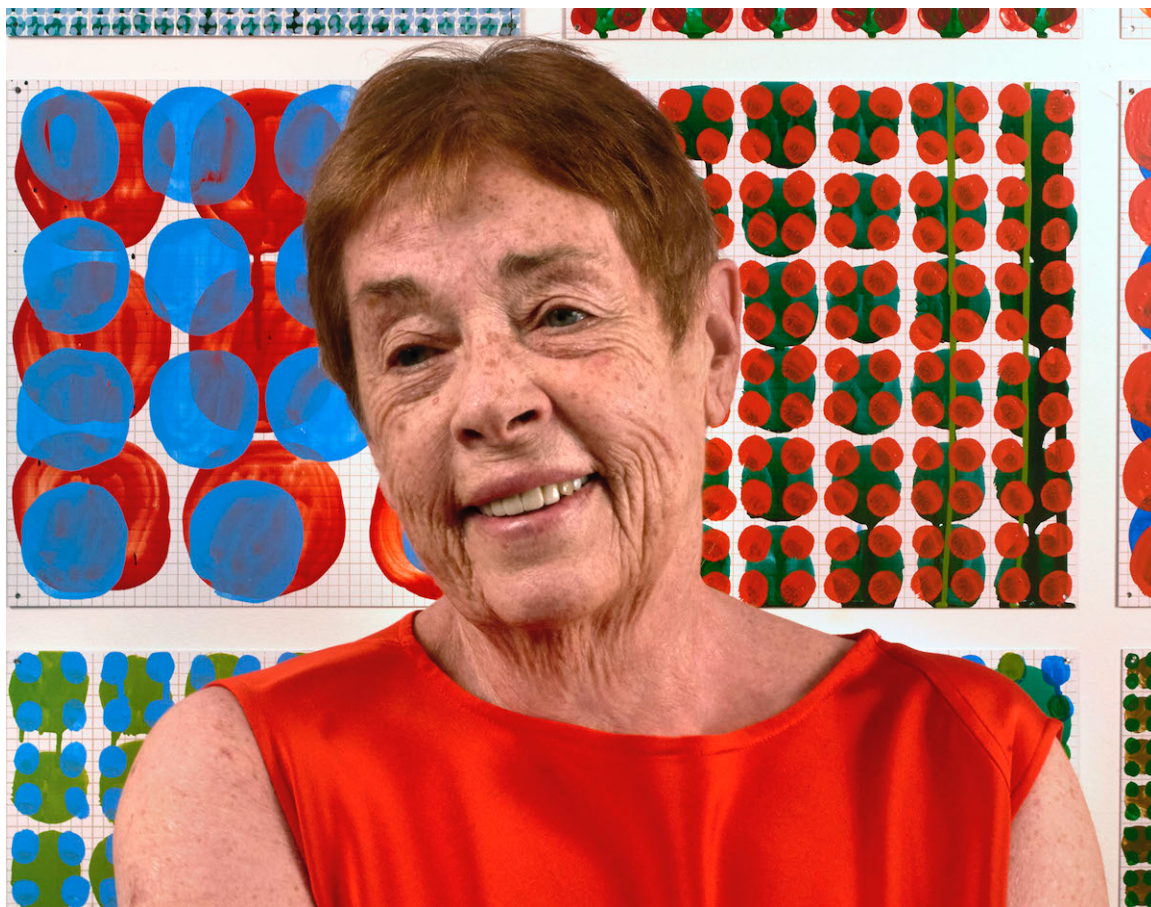


# ARTnews



Jennifer Bartlett. Photo: Takaaki Matsumo / Courtesy The Jennifer Bartlett Trust

## Jennifer Bartlett, Titan of the New York Scene Who Forged a New Path for Painting, Dies at 81

By: Alex Greenberger  
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**Jennifer Bartlett**, whose experiments with subjecting painting to predetermined rule systems had earned her a loyal following, died on July 25 in Amagansett, New York, at 81. A representative for Paula Cooper Gallery, which offered Bartlett some of her earliest shows, confirmed her death.

Bartlett's paintings are quite unlike almost any others made by artists of her generation, and for that reason, they have always made her a special artist within the eyes of many. She found unique ways of adapting abstraction for an age of Minimalism without moving full-tilt into conceptual art. At the same time, she also pulled off the tricky balancing act of working in a semi-abstract mode without leaving figuration behind entirely.

Her subjects varied widely. She created abstractions arranged in vast, epic grids that span enormous walls as well as more quaint images that are much smaller in scale. She painted quotidian-seeming images of hospital halls and dazzling landscapes composed of gridded dabs of paint. She even produced **one of the few images of 9/11 that explicitly portrays the day's events.**

"One of the best-known painters of her generation, Bartlett seamlessly combined the refined aesthetic of minimalism with expressive and emotional painting, and leaves a vast and varied body of work," Paula Cooper Gallery and Marianne Boesky Gallery, her two New York representatives, said in a joint statement.

Many critics have regarded Bartlett's breakthrough as *Rhapsody* (1975–76), a gridded arrangement of paintings that, when installed fully, spans more than 150 feet of space. Some images combine to form simple nature elements like a mountain or an ocean, others conjure neat juxtapositions between curlicuing lines. Taken as a whole, the piece represents "everything," as Bartlett once said.



Jennifer Bartlett, *Rhapsody*, 1975–76. Photo: John Wronn / Museum of Modern Art

The work is emblematic of Bartlett's unusual painterly process. She eschewed canvas for baked steel sheets, all of them 12 inches square, and oil paint for enamel, which is more commonly associated with hobbies than it is with fine art. The pieces were produced individually in Bartlett's Long Island and Manhattan studios, and she would make a decision within a day of their making whether she liked them or not. Though their imagery often seems banal, she spent hours in libraries researching the nature that she depicted.

Almost immediately upon its exhibition at Paula Cooper Gallery, *Rhapsody* was perceived as a major work. *New York Times* critic John Russell **called the piece** the "most ambitious single work of new art that has come my way since I started to live in New York."

When it was exhibited in 1976, Sidney Singer, a Westchester collector who had not yet built up a major collection, bought the work as a whole for \$45,000, a sum that a 1985 *New Yorker* **profile** of Bartlett described as "astronomical." (She did not want the work to be broken up and "had never really thought it could be sold intact.")

Singer later sold the painting, and it was bought in the '90s for more than \$1 million to Edward R. Broida, a real estate developer who later devoted his time to collecting art. She kept a portion of that relatively large sum, which came in at a time when she had no formal gallery representation. Before **his death in 2006**, Broida gave nearly 200 works, including *Rhapsody*, to New York's Museum of Modern Art, which gave it pride of place in an airy atrium during its 2019 collection rehang.

Jennifer Bartlett was born in 1941 in Long Beach, California, to a father who was a construction company owner and a mother who was a fashion illustrator. Her parents had a specific vision for her: "I think my mother would have liked for me to have gotten a job at Hallmark cards, done some painting on the side, gotten happily married, had some children and lived in Long Beach," she **told *People***. But Bartlett's goal was to move far away, to New York, and to become an artist there.

Having effectively fostered her own interest in painting, depicting Cinderella hundreds of times as a kid, she studied art at Mills College in Oakland as an undergraduate. She then went to Yale University for an M.F.A. and met the medical student Edward Bartlett, whom she married. Their marriage ultimately came apart as Jennifer attempted to gain a foothold in the New York scene while Edward focused on his career in Connecticut.



Jennifer Bartlett, 1975. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery

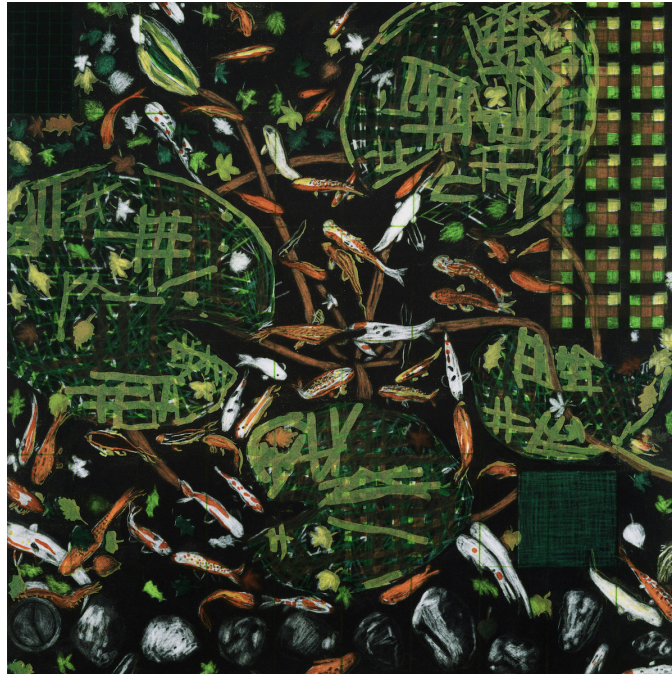
In Manhattan, Bartlett maintained a studio in SoHo, and she became friends with artists such as Elizabeth Murray, Jonathan Borofsky, and Barry LeVa. In 1970, she had her New York debut at the apartment of Alan Saret, who was at the time a well-known artist. She exhibited some of her early works that had been done by specifically avoiding certain colors—“I felt no need whatsoever for orange or violent, but I did need green,” she once told Calvin Tomkins—and combining and recombining those hues using systems of her own devising.

“What she was doing *sounded* like Conceptual Art: she was using mathematical systems to determine the placement of her dots,” Tomkins wrote. “But the results—all those bright, astringently colored dots bouncing around and forming into clusters on the grid—never looked Conceptual.”

Bartlett herself put it in an even more straightforward way in a 2013 **interview** with the *New York Times*: “The grid is not an aesthetic thing, really. It’s a method of organization. I like to organize things. Anything.”

Comparisons between Bartlett’s art of the ‘70s and other art forms are common. Critic Hal Foster has drawn out similarities between these paintings and music; others have seen alignments between Bartlett’s writing—she penned a 1985 memoir called *The History of the Universe*—and her paintings. But Bartlett herself has shrugged off any of these comparisons.

During the ‘70s and ‘80s, Bartlett achieved a level of fame that was rare at the time for female painters in the U.S. She got a coveted placement in the 1977 edition of Documenta in Kassel, Germany, and in 1980, her work figured in the U.S. Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. In 1985, she had a retrospective that started at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and traveled across the country. Paula Cooper, one of the top New York dealers, would go on to give Bartlett numerous shows, as would Philadelphia’s Locks Gallery starting in the ‘90s.



Jennifer Bartlett, *Air: 24 Hours, Five P.M.*, 1991–92. Corbis / VCG via Getty Images / Metropolitan Museum of Art

Her work took an increasingly vested interest in the natural world. Her 1980–83 series “*In the Garden*” was the result of an attempt to picture a garden at a villa in Nice, France, around 200 times over, with each rendition from a different perspective. She also began working on large-scale commissions, including *Pacific Ocean* (1984), a 30-foot-long painting of waves crashing against a shore done for AT&T that was executed in a Photorealistic style, causing it to appear at times like a camera-made picture.

The ocean and beaches would become recurring subjects in her oeuvre, most notably reappearing in a 2007 series “*Amagansett*,” featuring views of that Long Island town that are superimposed with grids that appear to shake.

The passage of time was another interest that showed up frequently in Bartlett’s art. Her 1991–92 series “*AIR: 24 Hours*” is a cycle of paintings that attempts to chart a day in and around Bartlett’s Manhattan studio. Dancers wind through the street at 5 a.m.; a crate is unpacked at 11 a.m.; koi fish twist beneath lily pads at 5 p.m. Perspectival shifts abound.

Along the way, she did not stray from the formula that made her famous, showing a 158-foot-long piece similar to *Rhapsody* at Pace Gallery in 2011. Titled *Recitative*, it was **praised** as “a deeper meditation on the digital age than any number of so-called digital artworks” by Jeff Frederick in *Art in America*. A retrospective featuring works similar to this one appeared at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art and the Parrish Art Museum two years later.

Despite whatever haughty concepts art historians pinned to Bartlett’s paintings, she always described her process as being somewhat intuitive.

“I spent 30 years trying to convince people and myself that I was smart, that I was a good painter, that I was this or that,” she told the painter Elizabeth Murray during a *BOMB* interview in 2005. “It’s not going to happen. The only person that it should happen for is me. This is what I was meant to do.”