

Detail from Paula Cooper Gallery announcement, 1976

## A NEW WORK: RHAPSODY

**'rhap-so-dy** \ˈrapsədə-, -di\ *n* -ES [L *rhapsodia*, fr. Gk *rhapsōidia*, fr. *rhapsōidos* rhapsodist (fr. *rhaptein* to sew, stitch together + *ōidē* ode, song) + *-ia -y*; akin to Gk *rhepein* to bend, incline, *rhapsis* rod, ON *orf*, *orb* handle of a scythe, OHG *worf* handle of a scythe, Lith *verpti* to spin, and prob. to L *repens* sudden — more at ODE] **1** : a recitation or song of a rhapsodist ; a portion of an epic poem (as a book of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*) adapted for recitation **2** *archaic* : a literary work consisting of disconnected pieces; *also* : a miscellaneous collection or disconnected series : MEDLEY, JUMBLE (a ~ of words —Shak.) **3 a** : an ecstatic or highly emotional utterance or literary work : effusively incoherent and extravagant discourse (a speech that bordered upon ~) (recite a long ~ to the joys of viewing America from a caboose —R.P.Cooke) (the novel ends in a kind of meditative ~ —Mark Schorer) **b** : RAPTURE, ECSTASY (reading poetry often seems a state of ~ in which rhyme and meter and sound stir the mind as wine and dance stir the body —Virginia Woolf) **4** : an instrumental composition that is irregular in form like an improvisation or free fantasia **syn** see BOMBAST

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... "Rhapsody" in all its ramifications is a work of art that functions simultaneously on many levels at once. To master it from end to end is a singular adventure; and by the time we have pondered the 54 different blues that have gone into the final "Ocean" section we shall have enlarged our notions of time, and of memory, and of change, and of painting itself.

John Russell  
The New York Times  
May 16, 1976

Over a period of one year, from May, 1975 to May, 1976, Jennifer Bartlett created an encyclopedic new work which she has titled Rhapsody. The piece is composed of 988 foot-square 16-gauge steel plates. Each has a white baked enamel surface on which a 1/4" grey grid has been silkscreened. The plates resemble pieces of graph paper. These 988 modular plates are organized onto a larger grid, 7-1/2 plates high and running for 153 feet and 9 inches. The piece unfolds vertically from top to bottom, from left to right.

In Rhapsody, Bartlett has sought to clarify the fundamental vocabulary of marks on a two-dimensional surface. To do so she chose to define the work in terms of twelve basic themes permuted in three different modes. The twelve themes are: four kinds of lines (Horizontal, Vertical, Diagonal and Curved); three shapes (Square, Triangle and Circle); four archetypal images (Mountain, House, Tree and Ocean); and Color. Each of these themes is executed in three different modes: Dotted, Freehand and Measured. Measured for Bartlett suggests precision. Measured lines and shapes are drawn with a straightedge or a compass, measured images intentionally approximate photographic reality and measured color is dispensed one brush load of paint per square inch.

Rhapsody is divided into six sections which address by title eleven of the twelve themes. The six sections are: "Introduction", "Mountain", "Line", "House and Tree", "Shape" and "Ocean". The twelfth theme, "Color", is dealt with throughout the piece.

Bartlett has chosen to use exactly 25 colors of the kind commonly used in plastic model kits and has assigned each color a number from 1 to 25. In every section Bartlett sets up what she refers to as specific color problems. In each color problem the 25 colors are combined according to a specific formula. The formula is played out in serial progression using a physical mix, a retinal mix or layering.

In the first section, "Introduction", Bartlett presents all twelve themes and three modes. The piece begins with a plate painted white in the measured mode. Included in this section are three color problems: the 25 colors dotted; the 25 colors measured (applied with one brush load per square inch); the 25 colors applied freehand. "Introduction" ends with a plate painted black in the freehand mode.

In the second section, "Mountain", the title theme is combined with every other theme. Here Bartlett deviates for the first time from strict adherence to the larger grid by abutting eight of the plates. Employing two familiar conventions which suggest concepts of time, Bartlett portrays a mountain in the four seasons of the year and at four different times of day (beginning with the shadow cast by the rabbit at dawn to the silhouette of the airplane in the evening sky). The color problem entails the systematic mixing of color #1 plus #2, #2 plus #3, #3 plus #4, through to #25 plus #1. This section ends with the black birds and the mountain top set against a yellow plate.

The third section, "Line", begins with a horizontal line drawn freehand. The four kinds

of lines are combined in all three modes with each other and with the other themes. Included is a large eccentric freehand line which boldly violates the larger grid and introduces a series of lyrical continuous line drawings of the individual themes. Bartlett presents two color problems: the 25 colors each layered twice and the 25 colors each layered once over a black ground.

The fourth section, "House and Tree," begins with a startling change in scale, a seven-foot square rendition of a house in the dotted mode. It is also, at the same time, a triangle and a rectangle in the dotted mode. Adjacent to the house Bartlett constructs a large scale color problem in the same dotted mode: 92 dots of each of the 25 colors, all arbitrarily placed on one plate. The same problem is repeated on 25 consecutive plates.

Then Bartlett hints at the breadth of possible interpretations (with their attendant sociological, political and environmental implications) which one single image might evoke: the house as a mobile home, the house as a developer's device, the house as a dream house, the house as private property, the house as an architectural floor plan, the house from the outside looking in, the house from the inside looking out, etc.

Five trees are depicted in both winter and summer, in black and white and combined with brief notations of other themes. Then come eight tiny trees in full bloom and full color. A second large scale color problem (three strokes of each of the 25 colors arbitrarily placed, repeated on 25 plates) precedes the seven-foot square freehand trees which concludes this section and form a companion to the seven-foot square house which opened the section.

The fifth section, "Shape" is the only logically complete section. Beginning with three squares

(large, medium and small) it plays out all possible combinations of the square, triangle and circle in large, medium and small sizes. This section is bracketed by two color problems. It is preceded with all colors mixed with white and followed with all colors mixed with black.

The final section, "Ocean", is in its entirety one large color problem. Here Bartlett employs the six blues from her original 25 colors to mix a total of 54 different blues. Each of the 54 blues in applied to one plate in the dotted mode and to one plate in the freehand mode.

Many viewers will be quick to notice passages in Rhapsody which resemble works by Van Gogh, Seurat, Mondrain, the Delaunays, Frank Stella, Sol LeWitt and many others. Although Bartlett appears at times to be vamping intentionally through other artists' territories, it is important to make clear that most such resemblances are unanticipated coincidences. These passages are, in fact, the outcome of Bartlett's prodigious pursuit of the solutions to certain problems she formulates for herself.

Beginning with her essential themes and modes Bartlett proceeds to consider, to combine and to cross-reference these essentials with inventiveness, energy and wit. In choosing to explore the possibilities rather than to exhaust the possibilities she has created a celebratory work which both affirms and enhances the future of painting.

Jennifer Bartlett was born in Long Beach, California in 1941. She grew up in Southern California, received a BA from Mills College in 1963 and an MFA from Yale School of Art and Architecture in 1965. She has lived in New York City since 1966 and is represented by the Paula Cooper Gallery.

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Selected one-woman exhibitions:  
119 Spring Street, NYC '70;  
Reese Palley Gallery, NYC '72;  
Jacob's Ladder, Washington, D.C.  
'73; Paula Cooper Gallery, NYC  
'74, '76; Samangallery, Genoa,  
Italy '74; John Doyle Gallery,  
Chicago '75; Dartmouth College,  
Hanover, NH '76; Contemporary  
Art Center, Cincinnati '76.

Selected group exhibitions:  
Museum of Modern Art, NYC,  
Seven Walls '71; Whitney Museum  
of American Art, NYC, Annual  
Exhibition '72; Indianapolis  
Museum of Art, Painting and  
Sculpture Today '72; Kunsthaus,  
Hamburg, Germany, American  
Women Artists '72; Whitney  
Museum of American Art, NYC,  
Contemporary American Drawings  
'73; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford,  
C. 7,500 '73 (organized by  
California Institute of Art,  
Valencia); Corcoran Gallery of  
Art, Washington, D.C., 34th  
Biennial '75; Musee National  
d'Art Moderne, Paris, 9e Biennale  
de Paris '75; P.S. 1, Long Island  
City, NY, Rooms '76; Whitney  
Museum of American Art, NYC,  
Biennial Exhibition '77.

Selected bibliography by  
Bartlett:

Cleopatra I-IV, New York,  
Adventures in Poetry, '71.  
Adventures in Poetry no. 9  
(excerpts from Autobiography) '72.  
Adventures in Poetry, Anonymous  
Issue (excerpts from Autobiography)  
'73.  
Big Deal 3 (excerpts from The  
History of the Universe) '75.  
The History of the Universe.  
To be published '77.

Selected bibliography about  
Bartlett:

Russell, John. "On Finding a  
Bold New Work," New York Times,  
Arts and Leisure, (May 16 '76),  
p. 1+.

Glueck, Grace. "Painting a  
Cosmic Conversation," New York  
Times, Arts and Leisure, (May  
23 '76), p. 35.

Bourdon, David. "Jennifer  
Bartlett's 'Rhapsody'," The  
Village Voice, (May 31 '76),  
p. 117.

Lubell, Ellen. "Jennifer  
Bartlett at Paula Cooper,"  
Artsmagazine, vol. 51, no. 1  
(September '76), p. 19+.

Shapiro, Lindsay Stamm.  
"Jennifer Bartlett at Paula  
Cooper," Art in America, vol.  
64, no. 5 (September-October '76),  
p. 105+.

Wooster, Ann-Sargent. "Jennifer  
Bartlett (Paula Cooper)," Art  
News, vol. 75, no. 7 (September  
'76), p. 124+.

Rhapsody has been loaned by  
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NOTE: Jennifer Bartlett is  
scheduled to speak at the  
Atheneum on Thursday evening,  
March 10, 1977 at 8 pm. She  
will discuss Rhapsody as she  
walks the audience around the  
piece. This event is free and  
the public is cordially invited.  
The following afternoon Bartlett  
is scheduled to do a public  
reading from her autobiography,  
The History of the Universe at  
the Hartford Art School,  
University of Hartford.