

ARTFORUM



JENNIFER BARTLETT

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Though I didn't see *Rhapsody, 1975–76*, Jennifer Bartlett's best-known installation, when it was first shown at Paula Cooper Gallery, I did see it some thirty years later, in 2006, at the Museum of Modern Art. Finally encountering the sprawling, epic work, which comprises nearly a thousand enamel-bearing metal plates, I suddenly—and even rather violently—had to reconfigure my own internalized images of it. Memories of the holistic photographic panoramas (and attendant detail shots) I'd found in books over the years yielded to the actual experience of tripping back and forth for closer and farther vantages, circling the work's perimeter, starting again, being called back to earlier sections, and so forth. A dumb observation in a sense, but startlingly a visceral one: *Rhapsody* cannot be taken in all at once or, more importantly, in any way conclusively. Indeed, viewers must juggle the empirical and intellectual contradictions that are a consequence of the work's simultaneously monumental and minute scale.

Sometimes discussed as offering a kind of inventory of painterly styles and histories, *Rhapsody* oscillates between abstraction and representation, proffering lyrical landscapes and rigidly plotted geometric compositions alike. At the same time, each individual steel plate, and thus its content, is undone—rendered a part object, as it were, separate from yet wholly dependent upon its juxtaposition with 986 others. While clearly connected to a burgeoning dialogue around the status of the image (engaged with what have come to be known as the “Pictures” problems), Bartlett's practice in the '70s was more often situated in an older “conceptual” yet fully painterly lineage (carrying on with operations borrowed from Sol LeWitt but also the likes of Georges Seurat) than given pride of place within the newer deconstructivist family. Notably

to this end, Bartlett was included in the 1978 exhibition “New Image Painting” at the Whitney Museum of American Art, an enterprise that fully aimed to revitalize painting despite its then-precarious stance.

Presented in 2011, Bartlett’s newest large-scale work (her third, including *Rhapsody and the 2007 Song*), proves, however, that she still has neither bent to painting per se, nor has she turned from the immense baggage of that medium. *Recitative*, 2009–10, hung at the Pace Gallery, offers a strangely to-the-point yet endlessly expansive exercise in mark-making and peripatetic viewing. More than 158 feet in length, the work extended across three walls of the cavernous gallery (recalling, inevitably, Warhol’s serial *Shadows*, 1978–79, which had hung there a decade or so ago, when the space was occupied by Dia Art Foundation). Comprising 372 steel plates in three sizes—each surface coated in baked enamel, screenprinted with a precise grid, and worked with more enamel—*Recitative* would seem, at a glance, to offer a kind of primer of various methods and configurations of non-representational form. Here the viewer could find small dots, there larger, there larger still, in palettes of muted but exuberant colors; elsewhere, ascending and descending lines of various scales; and, also, a more seemingly “gestural” large-scale squiggle. A kind of “expressive” mark, the last is built up from lines on some twenty individual metal plates, and thus becomes representative of itself, just another precisely executed shape.

Yet for all the seeming quiet and restraint of *Recitative* (which is only to say its supreme order, its clear plan and implementation), the work is ebullient, though hardly liberating in any cathartic way. Rife with nervous energy and a strange kind of obsessive joy, it expands and contracts spasmodically. If a viewer stands at one distance, a grouping of squares coalesces into a particular shape—an ascending half-ziggurat—while from further away it becomes part of a score, approximating language, communication, or melody. And up very close: Imperfect dots trying to fill rigid squares feel intimate, almost embarrassingly human, anything but mechanized. True to its title, *Recitative* slips between coherent speech and something more on the side of song. But there is more at stake here than cogency and lyricism: Bartlett continues to home in on the incongruity that occurs between a spot of paint and the embodied eye that encounters it.