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PROJECTS: WORKSPACE / PROJECT STUDIOS ONE (P.S. 1) / THE CLOCKTOWER / NEW URBAN LANDSCAPES / SURPLUS MATERI

JENNIFER BARTLETT
"SWIMMERS FOR ATLANTA"
SEPT. 19--OCT. 13, 1979
OPENING: SEPT. 19
6--8 P.M.

PRESS RELEASE:

THE CLOCKTOWER
108 LEONARD ST.
N.Y., N.Y.
Aug. 15, 1979

Jennifer Bartlett will open the season at the Clocktower on September 19, 1979 with a major series of paintings titled "Swimmers For Atlanta." These works were commissioned by the Art in Architecture Program of the United States General Services Administration for the Lobby of the Richard B. Russell Federal Building in Atlanta, Georgia.

The Clocktower exhibition will include Photo documentation of the Atlanta site, work drawings and presentation drawings. In addition the nine paintings which comprise this work will also be exhibited before their official installation at Atlanta later this year. The paintings, varying in size from 2' x 2' to 18' x 18', each consist of two parts: A multiple steel plate work painted with Testor enamel and the other part oil on canvas.

The opening will be Sept. 19, 1979 from 6 to 8 P.M. and continue through October 13.

The Clocktower Hours are Wed.--Sat. from 1-6 P.M. For further information please call 212-784-2084.

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JENNIFER BARTLETT is known for her painted sequences that are made up of hundreds of square plates. The squares compose a few larger squares, or frames, which in turn compose the sequence as a whole. Each frame is seen simultaneously as distinct and as connected to the whole; *distinct* inasmuch as one image is rendered there in one style or technique and *connected* inasmuch as the plates are regular and the one image is repeated. This, at least, is the format of a 1976 work called *Rhapsody*.

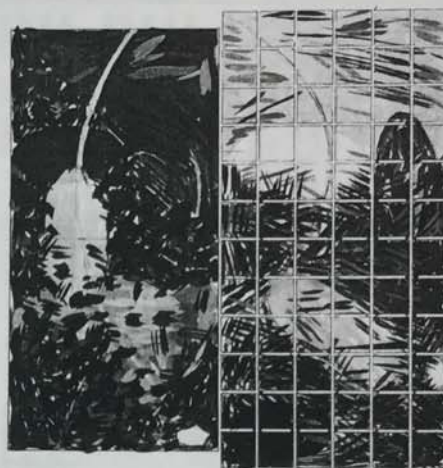
If the title is any clue, Bartlett thinks of her composition in terms of music; and it is true that each frame is somewhat like a musical phrase, or even movement. However, such metaphors or analogues tend to confuse more than clarify. Suffice it to say that the work is at once a composition and a decomposition, a body and an anatomy, a *figure*.

The images in her work are representational, however reductive they may be. This seems to make Bartlett anxious; thus the grid of plates, the musical composition, the manifold styles, the so-given-as-to-be-abstract images. That is, the imagery as such is deemed suspect, and so it is abstracted, or subjected to more or less transparent operations that will qualify the work as modernist. The grid is the best means; it's shorthand for objective, analytical, abstract.

Bartlett, it seems, is torn between the contemporary rage for expression and the older rage for order. This must be a very hard condition in which to work: to feel compelled, under the pressure of modernism, to denature the private and representational nature of her painting. It may also be the very condition for good work; and yet, as it is, she seems neither true to modernism nor her own (apparent) propensity.

Painters today seem less sure than ever about the historicist model of art history. Many see the breakdown as a license; 20th-century art becomes a warehouse of styles that will dress up any private production. Some exhibit the styles as new potential, others as clichés. Some are naively exuberant; others seem moribund.

Recently Bartlett was commissioned to do a series of paintings for a federal building in Atlanta. The nine works are made up of equal areas of stretched canvas and square plates and range from 2 by 2 feet to 18 by 18 feet. *Swimmers for Atlanta* is the rubric, though each work essays the theme in a different way. As her studies show, this



Jennifer Bartlett, Study for Painting #6, Flare Swimmers Atlanta, 1978-79, gouache, Tesdorlo enamel, ink on paper, 21 x 21

REVIEWS

New York

ULRICH RUCKRIEM, Sperone Westwater Fischer Gallery; JENNIFER BARTLETT, The Clocktower; KIT FITZGERALD and JON SANBORN, Whitney Museum;

is determined by an operation of set terms: each work is keyed to a season and an astrological sign as well as to a condition of light (color) and a state of water (snow, ice, fog, etc.). The swimmer motif and the ratio of canvas to plate remain constant, as does her code for the canvas as "happy calm" and the plates as "sad active."

This is how the work is generated, which is fine: it provides a given, gets her painting. But she seems to invest more in the system than she gets out. Her terms, codes, or whatever are fairly banal (perhaps if I hadn't seen them spelled out in the studies, I wouldn't think so). It's hard not to decode, and so dissolve, the work, or return it to the status of terms in a notebook.

The swimmer here seems less a repository of art value (the tradition of the bather as reformed in early modern art) than a motif of depletion, even a campy or pop-ish image of banality. And the operations to which it is subjected do not really clarify or complicate it. It is true that what is presented by the canvas is re-presented by the plates, but this is done in a way that neither the

nature of the subject nor the nature of the two media warrants fully.

Swimmers for Atlanta, like *The Swimmer* of Robert Moskowitz, has it both ways: it reads simultaneously as painted field and as water (or ice, etc.); there is a duplicity here as to what is representational and what is abstract that allies the work to new image painting. Many painters today dismiss the representational/abstract dichotomy as a false dichotomy (which is true in one sense) or as a cliché and yet paint and talk of nothing else. They tend to work in ambiguous relation to both kinds of art, and to mistake an ironic suspension for a renaissance of potentials.

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TAKING ON WATER

William Zimmer

Jennifer Bartlett
The Clocktower
108 Leonard St. (to Oct. 13)

I'm sure that the considerable failings of Jennifer Bartlett's recently commissioned work, *The Swimmers*, will pale against the eye-popping impact the piece is sure to have on its designated permanent site, the long front lobby wall of the new Richard B. Russell Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Atlanta.

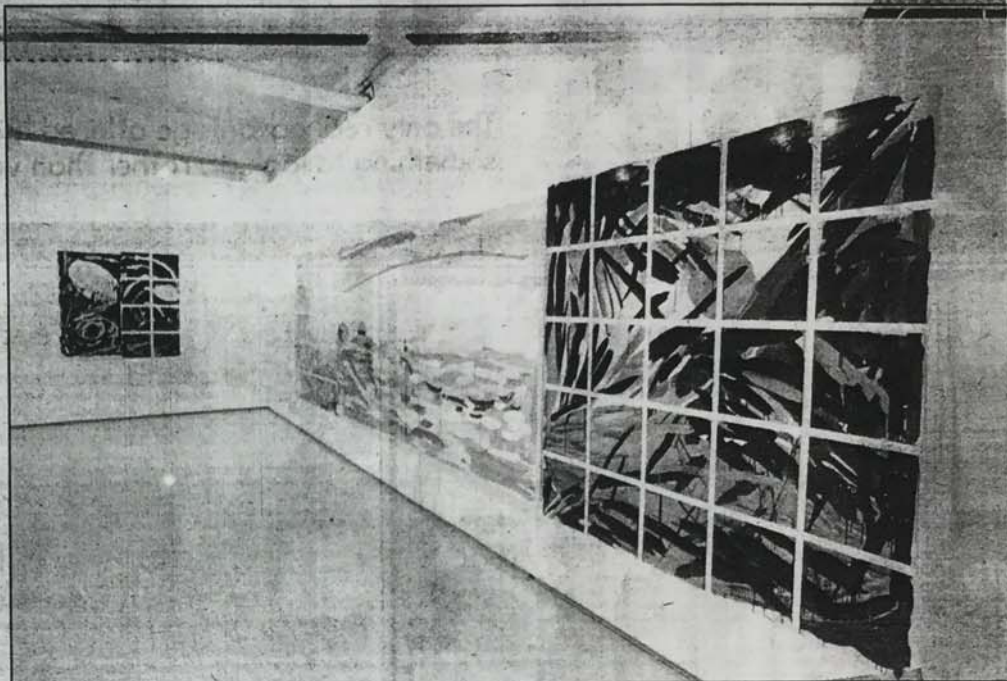
Notwithstanding some eclat from the WPA '30s, commissioned Federal art projects have a history of being vapid or worse. It helps now that the National Endowment is around as a broker. In Bartlett's work though, the government has bought itself a boatload of loud color—and, in other ways, has been sold down the river.

The imagery just doesn't work. I know as well as anybody that in abstract art an image doesn't have to resemble what it is representing, but the "Ellipses," in a gamut of flesh tones that represent the swimmers, are disasters. The water is a slapdash skein of lines of intense color. When the ovals and the tangles meet it looks like Easter—pink eggs in the grass. Southerners unused to Yankee styles won't be the only ones saying "I don't get it." What I get is that Bartlett just can't paint.

The lobby wall in Atlanta is broken up by doorways. To accommodate this architecture Bartlett has devised a noble symmetrical scheme: The central expanse of wall has a horizontal section of the piece and on either side there are vertical elements supposed to represent, à la Monet, various moods. Each element has two parts—a painting done on Bartlett's familiar metal plates abuts the same image rendered on canvas. There is a small change in mood from the shine of the plates to the matte of the canvas, but Bartlett has deeper aspirations.

According to her notations, the plate half is to represent "sad/active" and the canvas half "happy/calm" or vice versa. But to echo a Southern politician, there isn't a dime's worth of difference between the two states.

But I applaud the choice of theme. It is inspiring to imply that there is hidden fluidity, a way to churn through the federal bureaucracy.



Bartlett's *Swimmers*: drowned in a thrashing of strokes



Cover: Jennifer Bartlett's *Swimmers Atlanta: Bottle*, 1979, contrasts oil-on-canvas with enamel-on-steel, measures 6 feet, 5 inches by 6 feet, 2 inches and is part of a 9-painting public commission first shown at New York's Clocktower this fall. See article, page 93.

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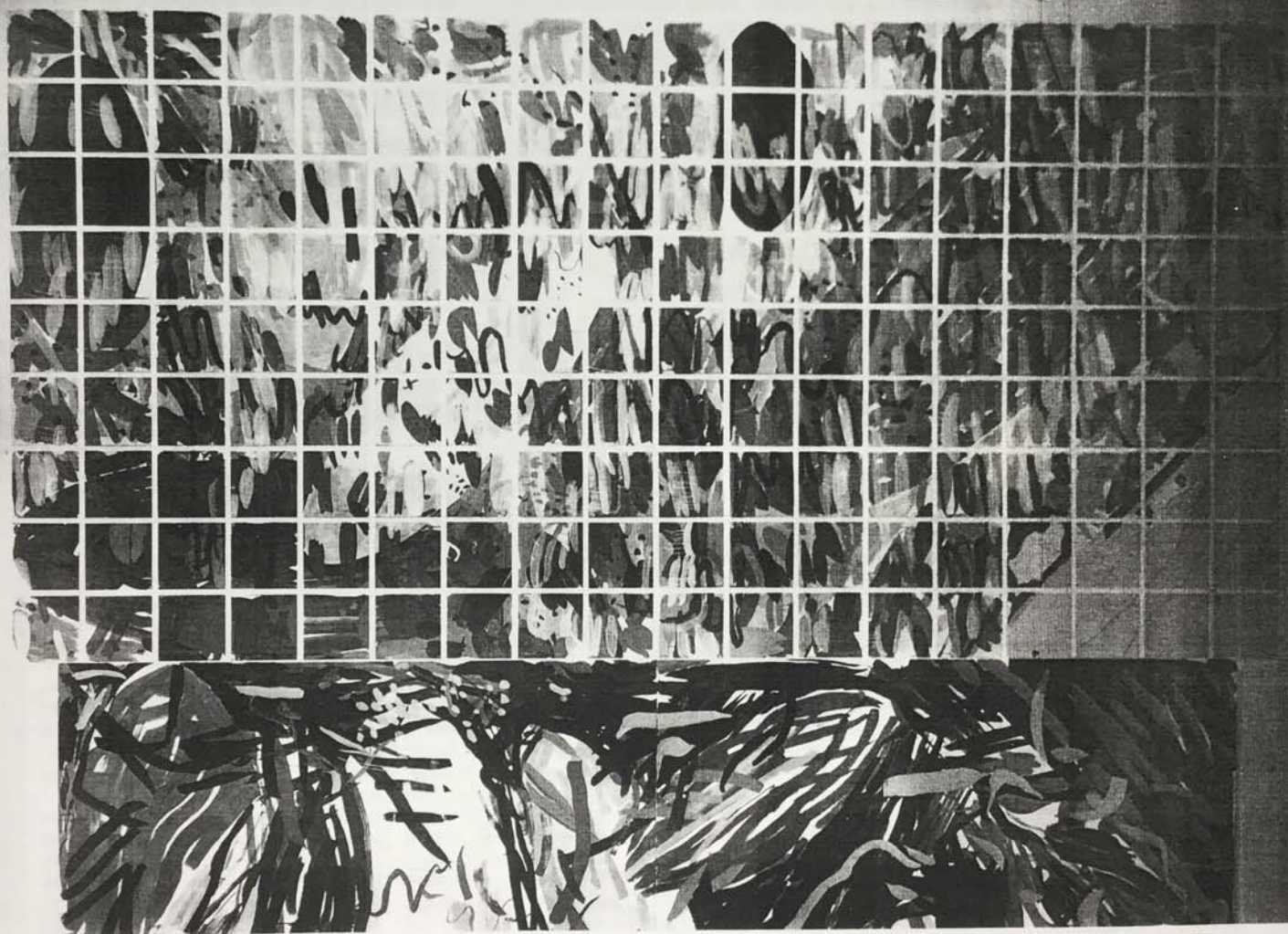
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Cover: Jennifer Bartlett's "Swimmers Atlanta: Bottle"
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Artists & Fabrics/Jennifer Bartlett/Mies' Barcelona Pavilion
Pollock's Jungian Critics, Part I/Elihu Vedder



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a smart-aleck, bad-girl position. First off, Bartlett systemized her painting quite literally from the ground up. The use of materials and a method of her own invention—thin, bright enamel colors on 1-foot-square steel plates in regular grids on the wall—gave her work a slick fill-in-the-squares look, and a procedural framework which was anathema to many painters. And in the beginning, the line, counting and color

approach are usually blunt and ungratifying, it also occasionally yields paintings so lyrical, their beauty seems gratuitous.

"Swimmers Atlanta" does for Bartlett's sense of touch and gesture what *Rhapsody* did for her subject matter and formal vocabulary; scrambles it, makes it more expansive, generous and accessible. It shows her increasingly able to balance lyrical with harsh,

steps from private to public experience, these works start out at two feet square, intimate, easel-painting size, and proceed incrementally to monumental surfaces 14, 16 and finally 18 feet square, which tower impressively overhead. They invite different viewing distances and times—up close, further off, long, short. When installed, larger and smaller works will alternate, encouraging the viewer to move forward

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Bartlett's Swimmers

Jennifer Bartlett's new series of nine paintings, a government commission bound for Atlanta, was recently exhibited in New York; its subjects include the adventures of ocean-going ellipses, the colors of the spectrum, the variousness of brushwork and an artist moving deeper and deeper into painting.

BY ROBERTA SMITH

With "Swimmers Atlanta," a nine-painting series commissioned by the GSA for the lobby of a federal court building in Georgia's star city, Jennifer Bartlett takes the plunge into painting as she never has before. These works, along with the architectural plans and photographs of their ultimate destination and two sets of studies, were shown this fall at New York's Clocktower before heading south. The paintings—complicated, diverse, colorful and energetically painted—clearly were conceived with the general public in mind. They present a changing progression in terms of size, scale, color and subject and promise to give people plenty to look at and think about. They also look like an interesting solution to a problematical site. But more significant, they represent a crucial point in Bartlett's development. Their real subject is the story of an artist expanding her ability to paint.

In broad terms, Bartlett's career has an orthodox '70s shape to it. Like many members of her generation—most of whom are now hitting 40—she started out at the Conceptual/Minimalist end of the stylistic spectrum and has moved toward an increasingly complex and referential visuality ever since. She has always been credited with something of a smart-aleck, bad-girl position. First off, Bartlett systemized her painting quite literally from the ground up. The use of materials and a method of her own invention—thin, bright enamel colors on 1-foot-square steel plates in regular grids on the wall—gave her work a slick fill-in-the-squares look, and a procedural framework which was anathema to many painters. And in the beginning, the line, counting and color

systems which she dotted onto these plates could seem "dumb" and arbitrary to artists with a more abstruse conceptual bent.

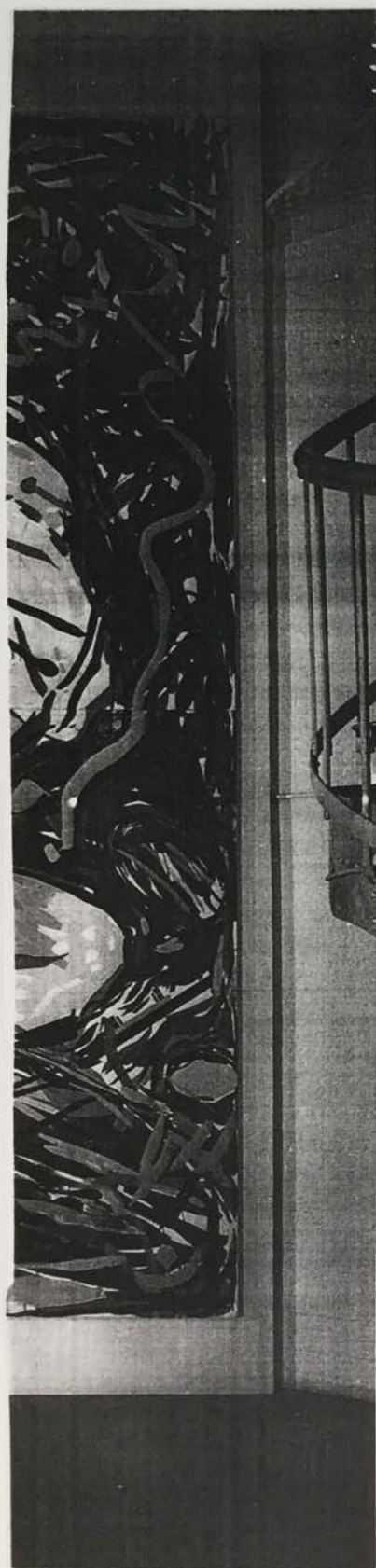
With *Rhapsody*, her 987-plate extravaganza of 1975-76 [see *A.I.A.*, Sept.-Oct. '76], things became unhinged in Bartlett's work: abstraction and representation and various styles and painting techniques were intermixed, and the individual plates' boundaries were finally transgressed. But in some ways this made her work seem even more arbitrary, as it verged on the encyclopedic; now, everything somehow seemed of equal value. Some observers were offended by this apparent lack of commitment to any one style, and also by the tendency of her brushwork, loosening up, but still rather predetermined, to look like "bad" painting. It's part of the extreme self-consciousness of Bartlett's approach to seem disinterested in style, to establish a way of working over a surface and follow it through, no matter what it looks like, and to try for a different look determined by a different set of rules in each painting. And this is the course she has followed since *Rhapsody*. Ultimately, such self-consciousness perhaps leads only to style. And Bartlett's is rather highly developed: it's something light but not too endearing, like a rough-edged, over-clever Dufy. And although the results of her approach are usually blunt and uningratiating, it also occasionally yields paintings so lyrical, their beauty seems gratuitous.

"Swimmers Atlanta" does for Bartlett's sense of touch and gesture what *Rhapsody* did for her subject matter and formal vocabulary: scrambles it, makes it more expansive, generous and accessible. It shows her increasingly able to balance lyrical with harsh,

"good" with "bad" painting within single works. And in this group of pictures, as with some of her other recent work, she finally allows the activity of painting to assume an equal footing with her elaborate narrative and intellectual schemes.

The building in Atlanta offered Bartlett a less than optimum situation to work with: a long granite wall, some 20 feet high and 160 feet long, broken symmetrically into five sections by entrances to hallways, and with a reception desk located in front of the central 35-foot wall. The possibility of a long mural covering and visually connecting any or all of the segments was further discouraged by the fact that this "lobby" is only 22 feet deep, little more than a hallway itself. Viewing distance is thus severely limited from inside, although the entire wall is visible through the mullioned glass front of the building. Bartlett's solution was a series of individual paintings, thematically interrelated, which progress in terms of size and concentrate, one at a time, on the colors of the spectrum. Her theme is swimmers as they encounter different ocean-going phenomena (one per painting)—icebergs, eels, whirlpools, flares, rocks, seaweed, boats—in seas which are predominantly white, black, orange, blue, etc. As if to cover the steps from private to public experience, these works start out at two feet square, intimate, easel-painting size, and proceed incrementally to monumental surfaces 14, 16 and finally 18 feet square, which tower impressively overhead. They invite different viewing distances and times—up close, further off, long, short. When installed, larger and smaller works will alternate, encouraging the viewer to move forward

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and back in space.

The format of all the paintings except one is a vertically bisected square. Half of each work is enamel on steel plates, the other half oil on canvas, forming a physical dichotomy which opposes fragmented with continuous, hard with soft, shiny with matte. Consistent with Bartlett's sense of precision, the areas of canvas and steel in each work are exactly equal but the 1-inch spaces between the steel plates make that side always slightly larger. The only exception to the vertically-bisected square format is the fifth painting in the series, which, occupying the central wall, is a horizontal 5 by 20 feet. This painting, as if to further emphasize its centrality, shows a coming together of all the colors, using the full spectrum.

"Swimmers Atlanta" does for Bartlett's touch and gesture what Rhapsody did for her formal vocabulary: scrambles it, makes it more expansive, generous and accessible.

"Swimmers Atlanta" is consistent with Bartlett's continuing interest in filtering the facts of life and art through her own elaborate system of predetermined strategies. This is a strange ambition, alternately simplistic and encompassing, childlike and grandiose, restricting and liberating. Sometimes it seems that all Bartlett's rules and themes simply serve to gird her up, enabling her to overcome some kind of fear of painting. On the other hand, she also seems interested in just how much information she can get into a painting—and her idea of "information" is not exactly modest. Somewhat like the Impressionists, whom she much admires, there resides behind the largely sunny, convivial disposition of Bartlett's work an obsession, almost scientific, with the large, given constants of the universe and the problems of representing them. Very often her most immediate subjects—the schematized houses, trees, mountains and, lately, figures, which as a group run

through many of the traditional subjects of art—function primarily to illuminate the effects of things much bigger than themselves: the passage of time, the elements, the seasons, day and night, changes in weather and light. Yet, Bartlett's attention to the real world is countered by her preoccupation with abstraction. She's not so much interested in portraying things as in reorganizing them, encoding them in her own terms, creating a deviant, self-consciously primitive, semi-abstract, alternate system of description.

In "Swimmers Atlanta," the big constant is the ocean, and the small one is the human figure—or Bartlett's codification of it. Her "sign" for the human presence is a simple, featureless ellipse, smooth and flesh-colored (pink, yellow or brown). Both ocean and swimmer have been present in her work for some time—not surprisingly, since Bartlett grew up literally at the ocean's edge, on a peninsula in Long Beach, California, and is no stranger to ocean swimming herself. The ocean has been a recurring motif since *Rhapsody*, where it dominates the closing and most painterly section: an extended sequence of blue plates, varying in tone and brushwork, which seem to wash over the viewer like big particles of water, immersing him in a final epiphany of the sea. The humanoid ellipse first appeared in *Termino Avenue* (1977), where it hovered awkwardly over dry land; it has been in the water ever since, in paintings like *Swimmers in a Storm*, *Tidal Wave*, and *Swimmers at Dawn*, *Noon and Dusk* (seen in the last Whitney biennial).

Bartlett subjects her ocean swimmer theme to a series of variations, both formal and literary. The result is a loose narrative, a kind of visual list of what can happen in the water. Notes on the preliminary studies exhibited here show that Bartlett, building on the physical duality of her works, designates either the steel or the canvas side of each painting "happy" or "sad," often specifying calm/active or day/night contrasts as well; she also notes details about differences in weather and water conditions between each half (it's raining, it's sunny; the water's choppy, it's glassy). With characteristic ecumenicism, Bartlett seems impelled repeatedly to present two versions, good and bad, more and less dramatic, of the same incident.

Although such clear-cut oppositions are not often obvious in the finished

Swimmers Atlanta: Boat, 1979, oil on canvas and enamel on steel, 19 feet, 5 inches by 18 feet, 8 inches. All photos ceva-inkeri.

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paintings, these "stage directions" seem basic to the extraordinary range of color and brushwork Bartlett develops here: the two halves of each painting *are* painted differently, and each is tonally opposed to its partner. As the series proceeds, the relative placidity or agitation of surface, brightness or somberness of color, floating or cascading of the ellipses, do start to carry stylistic and even expressive weight. For example, the several reds on the "sad," stormy side of *Swimmers Atlanta: Flare* tend to be dark, interspersed with somber yellow-greens and blacks; those on the "happy" side run toward pink, cut with strokes of cheerier blue, purple and white. And here, the triple-stacked dashes become thinner, sharper and more buoyant, as well. It seems that the tension between Bartlett's ideas about reality and what her hand is doing is such that the more explicit her subject, the more she has to encode, and therefore the better she paints. This point is brought home by the central horizontal painting, *Swimmers Atlanta: Buoy*, which uses all colors and, according to Bartlett's notes, has no conditions, and is one of the least engaging works in the series.

The tension between ideas and paint is pinpointed further in Bartlett's titles, which encourage you to examine the surfaces carefully, identifying this yellow arc as a flare, that mass of blue squiggles as seaweed. Occasionally you'll find an incident rather literally depicted, as with the green bottles visible among the orange strokes in *Swimmers Atlanta: Bottle*, or the toy-like ocean liner on the high, tilting horizon of the "happy" side of the big, green *Swimmers Atlanta: Boat*, and sunk to the bottom on its darker "sad" side.

As the ocean changes in color and brushwork, becoming more and more immense with each succeeding painting, it seems increasingly a metaphor for paint and painting itself—just as, perhaps, the ellipses' struggles might refer to Bartlett's own. The series has definite rough spots; the yellow painting, *Swimmers Atlanta: Eel*, seems unarticulated and flat relative to what comes later; the strokes on the smallish black whirlpool painting slip around too much; and in only a few paintings does Bartlett seem as completely at home on canvas as she is on her steel plates, so perfectly suited to the fast, didactic way she likes to paint. But, in toto, the series presents an illuminating odyssey, and as Bartlett progresses from painting to painting she gains confidence and



Swimmers Atlanta: Flare, 1979, 12 feet, 11 inches by 12 feet, 5 inches.

**Bartlett is interested in encoding reality on her own terms:
her "sign" for swimmer is a simple, featureless ellipse.**

Preliminary study, "Swimmers Atlanta" shows sequence in which paintings will be installed and the artist



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Swimmers Atlanta: Whirlpool (black), 1979, oil on canvas and enamel on steel, 4 feet, 3 inches by 4 feet, 1 inch.



Swimmers Atlanta: Iceberg (white), 1979, oil on canvas and enamel on steel, 2 feet, 1 inch by 2 feet.

spontaneity.

It's thus ironic that the method by which she has arrived at this new free look is not conventionally spontaneous at all; it's actually very controlled. The apparent freedom of Bartlett's painting—transferring freehand to much larger surfaces—the tiny, brushy but highly detailed watercolor studies for

each painting. It's perhaps in character that this almost compulsive procedure should lead her to a new freedom, and the best of these paintings to their own cool, stylish kind of passion. We see her go sweet and sour in alternation, garish and luscious within individual paintings, bringing together the previously separate extremes of her art.

Another result of this peculiar trans-

fer process is an exciting expansion in the scale of the brushwork. From the soft gentle pointillism of the smallest work, *Swimmers Atlanta: Iceberg*, (white), the brushstrokes gradually get bigger and bigger. This expansion brings the viewer in closer and closer to the paint surface itself. Add to this the sometimes complicated 'spatial effects gained through varying the position of the horizon line in each half of each painting, and you're soon experiencing the paintings as though from the swimmer's point of view—engulfed.

What is most riveting about this series is the viewer's process of becoming submerged in increasingly interesting, large-scale painting, and through it, getting deeper and deeper into the color, space and vibrancy of the work. By the end of the series, in the three biggest paintings—the violet *Swimmers Atlanta: Rock*, the blue *Swimmers Atlanta: Seaweed* and the green *Swimmers Atlanta: Boat*—Bartlett is operating free and clear. The strategies, rules and stories she started out with enable her to do just that, start out; then they are transcended. The brushstrokes take over, spanning the canvas and the plates in huge, sweeping, exulting gestures. □

Notes concerning the color, mood and narrative details of each work.



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paintings, these "stage directions" seem basic to the extraordinary range of color and brushwork Bartlett develops here: the two halves of each painting *are* painted differently, and each is tonally opposed to its partner. As the series proceeds, the relative placidity or agitation of surface, brightness or somberness of color, floating or cascading of the ellipses, do start to carry stylistic and even expressive weight. For example, the several reds on the "sad," stormy side of *Swimmers Atlanta: Flare* tend to be dark, interspersed with somber yellow-greens and blacks; those on the "happy" side run toward pink, cut with strokes of cheerier blue, purple and white. And here, the triple-stacked dashes become thinner, sharper and more buoyant, as well. It seems that the tension between Bartlett's ideas about reality and what her hand is doing is such that the more explicit her subject, the more she has to encode, and therefore the better she paints. This point is brought home by the central horizontal painting, *Swimmers Atlanta: Buoy*, which uses all colors and, according to Bartlett's notes, has no conditions, and is one of the least engaging works in the series.

The tension between ideas and paint is pinpointed further in Bartlett's titles, which encourage you to examine the surfaces carefully, identifying this yellow arc as a flare, that mass of blue squiggles as seaweed. Occasionally you'll find an incident rather literally depicted, as with the green bottles visible among the orange strokes in *Swimmers Atlanta: Bottle*, or the toy-like ocean liner on the high, tilting horizon of the "happy" side of the big, green *Swimmers Atlanta: Boat*, and sunk to the bottom on its darker "sad" side.

As the ocean changes in color and brushwork, becoming more and more immense with each succeeding painting, it seems increasingly a metaphor for paint and painting itself—just as, perhaps, the ellipses' struggles might refer to Bartlett's own. The series has definite rough spots; the yellow painting, *Swimmers Atlanta: Eel*, seems unarticulated and flat relative to what comes later; the strokes on the smallish black whirlpool painting slip around too much; and in only a few paintings does Bartlett seem as completely at home on canvas as she is on her steel plates, so perfectly suited to the fast, didactic way she likes to paint. But, in toto, the series presents an illuminating odyssey, and as Bartlett progresses from painting to painting she gains confidence and



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In broad terms, Bartlett's career has an orthodox '70s shape to it. Like many members of her generation—most of whom are now hitting 40—she started out at the Conceptual/Minimalist end of the stylistic spectrum and has moved toward an increasingly complex and referential visuality ever since. She has always been credited with something of a smart-aleck, bad-girl position. First off, Bartlett systemized her painting quite literally from the ground up. The use of materials and a method of her own invention—thin, bright enamel colors on 1-foot-square steel plates in regular grids on the wall—gave her work a slick fill-in-the-squares look, and a procedural framework which was anathema to many painters. And in the beginning, the line, counting and color

systems which she dotted onto these plates could seem "dumb" and arbitrary to artists with a more abstruse conceptual bent.

With *Rhapsody*, her 987-plate extravaganza of 1975-76 [see *A.I.A.*, Sept.-Oct. '76], things became unhinged in Bartlett's work: abstraction and representation and various styles and painting techniques were intermixed, and the individual plates' boundaries were finally transgressed. But in some ways this made her work seem even more arbitrary, as it verged on the encyclopedic; now, everything somehow seemed of equal value. Some observers were offended by this apparent lack of commitment to any one style, and also by the tendency of her brushwork, loosening up, but still rather predetermined, to look like "bad" painting. It's part of the extreme self-consciousness of Bartlett's approach to seem disinterested in style, to establish a way of working over a surface and follow it through, no matter what it looks like, and to try for a different look determined by a different set of rules in each painting. And this is the course she has followed since *Rhapsody*. Ultimately, such self-consciousness perhaps leads only to style. And Bartlett's is rather highly developed: it's something light but not too endearing, like a rough-edged, over-clever Dufy. And although the results of her approach are usually blunt and uningratiating, it also occasionally yields paintings so lyrical, their beauty seems gratuitous.

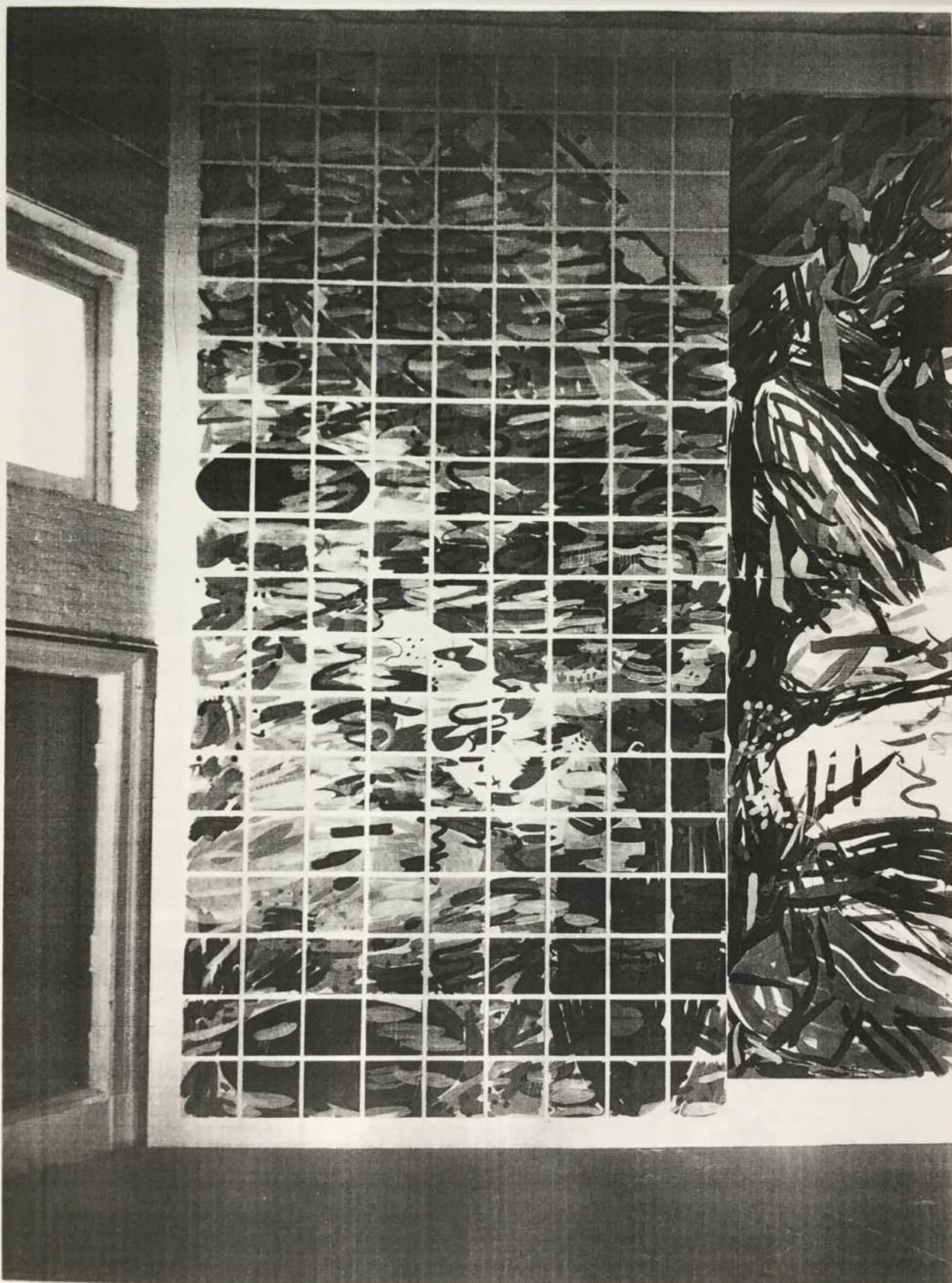
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and back in space.

The format of all the paintings except one is a vertically bisected square. Half of each work is enamel on steel plates, the other half oil on canvas, forming a physical dichotomy which opposes fragmented with continuous, hard with soft, shiny with matte. Consistent with Bartlett's sense of precision, the areas of canvas and steel in each work are exactly equal but the 1-inch spaces between the steel plates make that side always slightly larger. The only exception to the vertically-bisected square format is the fifth painting in the series, which, occupying the central wall, is a horizontal 5 by 20 feet. This painting, as if to further emphasize its centrality, shows a coming together of all the colors, using the full spectrum.

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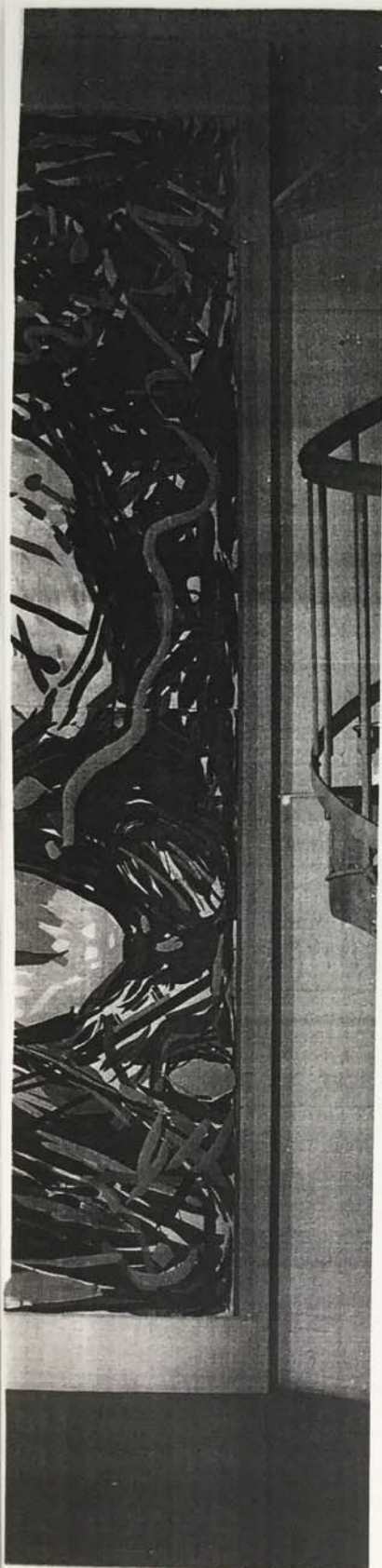
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Swimmers Atlanta: Whirlpool (black), 1979, oil on canvas and enamel on steel, 4 feet, 3 inches by 4 feet, 1 inch.



Swimmers Atlanta: Iceberg (white), 1979, oil on canvas and enamel on steel, 2 feet, 1 inch by 2 feet.

spontaneity.

It's thus ironic that the method by which she has arrived at this new free look is not conventionally spontaneous at all; it's actually very controlled. The apparent freedom of Bartlett's paint-handling results from actually copying—transferring freehand to much larger surfaces—the tiny, brushy but highly detailed watercolor studies for

each painting. It's perhaps in character that this almost compulsive procedure should lead her to a new freedom, and the best of these paintings to their own cool, stylish kind of passion. We see her go sweet and sour in alternation, garish and luscious within individual paintings, bringing together the previously separate extremes of her art.

Another result of this peculiar trans-

fer process is an exciting expansion in the scale of the brushwork. From the soft gentle pointillism of the smallest work, *Swimmers Atlanta: Iceberg*, (white), the brushstrokes gradually get bigger and bigger. This expansion brings the viewer in closer and closer to the paint surface itself. Add to this the sometimes complicated spatial effects gained through varying the position of the horizon line in each half of each painting, and you're soon experiencing the paintings as though from the swimmer's point of view—engulfed.

What is most riveting about this series is the viewer's process of becoming submerged in increasingly interesting, large-scale painting, and through it, getting deeper and deeper into the color, space and vibrancy of the work. By the end of the series, in the three biggest paintings—the violet *Swimmers Atlanta: Rock*, the blue *Swimmers Atlanta: Seaweed* and the green *Swimmers Atlanta: Boat*—Bartlett is operating free and clear. The strategies, rules and stories she started out with enable her to do just that, start out; then they are transcended. The brushstrokes take over, spanning the canvas and the plates in huge, sweeping, exulting gestures. □

notes concerning the color, mood and narrative details of each work.



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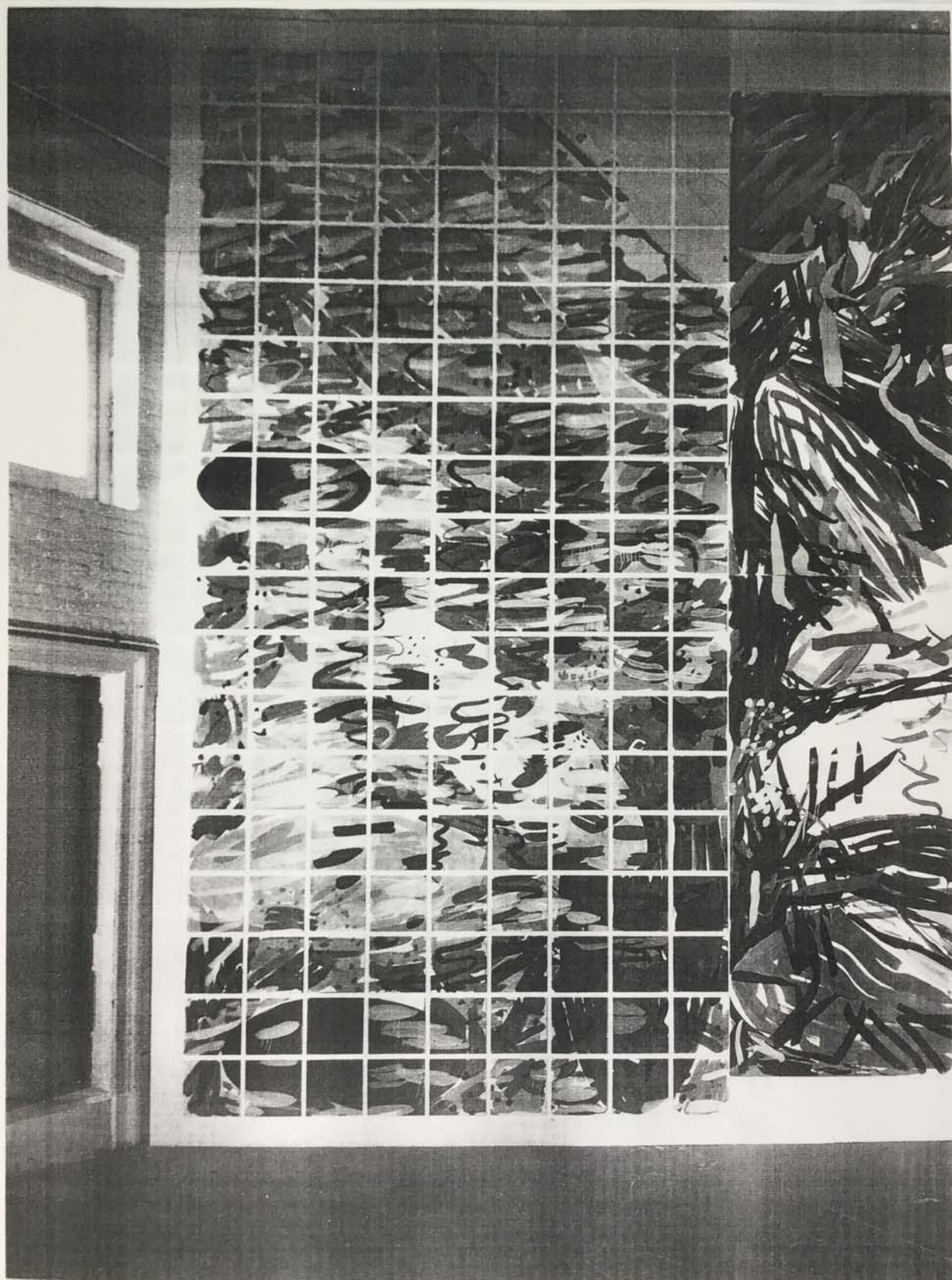
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In broad terms, Bartlett's career has an orthodox '70s shape to it. Like many members of her generation—most of whom are now hitting 40—she started out at the Conceptual/Minimalist end of the stylistic spectrum and has moved toward an increasingly complex and referential visuality ever since. She has always been credited with something of a smart-aleck, bad-girl position. First off, Bartlett systemized her painting quite literally from the ground up. The use of materials and a method of her own invention—thin, bright enamel colors on 1-foot-square steel plates in regular grids on the wall—gave her work a slick fill-in-the-squares look, and a procedural framework which was anathema to many painters. And in the beginning, the line, counting and color

systems which she dotted onto these plates could seem "dumb" and arbitrary to artists with a more abstruse conceptual bent.

With *Rhapsody*, her 987-plate extravaganza of 1975-76 [see *A.I.A.*, Sept.-Oct. '76], things became unhinged in Bartlett's work: abstraction and representation and various styles and painting techniques were intermixed, and the individual plates' boundaries were finally transgressed. But in some ways this made her work seem even more arbitrary, as it verged on the encyclopedic; now, everything somehow seemed of equal value. Some observers were offended by this apparent lack of commitment to any one style, and also by the tendency of her brushwork, loosening up, but still rather predetermined, to look like "bad" painting. It's part of the extreme self-consciousness of Bartlett's approach to seem disinterested in style, to establish a way of working over a surface and follow it through, no matter what it looks like, and to try for a different look determined by a different set of rules in each painting. And this is the course she has followed since *Rhapsody*. Ultimately, such self-consciousness perhaps leads only to style. And Bartlett's is rather highly developed: it's something light but not too endearing, like a rough-edged, over-clever Dufy. And although the results of her approach are usually blunt and uningratiating, it also occasionally yields paintings so lyrical, their beauty seems gratuitous.

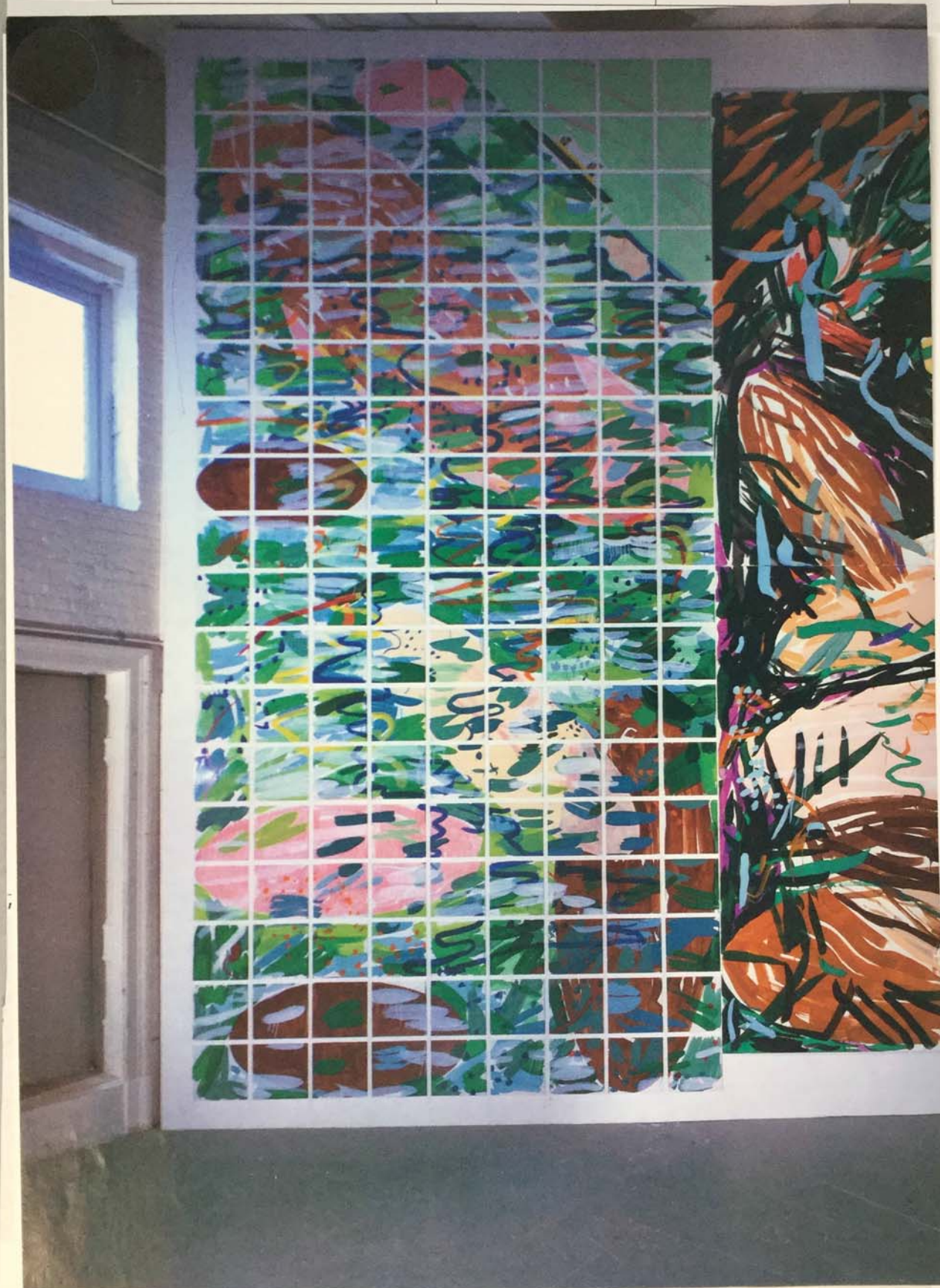
"Swimmers Atlanta" does for Bartlett's sense of touch and gesture what *Rhapsody* did for her subject matter and formal vocabulary: scrambles it, makes it more expansive, generous and accessible. It shows her increasingly able to balance lyrical with harsh,

"good" with "bad" painting within single works. And in this group of pictures, as with some of her other recent work, she finally allows the activity of painting to assume an equal footing with her elaborate narrative and intellectual schemes.

The building in Atlanta offered Bartlett a less than optimum situation to work with: a long granite wall, some 20 feet high and 160 feet long, broken symmetrically into five sections by entrances to hallways, and with a reception desk located in front of the central 35-foot wall. The possibility of a long mural covering and visually connecting any or all of the segments was further discouraged by the fact that this "lobby" is only 22 feet deep, little more than a hallway itself. Viewing distance is thus severely limited from inside, although the entire wall is visible through the mullioned glass front of the building. Bartlett's solution was a series of individual paintings, thematically interrelated, which progress in terms of size and concentrate, one at a time, on the colors of the spectrum. Her theme is swimmers as they encounter different ocean-going phenomena (one per painting)—icebergs, eels, whirlpools, flares, rocks, seaweed, boats—in seas which are predominantly white, black, orange, blue, etc. As if to cover the steps from private to public experience, these works start out at two feet square, intimate, easel-painting size, and proceed incrementally to monumental surfaces 14, 16 and finally 18 feet square, which tower impressively overhead. They invite different viewing distances and times—up close, further off, long, short. When installed, larger and smaller works will alternate, encouraging the viewer to move forward

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and back in space.

The format of all the paintings except one is a vertically bisected square. Half of each work is enamel on steel plates, the other half oil on canvas, forming a physical dichotomy which opposes fragmented with continuous, hard with soft, shiny with matte. Consistent with Bartlett's sense of precision, the areas of canvas and steel in each work are exactly equal but the 1-inch spaces between the steel plates make that side always slightly larger. The only exception to the vertically-bisected square format is the fifth painting in the series, which, occupying the central wall, is a horizontal 5 by 20 feet. This painting, as if to further emphasize its centrality, shows a coming together of all the colors, using the full spectrum.

"Swimmers Atlanta" does for Bartlett's touch and gesture what Rhapsody did for her formal vocabulary: scrambles it, makes it more expansive, generous and accessible.

"Swimmers Atlanta" is consistent with Bartlett's continuing interest in filtering the facts of life and art through her own elaborate system of predetermined strategies. This is a strange ambition, alternately simplistic and encompassing, childlike and grandiose, restricting and liberating. Sometimes it seems that all Bartlett's rules and themes simply serve to gird her up, enabling her to overcome some kind of fear of painting. On the other hand, she also seems interested in just how much information she can get into a painting—and her idea of "information" is not exactly modest. Somewhat like the Impressionists, whom she much admires, there resides behind the largely sunny, convivial disposition of Bartlett's work an obsession, almost scientific, with the large, given constants of the universe and the problems of representing them. Very often her most immediate subjects—the schematized houses, trees, mountains and, lately, figures, which as a group run

through many of the traditional subjects of art—function primarily to illuminate the effects of things much bigger than themselves: the passage of time, the elements, the seasons, day and night, changes in weather and light. Yet, Bartlett's attention to the real world is countered by her preoccupation with abstraction. She's not so much interested in portraying things as in reorganizing them, encoding them in her own terms, creating a deviant, self-consciously primitive, semi-abstract, alternate system of description.

In "Swimmers Atlanta," the big constant is the ocean, and the small one is the human figure—or Bartlett's codification of it. Her "sign" for the human presence is a simple, featureless ellipse, smooth and flesh-colored (pink, yellow or brown). Both ocean and swimmer have been present in her work for some time—not surprisingly, since Bartlett grew up literally at the ocean's edge, on a peninsula in Long Beach, California, and is no stranger to ocean swimming herself. The ocean has been a recurring motif since *Rhapsody*, where it dominates the closing and most painterly section: an extended sequence of blue plates, varying in tone and brushwork, which seem to wash over the viewer like big particles of water, immersing him in a final epiphany of the sea. The humanoid ellipse first appeared in *Termino Avenue* (1977), where it hovered awkwardly over dry land; it has been in the water ever since, in paintings like *Swimmers in a Storm*, *Tidal Wave*, and *Swimmers at Dawn*, *Noon and Dusk* (seen in the last Whitney biennial).

Bartlett subjects her ocean swimmer theme to a series of variations, both formal and literary. The result is a loose narrative, a kind of visual list of what can happen in the water. Notes on the preliminary studies exhibited here show that Bartlett, building on the physical duality of her works, designates either the steel or the canvas side of each painting "happy" or "sad," often specifying calm/active or day/night contrasts as well; she also notes details about differences in weather and water conditions between each half (it's raining, it's sunny; the water's choppy, it's glassy). With characteristic ecumenicism, Bartlett seems impelled repeatedly to present two versions, good and bad, more and less dramatic, of the same incident.

Although such clear-cut oppositions are not often obvious in the finished

Swimmers Atlanta: Boat, 1979, oil on canvas and enamel on steel, 19 feet, 5 inches by 18 feet, 8 inches. All photos ceva-inkeri.

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paintings, these "stage directions" seem basic to the extraordinary range of color and brushwork Bartlett develops here: the two halves of each painting are painted differently, and each is tonally opposed to its partner. As the series proceeds, the relative placidity or agitation of surface, brightness or somberness of color, floating or cascading of the ellipses, do start to carry stylistic and even expressive weight. For example, the several reds on the "sad," stormy side of *Swimmers Atlanta: Flare* tend to be dark, interspersed with somber yellow-greens and blacks; those on the "happy" side run toward pink, cut with strokes of cheerier blue, purple and white. And here, the triple-stacked dashes become thinner, sharper and more buoyant, as well. It seems that the tension between Bartlett's ideas about reality and what her hand is doing is such that the more explicit her subject, the more she has to encode, and therefore the better she paints. This point is brought home by the central horizontal painting, *Swimmers Atlanta: Buoy*, which uses all colors and, according to Bartlett's notes, has no conditions, and is one of the least engaging works in the series.

The tension between ideas and paint is pinpointed further in Bartlett's titles, which encourage you to examine the surfaces carefully, identifying this yellow arc as a flare, that mass of blue squiggles as seaweed. Occasionally you'll find an incident rather literally depicted, as with the green bottles visible among the orange strokes in *Swimmers Atlanta: Bottle*, or the toy-like ocean liner on the high, tilting horizon of the "happy" side of the big, green *Swimmers Atlanta: Boat*, and sunk to the bottom on its darker "sad" side.

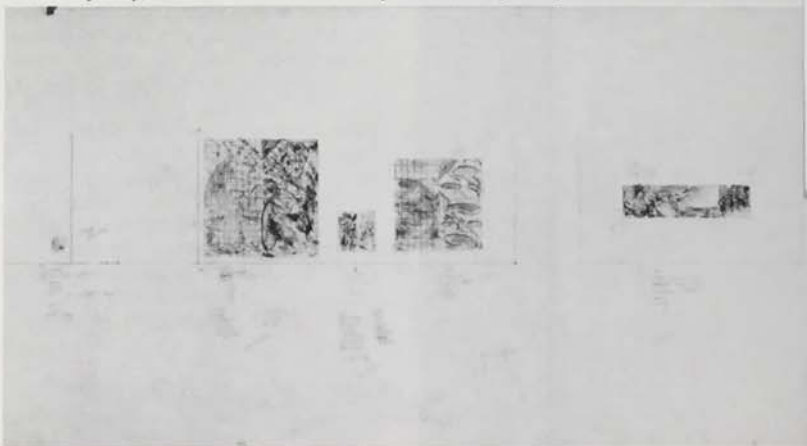
As the ocean changes in color and brushwork, becoming more and more immense with each succeeding painting, it seems increasingly a metaphor for paint and painting itself—just as, perhaps, the ellipses' struggles might refer to Bartlett's own. The series has definite rough spots; the yellow painting, *Swimmers Atlanta: Eel*, seems unarticulated and flat relative to what comes later; the strokes on the smallish black whirlpool painting slip around too much; and in only a few paintings does Bartlett seem as completely at home on canvas as she is on her steel plates, so perfectly suited to the fast, didactic way she likes to paint. But, in toto, the series presents an illuminating odyssey, and as Bartlett progresses from painting to painting she gains confidence and



Swimmers Atlanta: Flare, 1979, 12 feet, 11 inches by 12 feet, 5 inches.

Bartlett is interested in encoding reality on her own terms: her "sign" for swimmer is a simple, featureless ellipse.

Preliminary study, "Swimmers Atlanta" shows sequence in which paintings will be installed and the artist



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Swimmers Atlanta: Whirlpool (black), 1979, oil on canvas and enamel on steel, 4 feet, 3 inches by 4 feet, 1 inch.



Swimmers Atlanta: Iceberg (white), 1979, oil on canvas and enamel on steel, 2 feet, 1 inch by 2 feet.

spontaneity.

It's thus ironic that the method by which she has arrived at this new free look is not conventionally spontaneous at all; it's actually very controlled. The apparent freedom of Bartlett's painting—transferring freehand to much larger surfaces—the tiny, brushy but highly detailed watercolor studies for

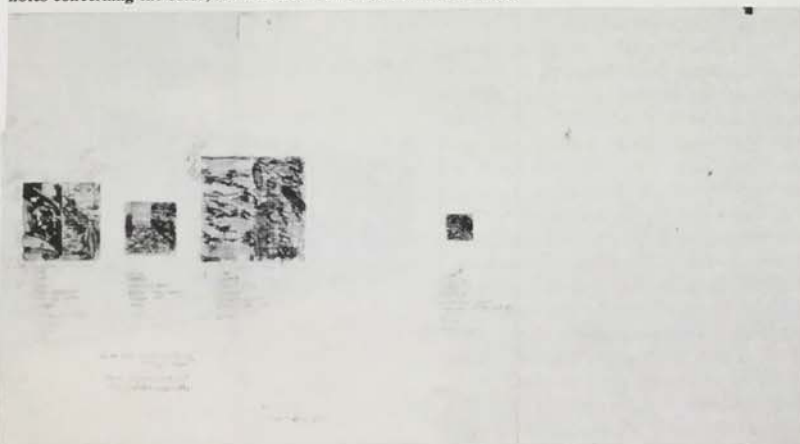
each painting. It's perhaps in character that this almost compulsive procedure should lead her to a new freedom, and the best of these paintings to their own cool, stylish kind of passion. We see her go sweet and sour in alternation, garish and luscious within individual paintings, bringing together the previously separate extremes of her art.

Another result of this peculiar trans-

fer process is an exciting expansion in the scale of the brushwork. From the soft gentle pointillism of the smallest work, *Swimmers Atlanta: Iceberg*, (white), the brushstrokes gradually get bigger and bigger. This expansion brings the viewer in closer and closer to the paint surface itself. Add to this the sometimes complicated spatial effects gained through varying the position of the horizon line in each half of each painting, and you're soon experiencing the paintings as though from the swimmer's point of view—engulfed.

What is most riveting about this series is the viewer's process of becoming submerged in increasingly interesting, large-scale painting, and through it, getting deeper and deeper into the color, space and vibrancy of the work. By the end of the series, in the three biggest paintings—the violet *Swimmers Atlanta: Rock*, the blue *Swimmers Atlanta: Seaweed* and the green *Swimmers Atlanta: Boat*—Bartlett is operating free and clear. The strategies, rules and stories she started out with enable her to do just that, start out; then they are transcended. The brushstrokes take over, spanning the canvas and the plates in huge, sweeping, exulting gestures. □

notes concerning the color, mood and narrative details of each work.



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TAKING ON WATER

William Zimmer

Jennifer Bartlett
The Clocktower
108 Leonard St. (to Oct. 13)

I'm sure that the considerable failings of Jennifer Bartlett's recently commissioned work, *The Swimmers*, will pale against the eye-popping impact the piece is sure to have on its designated permanent site, the long front lobby wall of the new Richard B. Russell Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Atlanta.

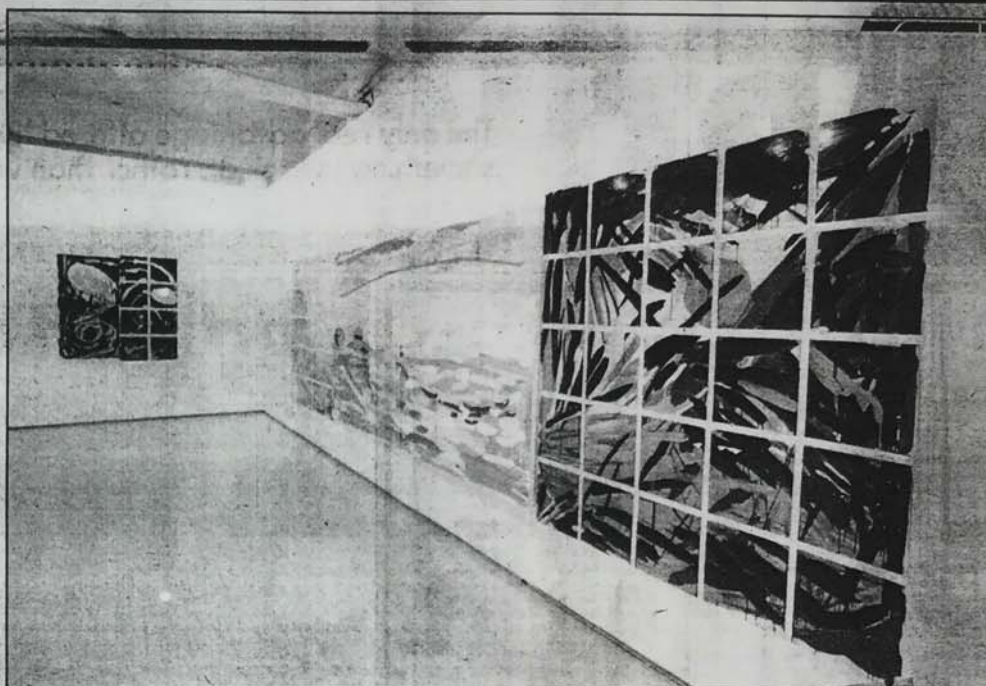
Notwithstanding some eclat from the WPA '30s, commissioned Federal art projects have a history of being vapid or worse. It helps now that the National Endowment is around as a broker. In Bartlett's work though, the government has bought itself a boatload of loud color—and, in other ways, has been sold down the river.

The imagery just doesn't work. I know as well as anybody that in abstract art an image doesn't have to resemble what it is representing, but the "Ellipses," in a gamut of flesh tones that represent the swimmers, are disasters. The water is a slapdash skein of lines of intense color. When the ovals and the tangles meet it looks like Easter—pink eggs in the grass. Southerners unused to Yankee styles won't be the only ones saying "I don't get it." What I get is that Bartlett just can't paint.

The lobby wall in Atlanta is broken up by doorways. To accommodate this architecture Bartlett has devised a noble symmetrical scheme: The central expanse of wall has a horizontal section of the piece and on either side there are vertical elements supposed to represent, à la Monet, various moods. Each element has two parts—a painting done on Bartlett's familiar metal plates abuts the same image rendered on canvas. There is a small change in mood from the shine of the plates to the matte of the canvas, but Bartlett has deeper aspirations.

According to her notations, the plate half is to represent "sad/active" and the canvas half "happy/calm" or vice versa. But to echo a Southern politician, there isn't a dime's worth of difference between the two states.

But I applaud the choice of theme. It is inspiring to imply that there is hidden fluidity, a way to churn through the federal bureaucracy.



Bartlett's *Swimmers*: drowned in a thrashing of strokes

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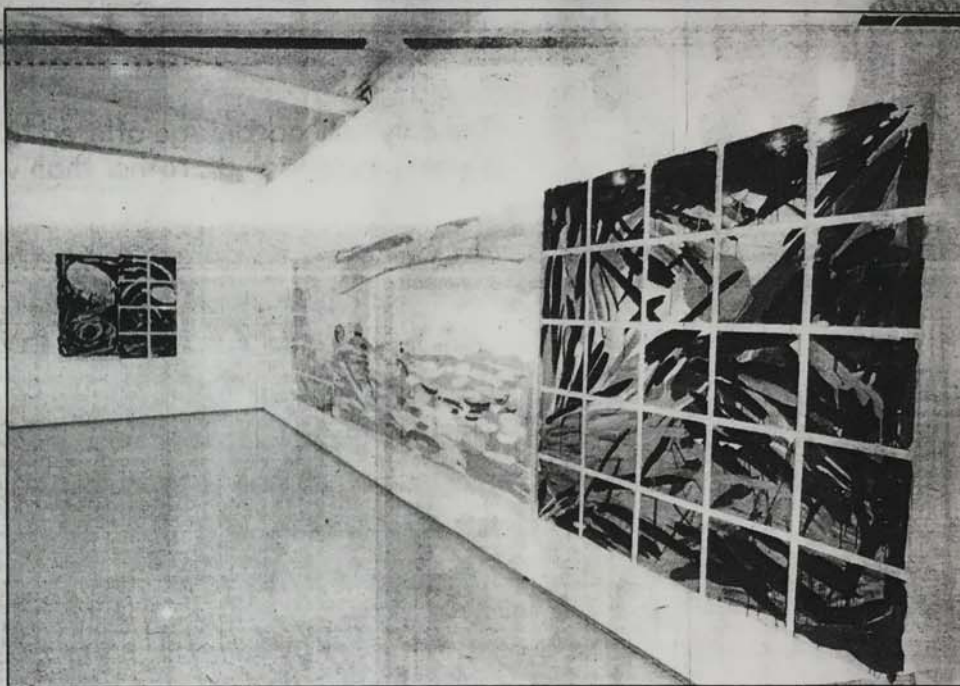
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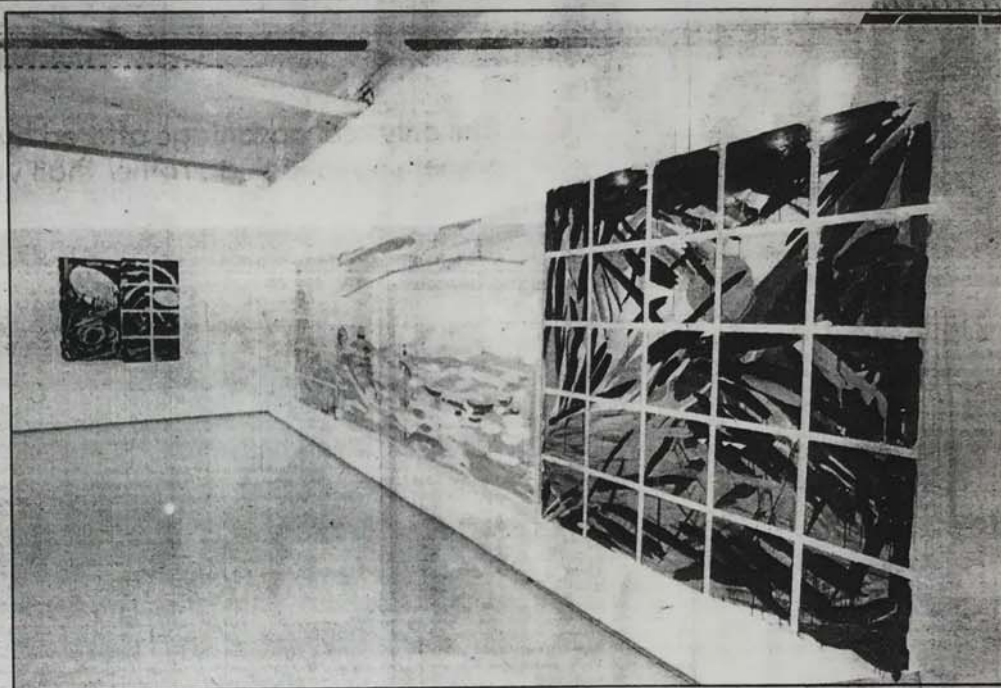
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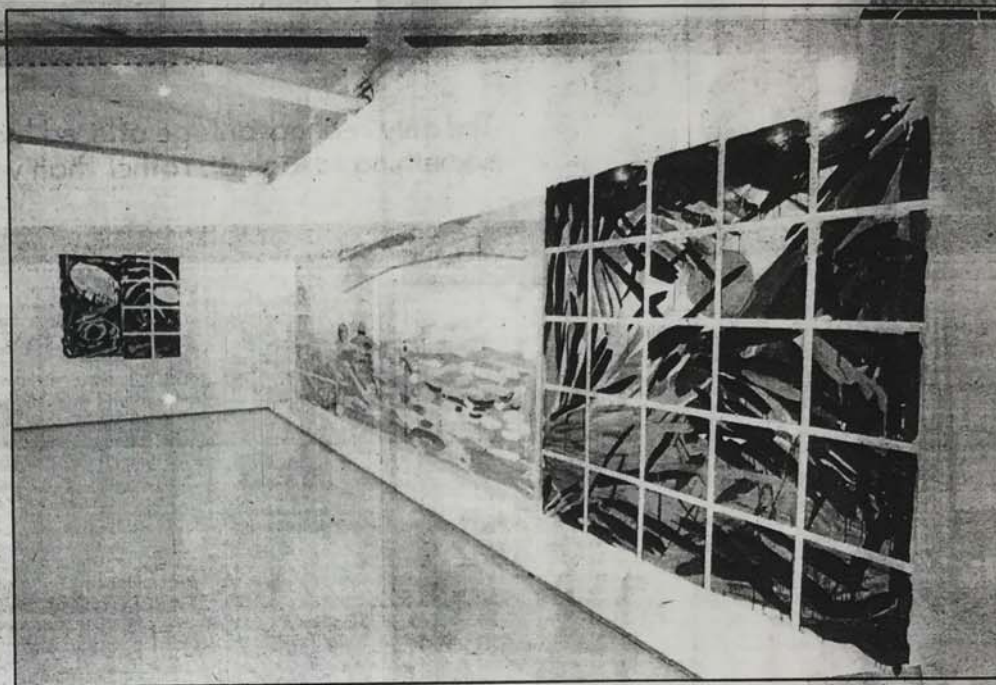
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JENNIFER BARTLETT is known for her painted sequences that are made up of hundreds of square plates. The squares compose a few larger squares, or frames, which in turn compose the sequence as a whole. Each frame is seen simultaneously as distinct and as connected to the whole; *distinct* inasmuch as one image is rendered there in one style or technique and *connected* inasmuch as the plates are regular and the one image is repeated. This, at least, is the format of a 1976 work called *Rhapsody*.

If the title is any clue, Bartlett thinks of her composition in terms of music, and it is true that each frame is somewhat like a musical phrase, or even movement. However, such metaphors or analogues tend to confuse more than clarify. Suffice it to say that the work is at once a composition and a decomposition, a body and an anatomy, a *figure*.

The images in her work are representational, however reductive they may be. This seems to make Bartlett anxious, thus the grid of plates, the musical composition, the manifold styles, the so-given-as-to-be-abstract images. That is, the imagery as such is deemed suspect; and so it is abstracted, or subjected to more or less transparent operations that will qualify the work as modernist. The grid is the best means; it's shorthand for objective, analytical, abstract.

Bartlett, it seems, is torn between the contemporary rage for expression and the older rage for order. This must be a very hard condition in which to work: to feel compelled, under the pressure of modernism, to denature the private and representational nature of her painting. It may also be the very condition for good work; and yet, as it is, she seems neither true to modernism nor her own (apparent) propensity.

Painters today seem less sure than ever about the historicist model of art history. Many see the breakdown as a license: 20th-century art becomes a warehouse of styles that will dress up any private production. Some exhibit the styles as new potential, others as clichés. Some are naively exuberant, others seem moribund.

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Jennifer Bartlett, Study for Painting #6: *Flare Swimmers Atlanta*, 1978-79, gouache, testor enamels, ink on paper, 21 x 21"

REVIEWS

New York

ULRICH RUCKRIEM, *Sperone Westwater Fischer Gallery*; JENNIFER BARTLETT, *The Clocktower*; KIT FITZGERALD and JON SANBORN, *Whitney Museum*;

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This is how the work is generated; which is fine: it provides a given, gets her painting. But she seems to invest more in the system than she gets out. Her terms, codes, or whatever are fairly banal (perhaps if I hadn't seen them spelled out in the studies, I wouldn't think so). It's hard not to decode, and so dissolve, the work, or return it to the status of terms in a notebook.

The swimmer here seems less a repository of art value (the tradition of the bather as reformed in early modern art) than a motif of depletion, even a campy or pop-ish image of banality. And the operations to which it is subjected do not really clarify or complicate it. It is true that what is presented by the canvas is re-presented by the plates, but this is done in a way that neither the

nature of the subject nor the nature of the two media warrants fully.

Swimmers for Atlanta, like *The Swimmer* of Robert Moskowitz, has it both ways: it reads simultaneously as painted field and as water (or ice, etc.); there is a duplicity here as to what is representational and what is abstract that allies the work to new image painting. Many painters today dismiss the representational/abstract dichotomy as a false dichotomy (which is true in one sense) or as a cliché and yet paint and talk of nothing else. They tend to work in ambiguous relation to both kinds of art and to mistake an ironic suspension for a renaissance of potentials.

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JENNIFER BARTLETT is known for her painted sequences that are made up of hundreds of square plates. The squares compose a few larger squares, or frames, which in turn compose the sequence as a whole. Each frame is seen simultaneously as distinct and as connected to the whole, *distinct* inasmuch as one image is rendered there in one style or technique and *connected* inasmuch as the plates are regular and the one image is repeated. This, at least, is the format of a 1976 work called *Rhapsody*.

If the title is any clue, Bartlett thinks of her composition in terms of music; and it is true that each frame is somewhat like a musical phrase, or even movement. However, such metaphors or analogues tend to confuse more than clarify. Suffice it to say that the work is at once a composition and a decomposition, a body and an anatomy, a *figure*.

The images in her work are representational, however reductive they may be. This seems to make Bartlett anxious; thus the grid of plates, the musical composition, the manifold styles, the so-given-as-to-be-abstract images. That is, the imagery as such is deemed suspect, and so it is abstracted, or subjected to more or less transparent operations that will qualify the work as modernist. The grid is the best means; it's shorthand for objective, analytical, abstract.

Bartlett, it seems, is torn between the contemporary rage for expression and the older rage for order. This must be a very hard condition in which to work: to feel compelled, under the pressure of modernism, to denature the private and representational nature of her painting. It may also be the very condition for good work; and yet, as it is, she seems neither true to modernism nor her own (apparent) propensity.

Painters today seem less sure than ever about the historicist model of art history. Many see the breakdown as a license: 20th-century art becomes a warehouse of styles that will dress up any private production. Some exhibit the styles as new potential, others as clichés. Some are naively exuberant; others seem moribund.

Recently Bartlett was commissioned to do a series of paintings for a federal building in Atlanta. The nine works are made up of equal areas of stretched canvas and square plates and range from 2 by 2 feet to 18 by 18 feet. *Swimmers for Atlanta* is the rubric, though each work essays the theme in a different way. As her studies show, this



Jennifer Bartlett, Study for Painting #6, *Flare Swimmers Atlanta*, 1978-79, gouache, Testor enamels, ink on paper, 21 x 21"

REVIEWS New York

ULRICH RUCKRIEM, *Sperone Westwater Fischer Gallery*; JENNIFER BARTLETT, *The Clocktower*; KIT FITZGERALD and JON SANBORN, *Whitney Museum*;

is determined by an operation of set terms: each work is keyed to a season and an astrological sign as well as to a condition of light (color) and a state of water (snow, ice, fog, etc.). The swimmer motif and the ratio of canvas to plate remain constant, as does her code for the canvas as "happy calm" and the plates as "sad active."

This is how the work is generated, which is fine: it provides a given, gets her painting. But she seems to invest more in the system than she gets out. Her terms, codes, or whatever are fairly banal (perhaps if I hadn't seen them spelled out in the studies, I wouldn't think so). It's hard not to decode, and so dissolve, the work, or return it to the status of terms in a notebook.

The swimmer here seems less a repository of art value (the tradition of the bather as reformed in early modern art) than a motif of depletion, even a campy or pop-ish image of banality. And the operations to which it is subjected do not really clarify or complicate it. It is true that what is presented by the canvas is re-presented by the plates, but this is done in a way that neither the

nature of the subject nor the nature of the two media warrants fully.

Swimmers for Atlanta, like *The Swimmer* of Robert Moskowitz, has it both ways: it reads simultaneously as painted field and as water (or ice, etc.); there is a duplicity here as to what is representational and what is abstract that allies the work to new image painting. Many painters today dismiss the representational/abstract dichotomy as a false dichotomy (which is true in one sense) or as a cliché and yet paint and talk of nothing else. They tend to work in ambiguous relation to both kinds of art and to mistake an ironic suspension for a renaissance of potentials.

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