

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART

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Jennifer Bartlett (Born 1941 -)

In the Garden, No.12

Conte crayon on paper.
495 x 660 mm. (19 1/2 x 26 in.)

The series known collectively as In the Garden was begun as a group of drawings made in 1979 and 1980 in the garden of a villa in the south of France. As one recent scholar has noted, 'You expect an idyllic hortus conclusus. The garden itself was indeed shut in from the glamorous world around it in the old town of Nice; it was ordinary, dull and certainly not picturesque. The reference, then, is ironic, it asks us to laugh as much at Bartlett's predicament (self-imposed) as at the apparent grandeur of the garden theme in Western Art rediscovered by the American traveler in Europe.'

It was at this period that, by necessity, Bartlett began to work on a small scale, and in particular to begin to develop her skills as a draughtsman. As the artist later recalled, 'I began 'notes to myself, which fascinated me more and more. First I would do drawings in pencil, then pencil plus colored pencil, then ink, then ink plus color, and it became a cycle of double drawings with forty or more possible combinations of this same subject. I like to do double drawings because I always feel one isn't enough. I became completely obsessed with the project.' Bartlett imposed a rule of a uniform size of paper for all the drawings and, having run out of time to complete the project in France, took photographs of the pool and the garden which served as the basis for the later works in the series.

The 197 drawings which make up the complete In the Garden series – drawn variously in pencil, coloured pencil, charcoal, crayon, pen and ink, brush and ink, watercolour, pastel and gouache - were exhibited together at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York in 1981, to considerable critical acclaim. The series was also reproduced in its entirety in the first monograph solely on Bartlett's work, published the following year.

At the time of the 1981 exhibition, one critic noted of the In the Garden series that it was 'very much about the landscape tradition; it is also about the history of 20th-century art – about breaking down the imitative powers of the line and imbuing them with something more abstract, more nervously emotional...In each of her drawings she investigates, tirelessly and inventively, the same scheme: a reflecting pool accented by an ornamental mannequin pis, backed by a stand of trees and a boxwood hedge. The series begins with the pool in sunlight, rather objectively drawn, and ends with a suite of expressionist nocturnal drawings in which selected views of the garden are paired with vignettes of some feral night creature...Composed primarily of drawings set up as marginally intersecting diptychs within each frame, the installation moves through modernism with such steamroller authority that references to Howard Pyle, Ad Reinhardt and David Hockney can coexist on the same wall without seeming to be mutually exclusive...The garden is pulled apart, detail by detail, and reassembled. The more familiar we become with the topography, the more compelling and varied it seems. Aerial views, close-ups and middle-distance shots are included. The juxtapositions and editing of the images is almost cinematic...At the moment when there is so much molelike scrimmaging going on in American art...it is reassuring to encounter an artist who is willing to take some time, to slow down and recollect.'

Provenance:

Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, in 1981
Barbara Krakow Gallery, Boston, MA.

Exhibitions

New York, Paula Cooper Gallery, Jennifer Bartlett: In the Garden, 1981, No.12.

Literature:

John Russell and Jennifer Bartlett, In the Garden, New York, 1982, unpaginated.

Artist description:

Active as a painter, draughtsman, printmaker and writer, Jennifer Losch Bartlett was born in California and studied at Mills College in Oakland and at the Yale School of Art and Architecture in New Haven, graduating in 1965. In the late 1960s she began painting on uniformly-sized small steel plates ('She wanted a simple, flat, uniform surface to paint on, a surface that did not require wooden stretchers, canvas, and all the bothersome paraphernalia of oil paint', as one writer has noted), and had her first solo exhibitions of these works in New York in 1970 and 1972. Two years later the artist began a long and fruitful association with the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York, although in later years she also worked with other galleries, notably the Locks Gallery in Philadelphia.

Bartlett first came to prominence when her monumental work Rhapsody - made up of 987 painted steel plates, each one-foot square, and arranged in 141 vertical rows of seven plates each - was exhibited in 1976 at the Paula Cooper Gallery to considerable critical acclaim, and was quickly sold to a private collector. (The 153-foot-long painting is now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.) Bartlett continued to produce works in series for much of her later career, notably the sequence of some two hundred drawings, executed in various media, entitled In the Garden and done between 1979 and 1980, and the twenty-four paintings of the Air: 24 Hours series, painted between 1991 and 1992. She also began working on print projects, once again often executed in series, such as an assemblage of screenprints and colour woodcuts entitled At Sea, Japan, which appeared in 1980.

Working between studios in Manhattan (and later Brooklyn) and Amagansett on Long Island, Bartlett continued to be very productive throughout her career. She also undertook a number of specific commissions for large-scale decorative work, notably for the Federal Building in Atlanta, Georgia, the AT&T Building in New York, the Institute for Scientific Information in Philadelphia, the Volvo corporate headquarters in Gothenburg in Sweden and the home of the collector Charles Saatchi in London.

Bartlett's paintings have been exhibited at the Venice Biennale, Documenta in Kassel and at the Whitney Biennial in New York, and the artist was elected to the National Academy of Design in 1990. Works by Bartlett are today in the collections of numerous museums throughout America, as well as in Australia, Bermuda, Britain, Denmark, Israel, Japan and South Korea. Museum surveys of her work have been held at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1985, the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2011, and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia and the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, New York in 2013-2014.