Up the Creek (detail), 1981-82



New York artist Jennifer Bartlett is known for her ambitious, sometimes obsessive artistic undertakings. In recent years she has been creating multi-part environmental works, each of which explores a particular kind of landscape in a multitude of artistic styles. A visit to a friend's country house in Rockland County, New York, was the impetus for Up the Creek (1981-82), the third in a projected five-part series. Although Bartlett admits to feeling out of place in the country, she immersed herself in the experience, taking hundreds of photographs of the lushly wooded property and finally selecting ten images that, together with her memories, served as models for the group of paintings and drawings that constitute the installation.

Bartlett's first paintings to be exhibited in New York in the early seventies were composed of dotted or gridded enameled steel plates. Although original in medium and technique, they were consonant with Minimalist principles based on geometry and seriality. In her first environmental work, Rhapsody (1976), Bartlett introduced simplified imagery--a mountain, a tree, a house and the ocean. She systematically creates permutations and repetitions of these themes in the 988 enamel plates that constitute Rhapsody, each of which is deliberately rendered in a different stylistic idiom, from linear to expressionistic.

Another monumental work that explores the function of style resulted from Bartlett's commitment to spend the winter of 1979-80 in what turned out to be a

dreary house in the country in southern France. Her response was to make the best of things by teaching herself "how to draw," producing nearly 200 drawings of an empty, tiled pool, an awkward statue of a boy and border of cypress trees in the rundown garden. She recorded the scene in ink, charcoal, graphite, colored pencil and watercolor in a variety of weather and light conditions, and from all possible viewpoints. In the process of completing this exhaustive task, she not only gave significance to a mundane scene by translating it into art, but also recreated just about every major modern graphic style. In order to complete the In the Garden works when it came time to leave the villa, Bartlett developed her present method of working from photographs.

Bartlett is one of several contemporary artists (e.g., Neil Welliver, Rackstraw Downes and Malcolm Morley) who have rediscovered the rich metaphorical and expressive potential of landscape. At its simplest level, Up the Creek is a description of familiar territory--leafy trees, dark shadows, sky and shimmering water, a kind of landscape that might have been painted by Gustav Courbet or Edouard Manet. But whereas the nineteenth-century painter of landscape was chiefly interested in how best to recapture nature, Bartlett views nature as a vehicle through which she can explore the function of artistic style and its effect on perception, while still creating a satisfying visual experience. Her current landscape installations derive from a commission by London collectors to create a

piece for their nine-walled dining room which overlooks a garden. Bartlett made several hundred photographs of the garden at different times of the year as preparation for the nine works she produced in various media, adding to those she had used in prior works.

Similarly, Bartlett employs a

distinct technique for each part of Up the Creek: pastel, charcoal, casein and oil paint on folding screen, plaster wall, mirror, glass and canvas, in addition to the medium with which she is most often associated -- footsquare baked enamel on steel plates. It is in the gridded, modular steel plate component of Up the Creek that Bartlett is closest to the spirit of Minimalism. The collage piece recalls the late cut-outs of Henri Matisse in which he distilled semi-abstract organic shapes from natural forms. Bartlett's broken brushwork in oil on canvas captures a favorite Impressionist motif: the dazzling effect of sunlight and reflections on water. She borrows the pose of the figure in the other oil painting in the installation from Paul Cézanne's The Bather, painted just a century ago. "I don't think I'm particularly sensitive or gifted in particular media," Bartlett said recently, "but I become curious about them. And I do think a medium determines how something looks, and what it is."

Other contemporary American and European artists, such as the Italian, Francesco Clemente and the German, Gerhard Richter, share Bartlett's eclectic and mutable approach to style but to different ends. Clemente's stylistic

diversity is an expression of the freedom felt by contemporary artists to appropriate any style that suits their needs in a given work. Richter's radical stylistic shift from one group of paintings to the next is a comment on style as it relates to fashion. Bartlett, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with investigating the effect of style on subject-matter, as well as with being able to sustain an overall harmony in each installation by concentrating on the consistent aspects of a distinctive locale.

Born in Long Beach, California, in 1941, Bartlett received a B.A. from Mills College, Oakland, California, before moving East to complete her studies at Yale University (M.A., 1964; M.F.A., 1965). She currently divides her time between Paris and New York. Up the Creek was shown in New York at the Paula Cooper Gallery, in London at The Tate Gallery and at the Long Beach Museum of Art (California) before its current presentation in MATRIX.

Constance Lewallen

Work in MATRIX:

Up the Creek, 1981-82, a tenpart installation consisting of:

Oil on mirror, 72" x 82-1/2"

Oil on canvas, 84" x 96"

Casein on free-standing plaster wall, 77" x 77" x 4-7/8"

Testors enamel on glass, 72" x 82-1/2"

Oil on canvas, 84" x 84"

Folding screen; Testors enamel on cherry, maple, oak, pine, poplar, walnut, 72" x 109-1/2" (when extended)

Testors enamel, silkscreen grid and baked enamel on steel plates, 116" x 77"

Collage, casein on paper on canvas, wooden frame with casein, 85-3/8" x 85-3/8"

Pastel on paper; oak frame with oil paint, 98-1/4" x 74-1/2"

Charcoal on paper; oak frame with oil paint, 74-1/2" x 98-1/4"

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Mills College, Oakland, CA, '63; Paula Cooper Gallery, NY, '74, '76, '77, '79, '81, '82, '83; Wadsworth Atheneum, Matrix 28, Hartford, CT, '77, brochure; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, '78; Hansen-Fuller Gallery, S.F., '78: Hallwalls and Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY, '80-'81, catalogue; The Tate Gallery, London, '82, catalogue; Long Beach Museum of Art, CA, '84; Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, '84, catalogue.

Biennial, '77, '79, '81, catalogues; The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, Painting: New Options, '72, catalogue; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 9e Biennale de Paris, '75, catalogue; The Art Institute of Chicago, 72nd American Exhibition, '76, catalogue; Kassel, W. Germany, Documenta 6, '77, catalogue; Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, New Image Painting, '78, catalogue; Venice Biennale, American Pavilion, Drawing: The Pluralist Decade, '80 (traveling), catalogue; Rheinisches Landesmuseum Bonn, W. Germany, Back to the USA, '83 (traveling), catalogue.

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogues under exhibitions):

Russell, John. "On Finding a Bold New Work," The New York Times, May 16, '76.

Smith, Roberta.

"Bartlett's Swimmers," Art in America, March '79.

Howe, Katherine.

"Jennifer Bartlett at Paula
Cooper," Images and Issues
(L.A.), Sept./Oct. '82.

Bernier, Rosamond.
"Garden of the Mind," House and Garden, May '83.

Robertson, Nan. "In the Garden with Jennifer Bartlett," Artnews, Nov. '83.

Hughes, Robert.
"Revelations in a Dank
Garden," Time, Oct. 31, '83.

Selected group exhibitions:

The Museum of Modern Art, NY, Seven Walls, '71; Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, Painting Annual, '72, MATRIX is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts, a federal agency.