

Art Agency, Partners


Art Agency, Partners is a bespoke art advisory firm founded in 2014, and built upon decades of combined experience, to provide counsel to many of the world's leading art collectors and institutions on collection assessment and development, estate planning, and innovative approaches to museum giving and growth.

I Got It Wrong

When a work forces you to reconsider the artist



Jennifer Bartlett, *FOUR A.M.* (1991-92). © Jennifer Bartlett. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, and The Jennifer Bartlett 2013 Trust

By  Allan Schwartzman

co-founder of AAP & chairman of Sotheby's Global Fine Arts

Published 13 June 2019 in [Allan's Intro](#)

I usually discourage beginner collectors from rushing to buy contemporary art because the work that appeals them at the start usually fails to sustain their interest over time. And many a seasoned viewer can still be vulnerable to this kind of rush to like (not that I encourage anyone to stifle their instincts!) For me, once I reach a strong viewpoint about an artist, I am rarely given cause to rethink it (even in instances where an artist I support strongly does not gain broad appeal). Likewise, I hardly ever find myself substantially rethinking the work of an artist I had previously dismissed unilaterally. This is simply because I don't rush to judge work so, when I get to a decision, most often I maintain a consistent faith in the art I support.

So, what a secret pleasure it was for me to "rediscover" the work of an artist I had confidently dismissed a long time ago, Jennifer Bartlett, through a day sale painting in Sotheby's spring auctions (*FOUR A.M.* (1991-92)). From the mid 1970s through the mid 1980s, there were few American painters as revered as Bartlett, whether because of her early conceptually based graph dot paintings or the increasingly more visual representational bodies of work that followed. Indeed, her magnum opus, *Rhapsody* (1975-76), is [currently on view](#) at New York's Museum of Modern Art, where its presence has been lauded by many.

The day sale painting in question was made in the early 1990s, a time when Bartlett's work was looking less and less relevant to contemporary discourse, especially after the waves of Neo-Expressionist painting and post-Duchampian psychological sculpture of the 1980s had shifted the attention to younger generations of artists. Indeed, as time went on, I found the glamorous leisure of Bartlett's successful life that was undeniably present in her paintings to be alienating, particularly at that moment when countless younger creative voices were being silenced by the scourge of AIDS, most never having had the chance for their potential to blossom.



Jennifer Bartlett, *Rhapsody* (1975-76), when it was originally shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

FOUR A.M. was estimated to sell for \$30,000-\$40,000, which sounded about right given how relatively invisible her work has become in recent years, particularly her later work. But there was something about this painting which kept drawing me deeper into it, even though it seemed a rather banal image by an artist who had been retreating further and further into what read to me as the bourgeois comfort of her lovely life, long ago detached from the vital spirit of contemporary art.

The painting depicts a domestic interior, the focus being an ordinary wrinkled towel at the top of a staircase, floating somewhat mystically in an otherwise mundane and plausible interior, with the artist's characteristic grid forming a compositional and gestural substructure for the painting. The brushwork was alive, but even more engaging was that strange line between the everyday and the extraordinary. At the time it was painted, this kind of diaristic representation seemed more the terrain of an earlier generation of artists inhabiting their own personal space, both literal and emotional,

disconnected from the salient artistic issues of the day.

The recent shift in art of the current time—which is a dramatic one—from abstraction to representation (which, in some of the most compelling cases, has been a shift from the work of white artists to that of black artists) has given me a different frame of reference for narrative in postwar painting.

It has prompted a new perspective on work made in the 1960s at a moment in which representational painting was seen primarily through a narrow lens in which it seemed artistically conservative. That lens of the avant-garde was principally formal and monolithic. I never would have been able to look at Bartlett's work of the 1990s in any other way at that moment, because of the context of the times.

Change of context can also be change of content

Now, though, it looks fresh to me, and for a totally different set of reasons because now we are given to see narrative painting through a new lens. [Philip Pearlstein](#) still looks conservative in relation to the art of his AbEx and Pop peers, but the narrative representational work of such artists as [Romare Bearden](#), [Faith Ringgold](#) and [Robert Colescott](#) was establishing a very different course for painting than that of artists as diverse as [Andy Warhol](#) and [Robert Ryman](#); a course that is only today becoming clearer as fundamentally different from traditional figurative painting of Pearlstein and others, within the context of the work of a younger generation of African American artists whose work is rooted more in cultural identity than formal concerns.

Nonetheless, given that Bartlett's star seemed to have faded in popular opinion, we thought we would be able to grab the painting quietly, within or near the estimate. Apparently, though, we were not the only ones to see it that way. *FOUR A.M.* sold for \$262,500, more than six times the high estimate and a record for the artist, the previous record of \$176,000 having been set in 1991 for one of the artist's most important mural-scale works, *At the Lake* (1978) (est. \$100,000-\$150,000), made during her golden years.

I have often said that change of context can also be change of content. I always saw that in terms of artists changing galleries. This is the first time I have seen it by questioning my own basic assumptions about contemporary art. So, the joke was on me—and I enjoyed it.

And more recently, I am having similar epiphanies about other artists. The beauty of this moment in contemporary art is that there is now, more than ever before, a broader basis for rethinking our assumptions. There is, for me, a joy in that discovery.