

ABSTRACTION AS RECITATION

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JENNIFER BARLETT, BRICE MARDEN and CLAIRE SEIDL

In music a recitative lies between speaking and singing. If that sounds like a good metaphor for art, Jennifer Bartlett takes it as a title for her most sweeping painting in quite some time. It is also a kind of safe harbor in the past.

A recitative allows an opera to be "sung through" without bringing the action or dialogue to a halt for an aria. It allows moments of comedy amid grander displays of emotion. It allows characters to address one another or the audience, rather than heaven and earth. Yet it also displays the tension between music and drama that led to Mozart's rapid-fire overlapping voices and, ultimately, Wagner's dream of a total work of art. In a sense, Modernism is all about the fulfillment and utter collapse of that dream. And Bartlett's best work is all about another day, savoring the waking fragments of the dream, and wondering what comes next.

She makes entering a room into an immersion in just that moment. Her best-known work covers the walls with a grid of nearly a thousand identical plates. In 1976, when formalism seemed to have defined paint-

ing once and for all and when Minimalism put the very possibility of painting in doubt, she managed to take on both claims—and then some. Rhapsody built from the search for a common language, and it cherished the languages of art it knew. Yet its grid within grids spins out into new elements, most notably a house as a child might imagine it, and then into black. As one looks from left to right, the possibility of seeing painting as a time line becomes impossible.

Now, at seventy, she tempts one again with reductive logic. Recitative again covers three walls with enamel on baked steel, and the gallery even uses its fourth wall for a display case of her past catalogs. This, it seems to say, is the definitive Jennifer Bartlett. Now, almost by definition, the definitive Jennifer Bartlett is never definitive. Along with Brice Marden and Claire Seidl, she asks what painting in the present can still add. And along with Suzan Frecon and JJ Peet, like dozens of others in galleries and open studios, she asks whether painting in 2011 can be not just tasteful and formulaic but ambiguous or even fun. The answer is by no means clear, but maybe that is the point