

Current Comments

Works of Art at ISI: Jennifer Bartlett's "In the Garden" and "Interpenetrations" by Handel Evans

Number 33

August 17, 1981

Within the past year-and-a-half, several works of art have been commissioned, executed, and installed at ISI®'s corporate headquarters in Philadelphia. These have included: "The Cathedral of Man," a 310-square foot (27.9 sq. m.) mural by Guillermo Wagner Granizo;¹ "Communication," an 8' 6" x 30' (259.08cm x 914.4cm) sgraffito mural by Joseph Slawinski;¹ and "The History, Gods, Myths, Rituals, and Future of the Huichol Indians," an 8' x 12' (243.84cm x 365.76cm) yarn painting by Emeteria Martinez Rios.²

The original stimulus for the creation of these works was a regulation by the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority. It requires that a minimum of one percent of the construction budget of a new building be devoted to publicly accessible art. We at ISI were so enthusiastic about this idea that we decided to go beyond a strict, letter-of-the-law compliance with the Authority's directive. For example, the three works I have just mentioned were "optional," in the sense that ISI did not submit any of them to the Authority as fulfillment of their requirement. Instead, we commissioned them simply because we felt that each artist, in his or her own style, could make a unique and significant contribution toward enhancing our work environment.

In this essay, I would like to focus attention on another such "optional"

work—"Interpenetrations," a 4' x 12' (121.92cm x 365.76cm) oil painting by Welsh artist Handel Evans. I will also discuss the 9' 8" x 32' 6" (294.64cm x 990.6cm) mural, "In the Garden," by New York-based artist Jennifer Bartlett. Installed in ISI's main lobby on April 13, 1981, this mural is the work we commissioned to discharge our legal obligation to the Redevelopment Authority.

Corporate interest in—and the purchase of—original artwork has been on the increase in the last two decades, according to Mary Anne Craft, a lecturer in art history, Frick Museum, Pittsburgh, and a research librarian specializing in pictorial materials. In a recent article appearing in *Business Horizons*, she listed a number of factors influencing the acquisition of art by business, including: the desire to decorate or refurbish new or existing company facilities, an interest in art as an investment, continuing a personal collection started by the company's founder, altruistic support of the arts, and a desire to foster good public relations by presenting the viewer with an image of the company as forward-looking and progressive.³

Some or all of these motivations may be true of any of the various corporations now involved in collecting or sponsoring artwork. In ISI's case, we were interested in art primarily as a vital, integral part of our environment. ISI's corporate art has stimulated the ex-

change of values and opinions among employees, which I feel is extremely important in a company as large and diverse as ISI. Moreover, as Craft notes, the values of individualism and human creativity—values not traditionally fostered in the business community—are reinforced in employees when art is not simply an investment or a decoration, but an integral part of the company.³ Finally, a visually attractive environment can only have a positive influence on the mental and emotional well-being of employees—always a subject of concern at ISI.

Of course, art has been around far longer than modern business' interest in it—or, for that matter, far longer than modern business itself, although it should be noted that the Dutch masters were supported substantially by Holland's merchant class. Though much has been written over the years about the nature of art and what it is ultimately for, the essence of artistic endeavor has remained peculiarly elusive. For instance, in her books *Philosophy in a New Key* and *Problems of Art*, philosopher Susanne K. Langer defined art as a "non-discursive" form of communication—as opposed to "discursive" forms like writing and speaking.^{4,5} In other words, art is a means of getting across a feeling or an idea when words won't suffice.

But in *The Painted Word*, social commentator Tom Wolfe suggests that modern art is *anti-communicative*. For Wolfe, and perhaps for many of us, some contemporary artists seem to elevate the mechanics and techniques of creating art to the level of art itself. Art seems to have become the pursuit of abstract ideals, no longer touching base with human experience.⁶

On the other hand, Albert C. Barnes, American physiologist, chemist, inventor of the antiseptic Argyrol, and author

of *The Art in Painting*,⁷ believed that the purpose of art is to reveal the significant qualities of an object or situation that might otherwise have escaped an observer. A landscape painting should capture the spirit of the scene, and not necessarily a photographic image. A portrait should reveal what is essential about the sitter, rather than render a perfect likeness.⁷

It is in the pursuit of this "essence" that art begins to take on the bizarre forms so characteristic of such modern 20th-century movements as Dada, Pop and Op Art, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, and a host of other "isms."⁶ I shall discuss Barnes and his ideas on art in a future essay. But when the pursuit of the intellectual ideas Barnes spoke of is taken to an extreme, it then becomes possible to understand Wolfe's criticisms of modern art.

Even a casual glance at Figures 1 through 4 (on the full-color insert in the center of this issue) will be more than enough to tell you that Bartlett's mural, "In the Garden," is well within the bounds of modern artistic styles. And as I have just indicated, modern art tends to be controversial. This is certainly true of "In the Garden." Bartlett herself has avoided commenting on the work's meaning, since she believes that a painting doesn't necessarily have to have a meaning—that it is created to be reacted to.⁸ Indeed, even the imagery of the mural interests her less than the methods she used to render it.⁸ It is not surprising, then, that whenever I am asked, "Do you like it?" I must respond with a rather ambivalent expression. I don't know whether I am being asked if I approve of the mural, or whether it turns me on.

Bartlett, born in 1941 in Long Beach, California, has been acclaimed as one of America's foremost young painters. She

received her bachelor's and master's degrees in fine art from the Yale School of Art and Architecture in the mid-1960s and is currently working on a commissioned painting in London. Her credits include the 20' x 160' x 22' (609.6cm x 4876.8cm x 670.56cm) enamel-on-steel, oil-on-canvas mural, "Swimmers Atlanta," in the Richard B. Russell Federal Building in Atlanta, Georgia; the 7' 6" x 153' 9" (228.6cm x 4686.3cm) "Rhapsody," part of a private collection in New York City; and "At Sea, Japan," another major large-scale work to be installed in the Keio University Libraries in Tokyo, Japan, next year. Each of the latter two works makes use of the same type of one-foot-square enameled steel plates employed in creating ISI's mural.

Bartlett's work has been featured in various one-woman and group exhibitions throughout the US, Europe, and Japan. A partial listing of the establishments in which she has had individual shows includes the following: Dartmouth College, New Hampshire; University of California, Irvine; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Baltimore Art Museum; and Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Her work has been shown several times in group exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art, both in New York; at the Art Institute of Chicago; and at least once at the Tyler School of Art and the Institute of Contemporary Art of the University of Pennsylvania, both located in Philadelphia; as well as at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. The European institutions in which she has exhibited her work include the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, the Kunstmuseum in Düsseldorf, the Kunsthaus in Zurich, and the Akademie der Künste in West Berlin. She has also been included in the Documenta, an international exhibition

that is held every two years in Kassel, Federal Republic of Germany. Bartlett's awards include the Harris Prize from the Art Institute of Chicago, a Creative Artists Public Service Fellowship, and the Lucas Visiting Lecture Award from Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota.

The mural itself, "In the Garden," actually consists of two identical works—one appearing in conventional fashion affixed to the east wall of our main lobby, the other dispersed in carefully calculated sections throughout the building. Each mural consists of 270 one-foot-square steel plates. However, while the lobby version is made up of five contiguous 9' 8" x 6' 6" (294.64cm x 198.12cm) sections making up an integrated whole, the dispersed version is broken down into six groups of one plate each, six groups of two plates each, six groups of three, and so on, up to the last six groups of nine plates each.

The subject matter depicted by the mural, as Grace Glueck of the *New York Times* puts it, consists of "a patch of garden attached to a villa [that Bartlett] occupied in Nice for several months [during the summer of 1980]. The main adornment of the garden, apart from the natural elements, was a rectangular pool on whose edge was poised a...statue of a urinating youth."⁹ This image, painted with Testor's Pla enamel (the same stuff children use to paint plastic models), is repeated five times in the mural, but is varied by changes in both perspective and time of day. In the first section, for instance, the viewpoint is aerial ("bird's-eye"), under morning light. In the last section, the image is from a "worm's-eye level," and night has fallen.

Like most works of art—modern or not—"In the Garden" functions on several levels at once. The format of the gridded steel plates was conceived of in

order to restrict and formalize the compositional decisions that had to be made about the painting. Yet, for Bartlett at least, the plates encouraged experimentation within their strictly defined structure, and in an article appearing in *New Image Painting*, she explains how: "If a painting is comprised of units, it is possible to think of it as always being divisible or changeable. The gridded steel plates allow me to approach painting in a very methodical manner, where each thought can be seen as if it were a clause. The white spaces between the plates act as punctuation—they function like the space between words and sentences, dividing one unit from another."¹⁰ (p. 20) Whatever Bartlett's rationale, the method apparently works, as John Russell notes in the *New York Times*: "She can plot and chart her subject matter as strictly as a naval cartographer, but she also has a juicy free-running way with the loaded brush."¹¹

It is Bartlett's concern for a system of fitting free-flowing, gestural shapes into an inflexible, unyielding latticework that makes her work somewhat analogous to the information gathering and disseminating functions of ISI. Information occurs in distinct, internally consistent bundles or units, comparable to the individual steel plates Bartlett used in the creation of the mural. It is ISI's function to gather the randomly distributed, highly dispersed bundles of information scattered throughout society and systematize them into an intelligible, integrated whole. This was the inspiration for the duplicate of the lobby mural distributed throughout our building. The relationship between the "dif-fused" version and the "assembled" version of the mural is representative of the nature of ISI's work.

Since I have a sense of history, however, I want to use this occasion to record my true feelings about the mural.

While I recognize it as a success, the mural does not turn me on for a variety of reasons. "In the Garden" does not contain many of the bright colors I am so fond of, nor does the subject matter itself relate to an information theme in the way that I would prefer. My criticisms of Bartlett's work, however, are less objections to her methods and philosophy and more a protest against the *manner* in which modern art is judged to *be* art. I get the feeling that this mural would have been done even without ISI's commission, and yet I am told that this is the very quality that makes it *art*, as opposed to *illustration*. This tends to reinforce the oft-voiced complaint that artists only paint for each other, as was recently noted in the *New Yorker*: "The New York art world, to be sure, is a dubious entity. No academic body sets the tone, and the few critics who try to measure new art by traditional standards of quality have lost even their power to irritate or annoy. For some time now, the most telling factor in a young artist's reputation is what other artists say about him."¹²

Despite these reservations, however, I am pleased to have "In the Garden" join the other fine works of art on display here. As Roberta Smith notes in *Art in America*, Bartlett "seems interested in just how much information she can get into a painting—" an "almost scientific [obsession] with the large, given constants of the universe and the problems of representing them."¹³ These characteristics, together with a penchant for "ritual spontaneity and random order,"¹⁴ make Bartlett's work appropriate for ISI.

Bridging the gap between art and science by approaching art with a controlled, rational attitude and painting in a mathematically precise way are the avowed purposes of artist Handel Evans. Born in Pontypridd, Wales, in

1932, Evans attended both the Cardiff College of Art and the University of Wales, and now divides his time between residences in Europe, America, and the Caribbean. He received a National Diploma of Design in 1953, an Art Teacher's Diploma in 1954, and became a licentiate of the Royal Academy of Music in 1958.

Evans's works have been exhibited widely throughout Great Britain, Europe, and the West Indies, and he is represented in a great many collections throughout the world, including those of the Arts Council of Great Britain, Lessing Rosenwald in Philadelphia, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, and W. Guggenheim in New York. His work is also owned by a large number of corporations, among them Alcan, in Canada, and the Charterhouse Group, in England. In addition, he is a member of Atelier 17, a famous group of etchers founded in New York and Paris in 1932 by J.W. Hayter, who evolved the use of a single-plate method of making multi-colored prints, replacing the process of using a series of plates which had enjoyed common practice until then.¹⁵

"Interpenetrations," the oil painting Evans executed for ISI, has been on display in the second-floor lobby since midsummer 1980 (see Figures 5 and 6). Though Evans commands a wholly contemporary technique, his art is steeped in classical themes and ideas. The intricate labyrinth of wildly interconnecting geometric forms in "Interpenetrations" exhibits an almost medieval flatness of perspective, and, indeed, the artist considers himself a "traditionalist" in the sense that he is not in sympathy with much of what has been done in art in recent decades. Though his own style is obviously modern, he has been far more influenced by the great movements of the 1920s and 1930s than by present directions in art.

Evans describes his painting as "a visual metaphor of the relationship between mind and information."¹⁶ The five central figures, painted with restraint, precision, and sensitivity, symbolize the mind through its five senses. The complex structures surrounding them, of which the figures are a part, represent the information environment. According to Evans, the picture came into being as a result of his search for an image expressing the interdependent nature of the relationship between modern humanity and the growing mass of information on which its welfare depends.¹⁶

Arriving at the final concept presented in the painting entailed a considerable struggle and many discarded versions:

The gigantic scale and scope of the information industry was a source of difficulty, by reason of the sheer multiplicity of possible images [which could be created. This] was an obstacle rather than an aid, and only after much deliberation and many false starts...did the idea of 'interaction' between brain and information become the basic one.... In the process of trying to convey something of the dynamic nature of [this mutual interaction], I gradually eliminated most of the vertical and horizontal elements in the design, [since they] possessed a static, passive, even monumental air, and...had no power to suggest the existence of the busy action, reaction, and counter-reaction which is constant between Man and Data.¹⁶

"Interpenetrations" is not only a pleasure for the eye but a challenge to the mind, combining both cerebral and sensual components, the human and the abstract. "In the 'real' world," according to the artist, "the twin entities of mind and data interpenetrate and generally condition one another. I have symbolized this interaction by fusing the

'human' with the 'abstract' elements.... I have expressed a state of constant growth, change, and development, [and] in order to suggest something of the nature of scientific and other intellectual inquiry, I have represented the entire image in as clear and strong a light as possible."¹⁶

Evans believes that a painting is not only a portrait of the person who executed it, but also of the viewer. But the impression a viewer will get from a painting depends to a great degree on the background and training he or she brings to it.¹⁷ In other words, people who are not trained in how to view art will be able to recognize only the crudest, most obtrusive, and unsophisticated qualities of what they are looking at; the subtle nuances of what makes a drawing or painting *art* will entirely escape them.

Yet, it would not really take much in the way of training to enhance most people's perceptions of art. Evans and I

agree that art education and instruction in aesthetics is rudimentary at best in our respective school systems—both British and American—and if only that education were improved, the public's appreciation of the beautiful art being created today would also be improved. I like to feel that ISI, by commissioning these works, is taking a step in the direction of helping fine art to find a more meaningful place in our lives.

In concluding this essay, I want to pay special tribute to my assistant Calvin Lee, who has been my main point of contact with all the artists who executed works for ISI. In addition, I want to thank Steve Bonaduce for his extraordinary effort in clarifying my thinking and helping me to express naive thoughts on a subject which I tackled only with great trepidation. I want also to thank Bob Ewing, manager of our creative graphics department, for his work on the color insert in this issue as well as the previous inserts.

©1981 ISI

REFERENCES

1. Garfield E. Fine art enhances ISI's new building. *Current Contents* (5):5-9, 2 February 1981.
2., Huichol mythology and culture. Part I. World's largest yarn painting is latest in series of ISI-commissioned artworks. *Current Contents* (28):5-11, 13 July 1981.
3. Craft M A. The corporation as art collector. *Bus. Horiz.* 22:20-4, 1979.
4. Langer S K. *Philosophy in a new key*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957. 313 p.
5., *Problems of art*. New York: Scribner's Sons, 1957. 184 p.
6. Wolfe T. *The painted word*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975. 121 p.
7. Barnes A C. *The art in painting*. Merion Station, PA: Barnes Foundation Press, 1965. 522 p.
8. Bartlett J. Personal communication. 13 April 1981.
9. Glueck G. Art: garden drawings by Jennifer Bartlett. *NY Times* 23 January 1981, p. C19.
10. Marshall R. *New image painting*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978. 96 p.
11. Russell I. Art: figures in American painting. *NY Times* 9 November 1979, p. C23.
12. Tomkins C. The art world. *New Yorker* 57(8):112-6, 13 April 1981.
13. Smith R. Bartlett's swimmers. *Art America* 67:93-7, 1979.
14. Hess T B. Ceremonies of measurement. *New York* 10(12):60-2, 21 March 1977.
15. Evans H. Telephone communication. 4 June 1981.
16., *Interpenetrations*. Unpublished essay. 1980. 4 p.
17., Telephone communication. 14 May 1981.

[BACK](#)

In The Garden

by Jennifer Bartlett

The latest addition to ISI's collection of corporate art is the 10'8" x 33'6" (325.12cm x 1021.08cm) mural "In the Garden" by New York artist Jennifer Bartlett. Consisting of 270 one-foot-square steel plates, Bartlett's mural (Figures 1-4, at right and below) portrays the garden behind the villa she lived in while visiting Nice, France. The focus of Bartlett's mural is a rectangular pool, on the edge of which stands a small statue of a urinating cherub. Painted with Testor's Pla enamel, the image is repeated five times. In each repetition, the viewer's perspective and the time of day change. In the section on the reader's left in Figure 4, below, the viewpoint is aerial, or "bird's-eye;" and the time of day is morning; in the last section on the far right of Figure 4, the viewpoint is from a "worm's-eye" level, and night has fallen.



"In the Garden" actually consists of two murals, identical in appearance except that one (Figures 1 and 4) is assembled in conventional fashion on the north wall of ISI's main lobby, while sections of the other are randomly dispersed throughout the building. Two of these sections are shown in Figures 2 and 3, below. The gathering together of the scattered sections of the mural into an intelligible, integral whole in the lobby represents ISI's information-gathering and systematizing functions.

