

Art in America

Southern Appeal

By Zachary Fine | 22 November 2021



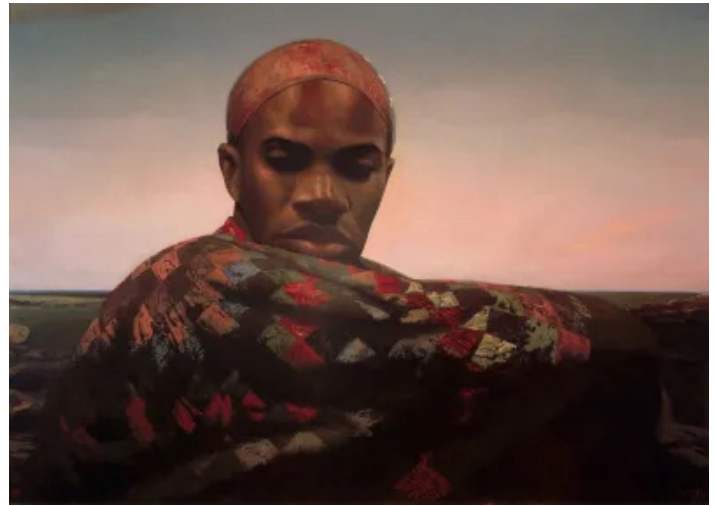
Young Life, 1994, oil on linen, 78 x 108 inches

At the end of July, I was standing with artist Bo Bartlett and his wife, painter Betsy Eby, on the western side of Wheaton Island, a twenty-acre lozenge of granite and spruce about twenty-two miles off the coast of Maine. We were on the shore, surrounded by sea kelp and tall loaves of rock, looking for good stones to skip. Bartlett, 65, is tan and boyish; he speaks softly, with a sort of preacherly calm, but is quite playful and energetic. In addition to painting, he runs a weekly radio show and makes full-length documentaries and feature films. On the island he likes to ramble around barefoot with a walking stick and often rushes toward things—flowers, blueberries, driftwood. He also talks to seagulls and lobsters. As we pass a little evergreen shrub, he bends down to rub the needles between his fingers and looks up with total wonder. “Smell this! Smell this! Can you believe it?”

Bartlett grew up in Columbus, Georgia, in the 1960s, and encountered art almost exclusively through *Time* and *Look* magazines and the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, where he first saw the work of Norman Rockwell and Andrew Wyeth. They were his introduction to a broadly realist tradition of American art that’s shaped his work for some fifty years. Bartlett paints large, visually enticing, and narratively complex scenes—from life, dreams, history, religion—that are sentimental and symbolic, and always more earnest than ironic. (“Earnestness is one of the last taboos,” Bartlett says.) His paintings are precisely the kind of which New York critics like to make minced meat.

In 1991, Roberta Smith wrote in the *New York Times* that Bartlett’s work was a terrible blend of conservative aesthetics and liberal politics. About *God* (1990), an enormous painting of an androgynous Black person shawled in

a multicolored blanket, Smith opined, “As consciousness raising, this is fairly simple-minded; as history painting, it’s idiotic.” In 1996, Peter Schjeldahl wrote in the *Village Voice* that Bartlett’s high-drama tableau of the Civil War—in which a nurse-like figure lifts the body of a Black soldier from a snowy field—was either “bad enough to be good or one of the single worst artworks I have ever seen.” Critic Michael Kimmelman read the review and, in his own piece on Bartlett in the *New York Times*, agreed with Schjeldahl. “That Mr. Bartlett might seriously seek to make history paintings seems, on the face of it, suspicious,” wrote Kimmelman. “[W]e’ve become too cynical for history painting, never mind that no one thinks to look to painting for moral guidance anymore. The very idea seems absurd, quaint.”



God, 1990, oil on linen, 120 x 168 inches

As we were skipping stones, Bartlett recalled an encounter with Roberta Smith a few years ago. “It was really interesting when we met her, because I told her the review affected my whole life. It was in Camden or Rockport. She and Jerry were there”—Jerry being Smith’s husband, art critic Jerry Saltz—“and people were asking questions. I said something like, ‘How does it feel to write a review and to know that it can change the course of an artist’s career?’ Eby also remembered it. ‘Basically, Roberta turned the question back and said, though not exactly in these words, that the artist is wrong if they think we [critics] have that much power. Because we really don’t.’”

After Smith’s review in the *Times*, Bartlett’s work stopped selling. A few magazines pulled their pieces on him without saying why. He even stopped painting for awhile. Then, he received a phone call from Betsy Wyeth—the wife of Andrew Wyeth, who was not only Bartlett’s artistic hero but the very reason Bartlett had moved to Philadelphia as a student. (He tried to meet, and apprentice for, Wyeth in 1975, but the artist was not taking understudies at the time.) Betsy happened to like Bartlett’s work. She invited him out to Chadds Ford, an hour west of Philadelphia, bought a few of his pieces, and asked if he would be interested in making a documentary about Andrew.

For the next five years, Bartlett embedded with the Wyeths, spending time with them in Pennsylvania and Maine, and closely observing Andrew. What he learned, at this point, was not so much a set of technical skills but rather a certain artistic temperament. “I realized by watching him every day that he essentially painted what excited him in the moment,” Bartlett wrote after Wyeth’s death. “Sometimes he wouldn’t get past the end of his own driveway in the morning before seeing the light strike a tree or a post, and stop to draw it. If he liked the results and was still interested, he’d do a watercolor of the subject. If the interest held, he’d begin a tempera. Rarely was there a sense of beginning a ‘work of Art.’ Usually it was just a notation of a moment.” The effect on Bartlett’s own work was that it became less “archetypal,” as he describes it. Paintings like *Damascus Road* (1988) and *God*, with their conceit-driven (or “idiotic”) approach, gave way to more consistently personal and immediate subject matter, such as what one finds in *Homecoming* (1995), *Painters Crossing* (1996), and *True Love* (1996)—the small-town South of his childhood or his relationship with the Wyeths coming through.

The first of Bartlett’s paintings I remember seeing, *Young Life* (1994), is from this period. It has been on loan for more than a decade at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans, where it is one of the more popular pieces in the collection. Like most of Bartlett’s works, it is also imposing: nine feet wide and almost seven feet tall. It shows a young family of three—mother, father, and son—in front of a dirt-spattered, jade-green pickup truck with a dead deer slung over the roof. The man holds a rifle, the boy a stick, and the woman has one arm around the man’s neck, the other on his stomach. All of them have a defensive, rather stern gaze.

While talking to the artist in his studio, I noticed a few small graphite marks floating in the middle of empty canvases. It turns out that these are compositional “sweet spots” he chooses after priming the surfaces. Sometimes the spots are chosen intuitively, and sometimes they are chosen with a golden mean caliper, which looks like a tool you might find in the hands of a dentist or animal surgeon. That the composition is loosely imagined before he even knows what he’s painting explains the pull of his pieces. *Young Life* is filled with strong lines and triangles, all of which are offset by the limp body of the deer. One can almost feel the heaviness of death—as communicated by the lofted and curved body—plucking at the image of the healthy young family.

There is always a mystifying edge to Bartlett’s paintings, a wayward symbol or provocation of some kind, often vaguely religious, that cannot be satisfyingly interpreted. A bonfire behind a homecoming king and queen, a boy being pried out from the inside of a whale, a church half-sunk in water. Bartlett will readily explain the source material for his own work; he will even interpret it with you. But what seems more interesting (maybe it’s a critic’s affliction) are the things beyond the intended layers. In *Young Life*, for instance, there is the woman’s hand. She is not just resting it on the man’s stomach but crimping it strangely, as if the man were expecting a child. Initially the gesture brings to mind the hand of Saint Elizabeth in certain Renaissance paintings of the Visitation, but as one approaches any point of reference like this, the meaning of Bartlett’s work can slip away.

BARTLETT SPENT THE FIRST PART OF HIS ADULT life in Pennsylvania, where he initially moved to train as an artist at the age of nineteen. As far as he understood, the Academy of the Fine Arts was the vital, and last surviving, vein of the American Realist tradition, from Thomas Eakins—whose 1875 painting *The Gross Clinic* Bartlett often studied at the Philadelphia Museum—through Wyeth. (Other formative influences during this period included Winslow Homer and Edward Hopper, as well as Balthus, who gave him something more surreal to chew on.) Bartlett speculates that his work probably absorbed the Americana in the city around him. Instead of Civil War memorials and nostalgia for the antebellum South, it was all Ben Franklin and Betsy Ross and the Declaration. There was a sense of an ascendant country, not a declining region.

In the early 2000s, Bartlett met Eby at an artist’s talk he was giving in Seattle. They fell in love quickly, stayed in the Northwest for some years, and eventually moved together to Columbus in 2012. Since then, they have spent their summers on Wheaton Island, which Bartlett purchased in the late 1990s and owns in its entirety. Everything on the island is stripped down and rather bare; the house is white, the furniture is white, the outhouse is white (there are no indoor toilets). For the rest of the year, they live in Bartlett’s childhood home, and work in their studios at an old repurposed textile mill.

Like many artists from the South, Bartlett has spent most of his career in places with greater access to art schools, art institutions, and art media. But the South has always been a part of his work. “Even in Pennsylvania I did Southern paintings,” he says. “Because I always thought of myself, when I was working on a painting, as going back to my backyard. I would imagine myself in the field below my house. It was woods at first, but that was where I always set my paintings. . . . Because I would sit there as a kid, and look at the grass, and look at the sunset, and that was my place. It was wide open. I thought of it as the West. I saw the hills in Alabama, and I thought they were the Rockies. I was too young to know any different. America is out there!”

While his standing with New York critics has never really changed, Bartlett is now represented by a gallery there, Miles McEnery, and his work is embraced in other parts of the US. Currently, he is perhaps the best-known figurative painter from the South besides Kerry James Marshall. His pieces have been acquired by museums including Crystal Bridges in Arkansas, the Lauren Rogers in Mississippi, and the Frye in Seattle. Prominent Hollywood directors and actors, like Steve Martin, have purchased his paintings. And most impressive, as of 2018, Georgia’s Columbus State University has a Bo Bartlett Center, which not only holds the bulk of Bartlett’s papers and artworks, but even has an installation called “Bo’s Brain,” complete with journal entries, juvenilia, and—in what may be a first in art history—an MRI scan of the artist’s brain.

This is a high degree of ceremony around a white male painter, in a part of the country that has historically refused to support or recognize its female artists and artists of color. The Center, which was made possible in part by Bartlett's brother-in-law, Otis Scarborough, a trustee emeritus of the university, was conceived with a focus on arts education and community service. But for some, it would seem to be too little, too late—a well-intentioned misdirection of resources. When I spoke with a curator at a Southern museum about writing this article, her response was frustration. Why Bartlett? Why now? Shouldn't the South be lifting its artists of color, its unsung talent, its formerly incarcerated and nonbinary, its immigrants and women? The issue was not about Bartlett himself but the seeming excess of attention he has received.



The American, 2016, oil on linen, 82 x 120 inches

Part of the appeal of Bartlett's work is that it riffs on a familiar grammar of American symbols in stripped-down, purified settings. Red wagons and baseball caps and tract housing appear in vague towns where the figures have been arranged, and the landscapes emptied, for high intensities of feeling. A YouTube video shows someone in the middle of an art gallery choking back tears as he tries to describe the power of Bartlett's *The American* (2016). The painting depicts a man wearing a suit and standing on an empty road in front of two nondescript houses; he is pointing a shotgun at an unspecified thing beyond the frame: it could be an object, it could be an animal. But one gets the impression that this man is ready to shoot a person, an intruder. The image is resonant in the South, where guns can appear suddenly and for no reason. It is also an image about the violence and anger of white men in America who feel as if they are defending their country from some onslaught or theft—by immigrants, the media, the government. It is also an image about someone protecting their home. One could keep going. Bartlett's paintings have enough ambiguity to intrigue many viewers, for conflicting reasons.

Southern art is typically a “regional” detour in the arc of American art history, but what distinguishes Bartlett's work is that it makes America itself seem more Southern. Many of his paintings that capture the spirit of American life—like those of children catching fireflies or riding red tricycles behind picket fences or playing in graveyards—are actually set in the South. We are, in other words, encountering a Southern image without knowing it. The paintings are flush with a nostalgia, a sentimentality, an earnestness; they allow anyone in the United States, or even abroad, where his work is often reproduced, to feel they have understood something essential about American emotional life, by looking at the South.

Bartlett has early memories of chafing at the conservative household in which he was raised—feeling disturbed by the racial discrimination in Columbus and what he heard on the radio from over the state line in Selma—but his paintings generally avoid scenes of explicit conflict, and especially racial violence. When I ask him about the issue of representation, Bartlett says that he wants to stay “within [his] own story.” For him, this means avoiding depictions of Black suffering that would land him in the same cauldron as artists like Dana Schutz. It does not mean painting only white people. “You want everybody to look at a painting and be able to associate with somebody, one of the characters. If you have the option and the opportunity, I do that.” His approach in recent years has been to paint Black figures in rather benign, ahistorical scenes that give viewers a wide berth to feel what they want to feel about race. *Georgia* (2021) shows a Black teenager riding a bicycle in an open field (and recalls Wyeth's *Young America*); *Hurtsboro* (2021) shows the backs of five Black men sitting on a beach.

Bartlett has been buoyed, in part, by admirers like Amy Sherald, the Black painter from Columbus who was commissioned to paint the official portrait of Michelle Obama. Sherald has said that it was Bartlett's *Object Permanence* (1986), which she saw on a school field trip as a child, that inspired her to start painting. "As we walked through the show my eyes were wide open when they landed on an image of a man standing in [a] yard," Sherald writes. "He was tall, and beautifully black. He met my gaze and I saw my future. I was captivated not only by him but by the idea that I wanted to make big beautiful paintings that told my story. Forty years later, here we are. Representation matters. It did then and does now more than ever."

The debates over representation—its inadequacy, its abuses—seemed far away from Bartlett's studio on Wheaton, where we were sitting. Wind whistled past the windows. An occasional plane on its way to Europe flew overhead. We could hear the harbor bell rocking out in the water, the low motors of lobster boats returning for the evening.

"You want to make the paintings that you want to see in the world," Bartlett said. "You don't want to edit according to what people are going to say or think." It was a contradiction, in some ways, his self-reliance and his desire to appeal widely, I said. There seemed to be a populist inside of him, someone not unlike Rockwell, who wanted to reach as many people as possible. "That's complicated," he responded. "As a Southerner, you want to please people. You're a people-pleaser. We are. We want to make sure that everybody's happy. That everything's okay."