

A painting of a hospital interior, likely a hallway, with a window showing a landscape. The painting uses a palette of earthy tones like browns, tans, and grays, with some blue and white. A white rectangular box is overlaid on the upper left portion of the painting, containing the text '125'.

125

Jennifer Bartlett
Hospital

THE
DRAWING
CENTER

The Drawing Center

January 22 – March 20, 2016

Drawing Room

Jennifer Bartlett Hospital

Curated by
Brett Littman

DRAWING PAPERS 125

Essay *by* Brett Littman
Poems *by* Wystan Curnow

Jennifer Bartlett: Hospital

Brett Littman

In June 2012, Jennifer Bartlett began a new series of ten pastels entitled *Hospital*, based on photographs she took during an extended stay at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York. The images are of quotidian things: corridors and views from the windows of waiting and treatment rooms. What makes them emotionally charged is not their mundane subject matter but their powerful subtext—Bartlett’s own mortality. These pastels are not maudlin, but, as discussed below, they register the particular circumstances of their creation—that they were made during the treatment of a grave illness.

These are not Bartlett’s first hospital-related works. In 2004, after an exploratory surgery, the artist had to convalesce at home and, lacking the energy to paint, began to write short stories and dialogues, which became the basis for her *Word Paintings*, 2004–06. The series consists of personal reflections on illness, recovery, dreams, friends, and family. One, *Purple Corridor*, 2004, is a twenty-three panel text-and-image painting that begins with the phrase “HERE IN THE HOSPITAL I FIRST SAW THE PURPLE CORRIDOR...”. The *Word Paintings* and Bartlett’s earlier series *Air: 24 Hours*, 1991–92—made during a complicated divorce—are the most directly intimate works in Bartlett’s career, dealing as they do with specific difficult personal emotional states. Interestingly, both series also deal with interior spaces—an imaginary corridor and the insides of rooms. In this sense as well, these series are a departure for Bartlett who generally works with systems or landscapes. I would posit that the *Hospital* pastels, due to their intimate nature and their emphasis on interiors over landscapes, should be viewed in relation to *Word Paintings* and *Air: 24 Hours*.

In the *Hospital* pastels, Bartlett visually expresses what might be called “hospital time,” a temporality marked by the alternation

between periods of intense treatment and extreme boredom that fosters a hyper-attunement to small changes in one's immediate surroundings. From pastel to pastel, Bartlett tracks micro-shifts, rendering similar landscapes at different times of day and under different weather conditions or drawing the way a railing in a corridor stretches into the distance from two distinct vantage points. Her attention to these kinds of details, reflected in shifts of color and perspective, imbue the works with a palpable sense of her own changing emotional states, which seem to oscillate between resignation and hope. This logic of alternation and subtle shifts is reinforced by the way Bartlett pairs her pastels by subject matter. There are two hospital corridor views with railings [PLS. 4, 5], two hallway views with Arne Jacobson Swan Chairs in front of a window [PLS. 2, 6], two views of the 59th Street Bridge [PLS. 1, 3], two views of buildings [PLS. 7, 8], and two abstracted views through windows [PLS. 9, 10]. None of the images include figures.¹

Bartlett's strategy of employing a limited number of visual motifs repeated from differing vantage points links *Hospital* to another series, *In the Garden* from 1981—the artist's first major work using the medium of drawing. Comprising 200 multi-media works on paper, it was inspired by Bartlett's visit to Nice, France, between 1979 and 1980. The story goes that she was a bit disappointed with the run-down villa where she was staying, so she began to focus her attention on the garden attached to the house. Neither highly designed nor decorative, it consisted of a grove of cypress trees surrounding a rectangular pool with a kitschy sculpture of a urinating cherub at one end. This somewhat banal scene, however, acted like a generator that motivated Bartlett to create a multitude of drawings.

¹ Later in 2012, Bartlett used the same set of photographs to create a series of ten large oil paintings also entitled *Hospital*, which were shown at Locks Gallery in 2015 and are included in this catalogue in order to document all the works under this title in one place. Using the same basic visual vocabulary of corridors, views through windows, and urban landscapes, Bartlett repeats the motifs she established in the pastels with two major differences: all of the paintings have the word "Hospital" written on them and all have a colored line or lines running through the images. For those interested in the *Hospital* paintings, I refer you to the excellent essay by Raphael Rubinstein in the catalogue entitled *Hospital*, published by Locks Gallery in 2015.

Bartlett made preparatory sketches for her panel paintings throughout the 1970s, but rarely displayed them. *In The Garden* was surprising both as a public presentation of her drawings and for the fact that she showed so many in a single exhibition. One of the other unusual elements of *In The Garden* was the inclusion of almost fifty works that employed pastels—a medium rarely used by artists working in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Pastel drawing had fallen far out of fashion and was more associated with eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early twentieth-century figures like Quentin de la Tour, Georges Seurat, Jean-François Millet, Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Odilon Redon, and Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer. At a moment when the dominant aesthetic movements of the day—Conceptualism, Minimalism, and Post-Minimalism—privileged idea and system over image, there was something radical in Bartlett’s championing of the highly sensuous and visual medium of pastels.

So what was Bartlett trying to do with these pastels in *In The Garden*? The whole project was almost an auto-didactic lesson for Bartlett to teach herself how to draw in different media: in addition to pastel, we find pencil, graphite, pen, ink, charcoal, conté crayon, watercolor, and gouache. The images range in style from simple line sketches to fully rendered scenes, and Bartlett chose to depict a wide range of vignettes that included landscapes, figurative works, abstract drawings, studies of the trees and other isolated objects, perspectival views of the pool and its surroundings, multiple views of the sculpture, and many diptychs juxtaposing cinematic vantage points of the same scene. *In the Garden* is a veritable Beaux-Arts education condensed into a very short period that links Bartlett’s work to broad themes in art history. In addition, the works, in their totality, lay bare Bartlett’s relentless exploration of a limited landscape for all its formal, geometric, emotional, and atmospheric possibilities. (Bartlett even writes notes in the margins of *In the Garden*, 1980, about measurements of scale, perspective, hue, and time of day.) The prevalence of pastels in these works might be connected to the fact that they offer more “painterly” applications and color options than pencils, graphite, or crayons. With the pastels in *In The Garden*, Bartlett seems best able to capture and synthesize the changing conditions of the site itself with its shifts of weather, clouds, coloring, and wind, making these particular works a very strong aesthetic

foundation for the series's overall project of presenting a specific time and place.

Since *In the Garden*, Bartlett has continued to employ pastels and has made more than 600 works in the medium. Pastels appear in other earlier multi-media serial works like *Elements*, 1990, *Seasons*, 1990, *24 Hours: Elegy*, 1992–93, *Air: 24 Hours*, 1993, and *Earth*, 1993–96. Here, the pastels are offered as variants on paintings also contained within the series. In 1995, however, starting with *Aspen, 6 Weeks*, a suite of twenty-four pastels made during a vacation in Aspen, Colorado, it seems that Bartlett shifted her thinking about how she would use the medium moving forward. Since that series, Bartlett has used pastels almost exclusively to document places she visits (much like the initial pastels for *In the Garden*), creating a sort of art travelogue. Each series is identified by the name of the place and often the months that Bartlett was there (e.g. *Jumby Bay, February*, 1998, or *Parrot Cay, March*, 2011). According to Joan LiPuma, Bartlett's longtime studio assistant, 30 x 30 inch sheets of paper would be shipped to these various locations so that she could work on site and then send the resultant pastels back to the studio at the end of her trips. For Bartlett, these series act as a way to keep busy and limber during downtimes from her studio practice.

The post-1995 “travel” pastels are always devoid of human figures. They focus on exterior landscapes populated by flowers, fauna, trees, clouds, water, snow, sunsets and nightscapes, architecture, boats, chairs, fencing, mountains, and deserts. Their color palates are varied due to the seasonal nature of Bartlett’s travel and also due to the different locales in which she works. From the bright blues, purples, yellows and greens of Bermuda, Nevis, and Parrot Cay to the snowy white vistas of Iceland and Aspen to the earthy browns and ochres of Arizona—these works perfectly harmonize and exploit the nature of the quick pastel sketch with Bartlett’s empirical and emotional reads of the daily conditions during their making.

Can we also then say that the *Hospital* pastels act as a kind of travelogue? I would argue yes: these pastels are made during a journey—not to a beautiful vacation spot but to a specific place

nonetheless. Of course, the results are more disquieting than her other “travel” pastels. In a sense, with *Hospital* Bartlett has come full circle through *In The Garden to Air: 24 Hours and Word Paintings* to tie together the more personal reflections and ideas that she has explored throughout her career to create a new body of work that eschews sentimentality while remaining indelibly poignant.

Pastels

as for
what's
in store

what-
ever

I and
you who

do al-
so care

to think
means
nothing

26. 7. 82



PL. 1

what

was the

point

is

still

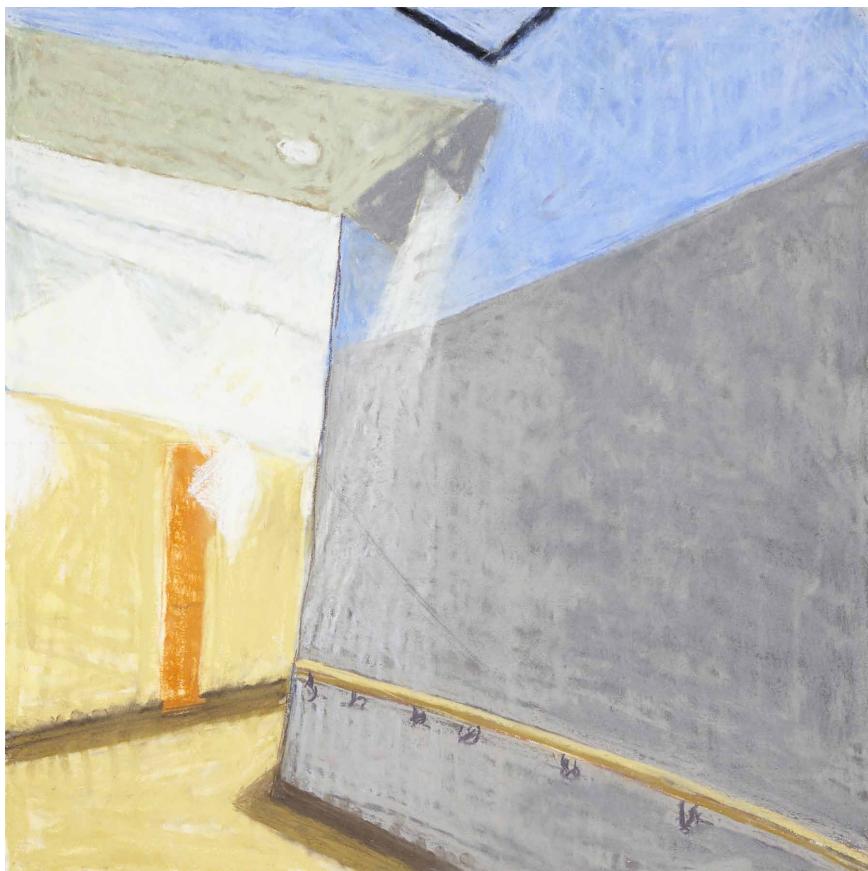
the

point

is

the

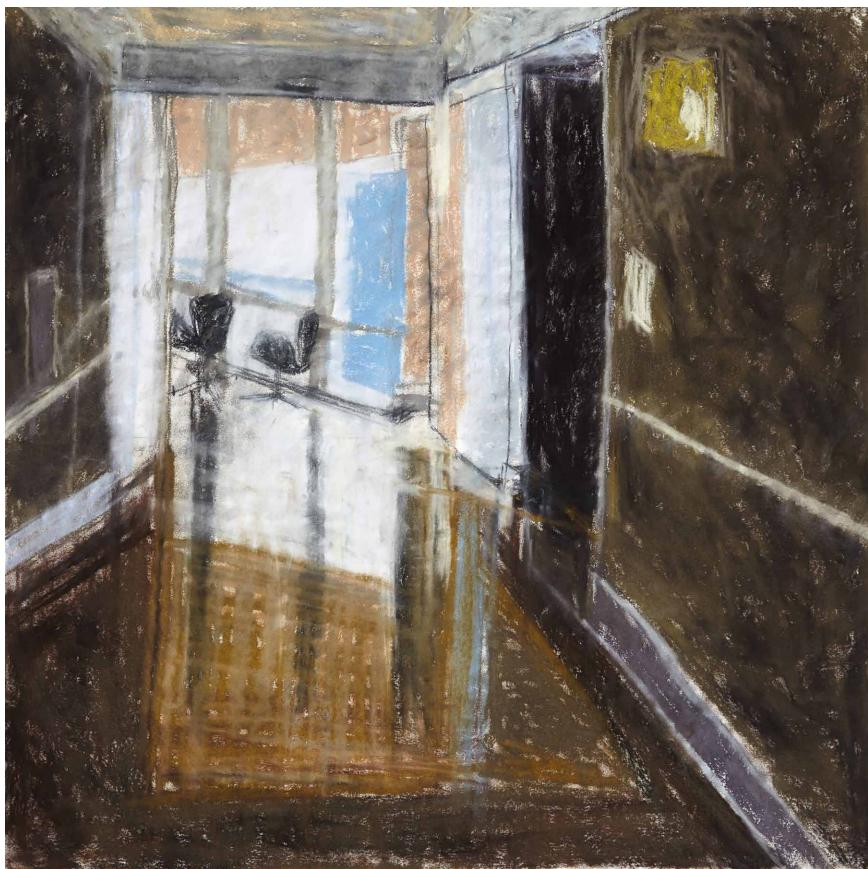
9. 8. 82



PL. 2

you
go
on
with
out
me

13. 8. 82

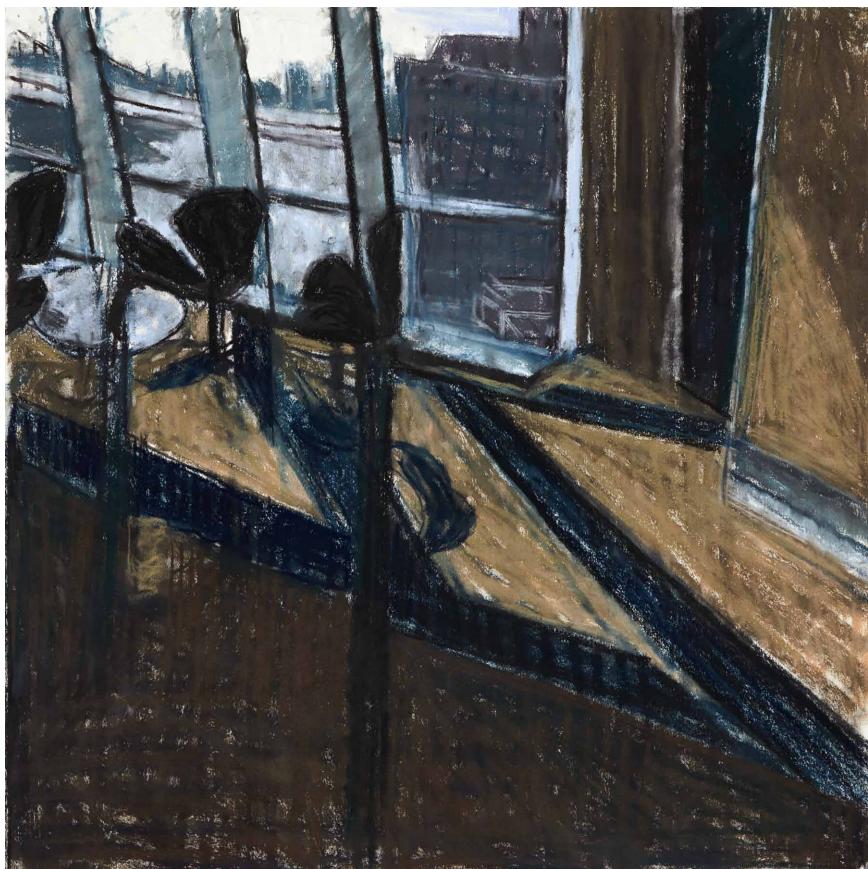


PL. 3

get me

for not

7. 11. 82



PL. 4

Now that
I
have it
(death)
in my
sentence
I'm the
more
composed.

27. 7. 82



PL. 5

Have it

in for/

out with

my one
and only

body

17. 12. 82



PL. 6

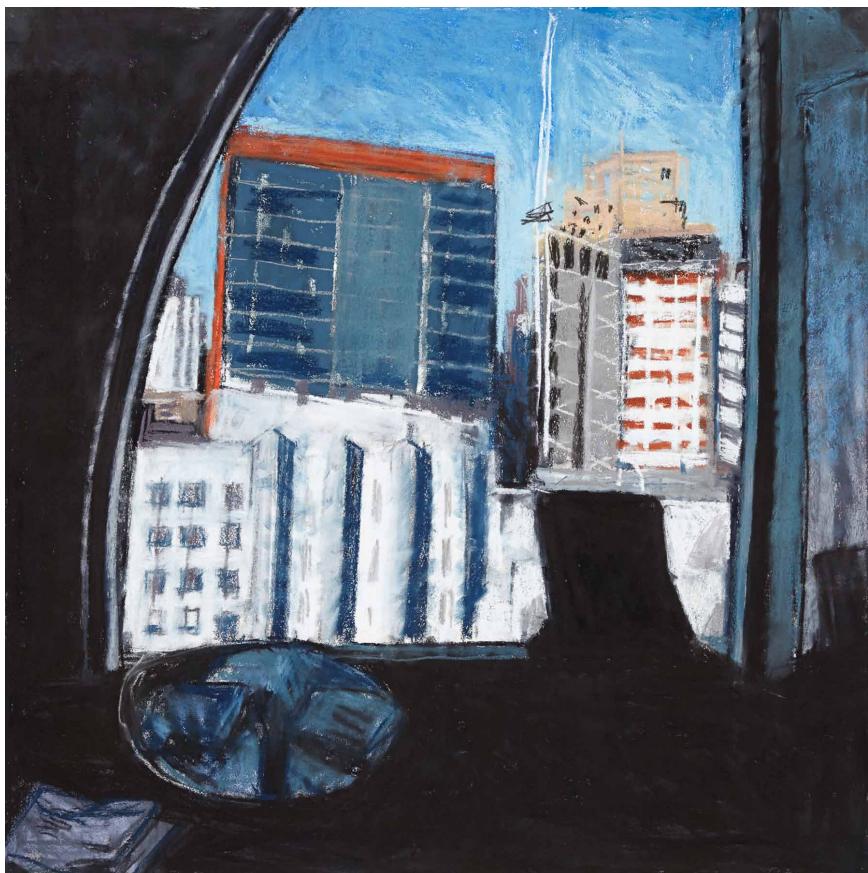
my out-

cast is

your ov-

er look

19. 9. 82



PL. 7

One

an

other

An

other

one

15. 12. 82



to one

side not

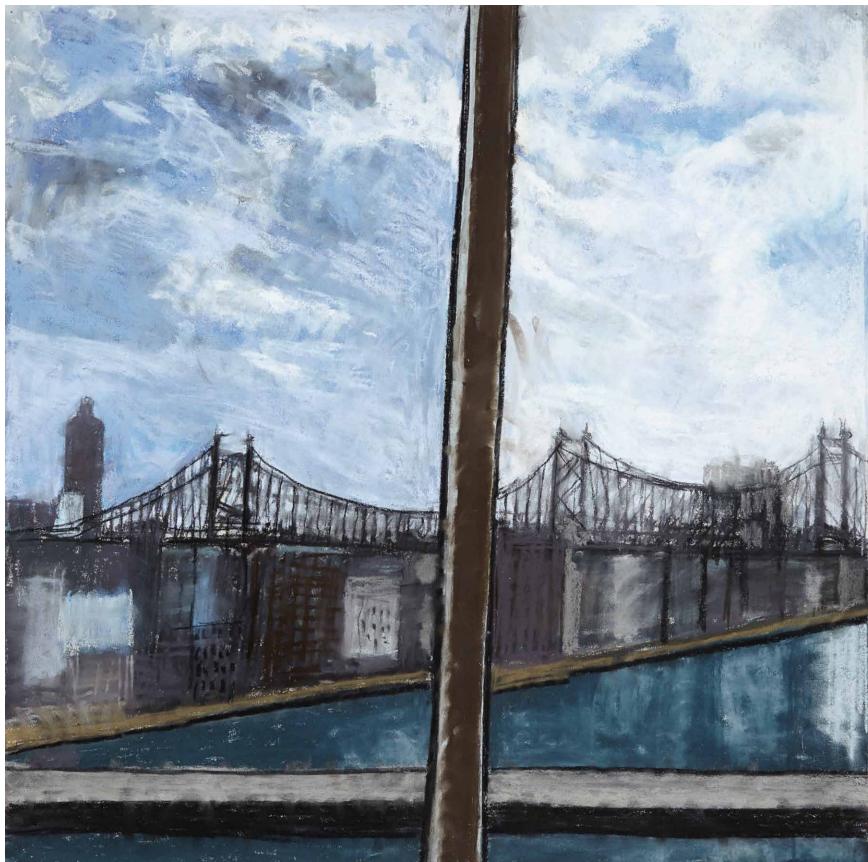
in side

one to

side with

out sides

27. I. 83



cut	it
out	cut
it	out

26. 7. 82



PL. 10

now to

face

known

facts

not yet

known

27. 7. 82

Who

leads

a life?

21. 11. 82

Wystan Curnow's *Cancer Daybook* was published in 1989. He was diagnosed with colon cancer in June 1982 and following surgery and chemotherapy was given a 50 percent chance of remission within five years. He concluded his book with a note: "These poems had at the time of their composition a peculiar purpose: that of distracting a disease. On a day to day basis. It seemed best to delay their publication as a volume until such time as that purpose had been well and truly served."

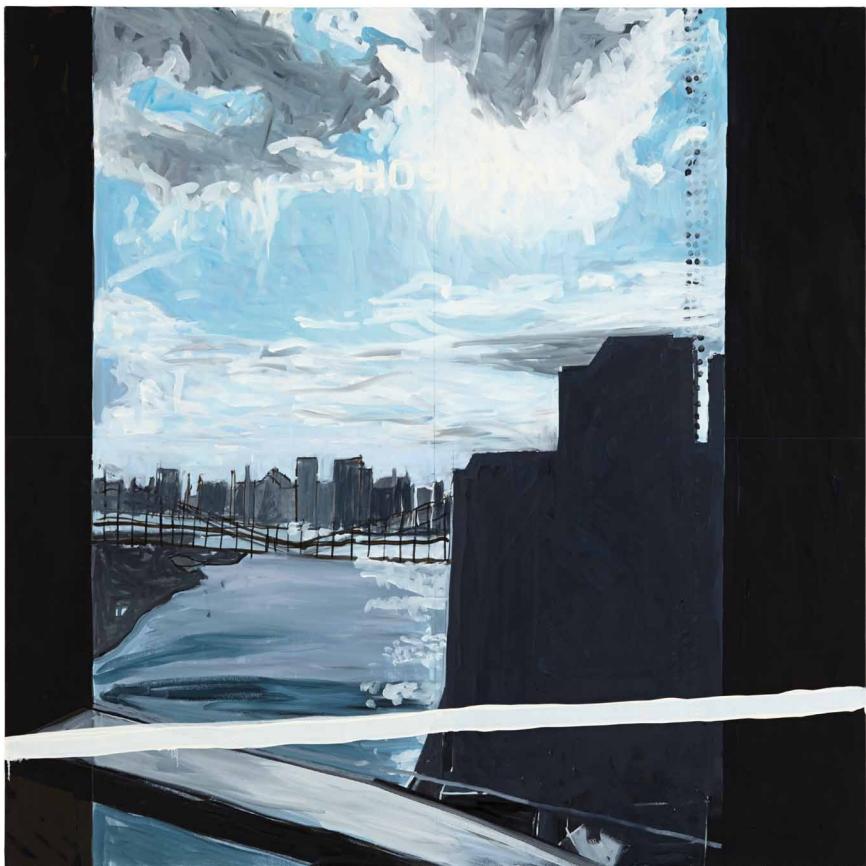
Paintings



HOSPITAL















LIST OF PLATES

PLS. 1-10 / COVER (DETAIL)

Hospital, 2012

Pastel on paper

30 x 30 inches (76.2 x 76.2 cm)

Courtesy of Michael Forman & Jennifer Rice

Photographs by Joseph Hu

PLS. 11-18

Untitled (Hospital), 2012

Oil on canvas

54 x 54 inches (137.2 x 137.2 cm)

Courtesy of Locks Gallery

Photographs by Joseph Hu

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Jennifer Bartlett: Hospital made possible by the support of Jerry Speyer, Michael Forman and Jennifer Rice, and the Schiff Foundation. Additional support is provided by members of The Drawing Center's Exhibition Fund.

The Drawing Center would also like to acknowledge Sueyun Locks and Doug Schaller of Locks Gallery for their longterm commitment to making this exhibition possible, as well as Joan LiPuma, Jennifer's studio manager, who assisted with crucial research on Bartlett's pastels.

Lastly, the poignant simplicity of Wystan Curnow's poems were a guiding light for this project, and we are grateful that they anchor the book.

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This is number 125 of the *Drawing Papers*, a series of publications documenting The Drawing Center's exhibitions and public programs and providing a forum for the study of drawing.

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Designed by AHL&CO / Peter J. Ahlberg

This book is set in Adobe Garamond Pro and Berthold Akzidenz Grotesk.

It was printed by BookMobile in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

ISBN 978-0-942324-95-2

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