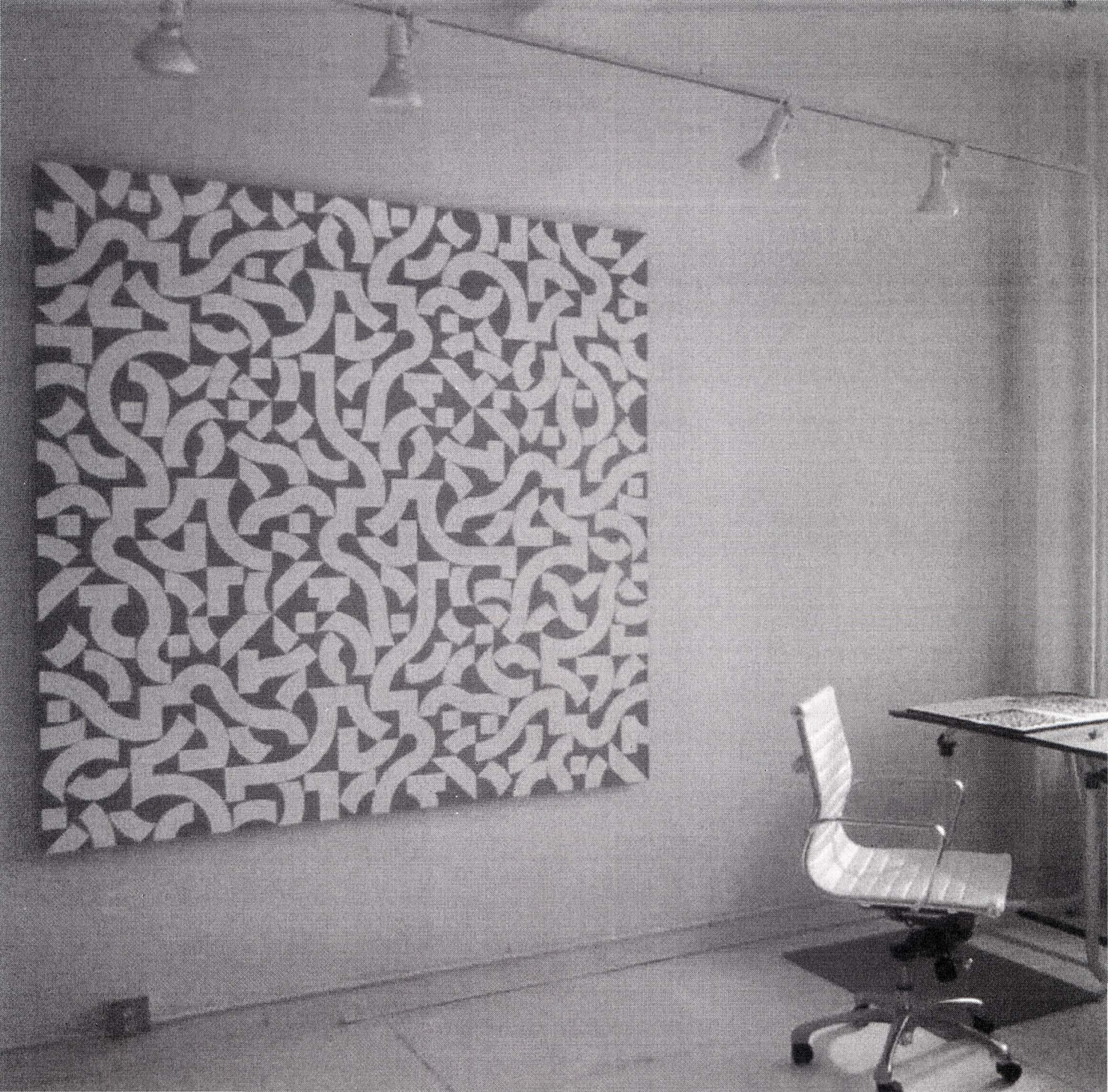


VALERIE JAUDON

W H I T E

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An interview divided in four parts between
William Pittman Andrews, Director, University of Mississippi Museum,
Oxford, MS, and Valerie Jaudon, artist, New York, NY.

General Context

William Pittman Andrews (WPA)

Is there a particular zeitgeist you see your work coming from or through, a particular era where it is most grounded where it draws momentum and energy?

Valerie Jaudon (VJ)

I wonder if you could call abstract painting a zeitgeist? I think of my work as being engaged in a conscious dialog with a very wide range of abstract art from both the 20th and 21st century. Although my work got its initial impulse from the art around me – that is Minimal and Postminimal abstraction, I looked at and was inspired by the sparer forms of cubism and constructivism – Malevich, Mondrian and in some ways, Léger. I showed at the Sidney Janis Gallery for 18 years and got to spend a good deal of time with that work. I am also increasingly interested these days in postwar European art – people like Fontana, Manzoni, and the artists of the Zero Group. By the way, I am, of course, interested in the very vital abstract art of today, and consider myself a part of it.

WPA Eighteen years speaks of an incredible relationship between artist and gallery. The Sidney Janis Gallery was a tremendous force in the art world, exhibiting artists like Picasso, Léger, Mondrian, and Giacometti, as well as de Kooning, Kline, and Rothko. Did exhibiting at the Sidney Janis Gallery provide or promote a specific context for your work to be considered?

VJ I had been exhibiting my work in SoHo for only about five years before Sidney and Carroll Janis asked me to join the gallery which was uptown on 57th Street. The move uptown made an immediate difference in my outlook since the gallery was so immersed in history. Since the gallery's own history formed a significant piece of 20th century American art, Sidney and everyone at the gallery had countless stories about the artists. My first week there Sidney, in explaining how the freight elevator was too small for large paintings (like some of mine) told me a story about the difficulty he had with Rothko and his large paintings. To make a long story short, Rothko wanted to hang a large painting in his exhibition that blocked part of a gallery doorway and actually did so against strong warnings to the contrary. I commiserated

with Sidney about the incident, but I understood Rothko's feelings. In many ways the gallery was like a museum — they owned or had owned some of the greatest works of the century, and since they had such a deep and longstanding relationship with the Museum of Modern Art, they were able to borrow pretty much what they pleased. The group shows they put together were astonishing. Janis was a very special situation and since the gallery closed I have been working with the Von Lintel Gallery, which deals with what's going on right now. Ultimately it's most exciting to be engaged with your contemporaries.

WPA Your work prefigures or is in some way predisposed to the inherent qualities of Geometric Abstraction, Minimalism, Systems Art, and other forms of abstraction. With the benefit of hindsight, where does your work fit in?

VJ My work could be seen to have a relationship with most of the above, but these are historical categories, mostly modernist ones, and I don't fit cleanly into any of them. There are similarities for example to the sharp edges of Geometric Abstraction, the reduced color of Minimalism, or the modularity of Systems art, but my painting tries to expand the arena.

WPA By doing so, your work remains fresh, of the times, and defies easy classification. Has this always been a conscious direction or simply the effect of where the work is currently located? In other words, in relation to historical significance, is your studio activity as a painter more like rowing a boat in a specific direction with a destination in mind or like sailing a ship with constant navigation toward unknown lands?

VJ Ah, the studio work could be compared to sailing a tramp steamer with a pickup crew and out of date charts and with no real assurance that the world is not flat. Fortunately, the seas are calm now.

WPA Postminimalism is relatively recent nomenclature. How should your work be regarded in relation to the rest of the Postminimalist artists? Brice Marden, Sol LeWitt, etc...

VJ I think both of those artists straddle the Minimalist-Postminimalist line. I particularly like the surface in Marden's early work — its waxiness is beautifully slow — it seems to capture the light and this is something that I have tried to do, although in a different way, with my surfaces, to which I pay a great deal of attention. And, of course, I like the linear quality of Marden's later work, although it's different

from mine. Mine is more premeditated. As for LeWitt, the conceptual clarity, the programmatic elegance which yields an unexpected poetry, is very appealing to me. As for other Postminimalist artists, I've always admired Linda Benglis', Eva Hesse's and Keith Sonnier's work as well. I also think that the Pattern & Decoration movement, with which I was associated early on, fits very nicely into the larger Postminimalist era.

WPA The importance of surface is in evidence in your work — I mean the concept of the planar surface as a contemporary concern bringing objectification to painting. In regards to this particular company, I identify the same poetic contingency in your work as a result of your material process and other unspoken goals, I suspect. Benglis, Hesse, and Sonnier are often identified as Process artists and further evidence of this element in your work is visible.

VJ It is a both/and situation for me. Emphasis on the painted surface or skin draws attention to the object-like and objective quality of the painting — that is to its end state -- but it also speaks to process, to the making of the work and the open-ended, personal quality of a work in progress.

WPA Seeing how your work is located somewhere between all of these points, and not necessarily fixed, I have to ask if you think sub-categories and classifications are necessary in art? Don't they often complicate our goals? Would you prefer a more broad, interpretive nomenclature relating to your painting, or do these terms give us common ground?

VJ Deriding classification is a very common way for artists to deal with their art critically, but I think that is ducking the issue. Of course, no one likes to be pigeonholed — everyone is unique and special — but if we can't in some way order art, that just makes communication more difficult. In that case everyone ends up speaking his or her own language, and it puts a much greater burden on the public. Of course, an overly simple classification shortchanges art, but there is no reason that a complex and nuanced approach can't lead the viewer that much closer to an appreciation of the art. You can never completely frame the work of art logically, but you can get yourself closer to the unknown center of it. Even though the experience of a work of art is personal and individual, our discussion of it is public and should lead us to a common ground. Of course, that common ground is a shifting one, and no categories are permanent.

WPA Your paintings often take a seemingly simple idea and sublimate it through a conceptual painting process that concerns time, materials, and craftsmanship, the result of which informs the content of the work. Is this extrapolation intentional?

VJ Simple ideas are often the most productive ones to work with. If you begin with something clear and straightforward, then you can enrich it in complex and surprising ways and not lose sight of what you are trying to do.

WPA Is consideration for the condition of time in your work an objective or subjective idea? If so, how much do you mean for your painting to act as an actual object of measurement?

VJ Even though the paintings are composed of relatively evenly weighted parts, there is not a regulated, clocklike way of looking at them, and so I'd have to say that the condition of time in them is subjective. There is a difference between a feeling of being measured and actual measurement.

WPA Do you care to try to predict anything about the future direction of your work? Where are your paintings going?

VJ They seem to be going toward a different kind of complexity. About five years ago, I moved away from symmetry and set up an internal structure that was asymmetrical but still based on a nine-part module. I am now exploring a non-modular structure that uses what amounts to a single complex but orderly line.

Process

WPA Your paintings use form to create image. What external forms do you derive imagery from, or is their formation the result of an entirely internal process?

VJ In these recent white paintings, the paintings are a result of a three-part process that develops as it goes along. Line is my main ingredient, with straight and curved lines as the tools. I make small drawings as a point of departure and intuitively fill in a square module of simple shapes that link and arrange themselves according to a few rules about points, touching, or overlapping. Next, I trace that module and add it on to a side by a simple repeat, reversing or transposing, looking for links or new shapes. It turns out that there are twenty-one permutations and if something works well once, I repeat the process until nine parts make a new whole. So I have choices, but the end result is always a surprise. I am working toward a result that only becomes clear at the end. The drawing in some measure makes itself. It could go on forever if the connections work. Then I transfer the entire drawing to the canvas and paint each shape.

WPA So your paintings emerge from a serious involvement with drawing as a method to divide space, like experimentation or hard, clinical research, becoming more complex as you move forward in the process. If the drawing could make itself, and go on forever, your choice of scale and dimension in painting is the ultimate authority. What is the largest painting you've ever made? What is the largest you've considered? Do your large-scale public works address this expansive idea?

VJ The largest single oil painting on canvas was about 16 x 12, and I also did a group of three paintings — each 7 x 27 for the atrium of an office building in New York. The paintings were stacked — each on a different floor — but you could see them together across the atrium, so in a way they functioned as one. The first architectural project I completed in 1977 was with the architect Romaldo Giurgola. It was a ceiling painting, oil on plaster, and it was 22 x 90 feet. The experience, both in the making and the viewing of a mural-scaled painting is very different than an easel painting — there's more of a physical involvement — a sense of losing yourself in it. I've also worked both two and three dimensionally in materials other than paint on canvas — tiles, iron, stained glass, and mosaic. They each have their own challenges and pleasures. For example, there was a grass and gravel garden that covered a whole city block in St. Louis opposite the Federal courthouse downtown, and 3 ½ acres of granite and brick paving around the Municipal Building in New York. There was also a complex garden and pool at the Birmingham Museum. It was about 100 feet long and nearly that wide. Those projects greatly expanded the scope of my working process. They took them from simple scale into multiple levels of problem solving. I had to deal with architecture, landscaping, horticulture, engineering, irrigation, and climate and, of course, lots of local politics.

WPA To what degree is your imagery guided by material process? Where does an image begin? Does it end? Regarding process and material in your work, how closely are the two related in your studio?

VJ Specific materials are essential to the process in all of my work.

WPA So the materials help determine the final form of the work as much as the intention of imagery, and for representation. To a certain point on a given body of work, are there no other materials that would suffice?

VJ I always start with the material first and with painting that is a given while work on paper has more possibilities. My public projects need specifically durable materials because they are large scale, public, and long term. Once I find the best material then I can "work the site" and start drawing. In a public project the site is a particular place, and with painting the site is much more variable.

WPA Your earlier imagery has also been linked to Islamic and Celtic patterns. How would you relate that comparison to your current imagery that seems to have less to do with art of the ancients and more to do with art of the future?

VJ I have changed in the last 40 years, but certainly not as much as the world around me. What may have seemed Islamic and Celtic back then looks like something else today. I never consciously used Celtic or Islamic motifs – it was just that complex, symmetrical geometric work tended to evoke those comparisons, especially in a more Minimalist context.

When I started out I was looking closely at the art, artifacts, and architecture of non-western cultures as a way out of 20th century Modernism.

After school in the '70s, I wanted a fresh start and began consciously looking at visual traditions from other countries that had escaped Western notice. There is a long list beginning with Mexico, Morocco, and Greece, where I had spent time traveling, and goes on to include Egyptian, African, and Islamic art among others. Music, architecture, and anthropology have been my constant interests, with the addition of gardens, semiotics, and 18th century aesthetics. Recently, I have traveled to India, New Zealand, and Australia to further complicate any questions about influences.

Actually it goes both ways – simplification through complexity, complexity through simplification.

WPA How has technology impacted your work – perception, process, or both?

VJ Computers and the Internet have changed the way everyone thinks and organizes things, including me, but I have never used computer imaging to make my work (although I did use some pretty advanced laser and waterjet cutting devices on some public projects). Maybe the computer and Internet revolution has enabled us to handle more things at once – to keep more perceptual balls up in the air. It has certainly made reading works of art on multiple levels increasingly natural.

WPA The art world has paid much attention to aspects of morality, social justice, and cultural progress and awareness in relation to art historical movements your work has been associated with. How does your work fit into this conversation? Is this comparison still necessary or relevant?

VJ Artists and the art world today are paying attention to everything and anything in a greatly expanded cultural situation. The contrarian streak that has been such

a prominent factor in modern art seems to be absent — there isn't that need to rebel against earlier art movements or a dominant aesthetic. There is a larger conversation now about art in a global culture and while that is healthy it tends to take the focus off art itself. When the conversation in the artworld was just about art, then moving it outside of that arena was liberating.

WPA Visiting your studio, I noticed that your process for preparing canvases is rigorous with about eight steps of preparation. Craftsmanship in the most consummate sense is therefore an important component of your work, and it's hard to imagine this amount of concern is not reflected in the final authority of the painting. Is this preparation critical to the material concerns of making a painting, the conceptual basis of making an image, or both?

VJ I like to keep my working process simple and direct, and this seems to translate into an increased attention to craft. It is not so much a question of emphasizing the hand-made — looking closely at the paintings, you can see that I was engaged in every aspect of their making— but rather an ability to focus sharply and to see ideas to the finish. Since I work with such limited elements, I want to be totally clear about what I do.

In my public art work, which includes floors, walls, ceiling, and gardens, even though everything is fabricated, I always insist on durable and quality materials. If the art is in a public place then the public deserves good materials and workmanship, a Cadillac job as contractors say. The high value placed on expression has often taken the place of craft, but it seems to me that the two are perfectly compatible.

WPA What is the greatest demand of your time in the studio?

VJ Sometimes it seems like mostly daydreaming. A painting takes about two weeks to draw and two or three weeks to paint. Daydreaming seems to double that.

WPA How do you manage your teaching career (at Hunter College), and how does it impact your work?

VJ I learn so much from my students, both graduate and undergraduate. Good critical seminars are addictive, and I have gotten used to the fact that I enjoy thinking like a student.

WPA If your work defines place, and one has to travel a lot over the surface of your imagery, how does physical travel or the idea of traveling affect your work?

VJ Travel is a big part of my life, and it's generally connected with seeing art or architecture. In recent years I have been trying to visit as many buildings by Le Corbusier as possible, also Romanesque churches. As I mentioned before, I spent some time a few years ago in India. The architecture there is extraordinary, although the Islamic tomb architecture and Hindu temples have nothing to do with each other formally, theologically, or emotionally. I try and absorb new experiences and fit them into my painting. Architecture has always been important to me and to my work, all the more so for its three dimensionality, which seems counterintuitive, but it's true.

Current Work

WPA Your work is primary, with planar shapes, minimalist aesthetic, and restricted color, yet is complex with its additive process, exacting craftsmanship, material investigation, and intellectual inquisition. Is it difficult to reconcile these two things in one image or one body of work?

VJ These are not mutually exclusive, except for the additive process, and this is important. I am after complexity, but a complexity made from simple, straightforward elements. In my paintings the complexity is a result of the additive process, and what happens is always surprising to me: I work within a logical framework, but the results are never really predictable.

While the elements of the painting might look similar, they are different in subtle ways — they seem static, but they are very changeable — one form easily morphs into another. This for me is the great advantage of abstract shapes, their lightness and flexibility of meaning, their ability to change. All the shapes are in some way linear, and they all have the same width, so that none are dominant or more important than another. They meet up at unpredictable but logical angles and their relationships seem to multiply. I just set out the forms — it's the viewer who ultimately controls the associations and metaphorical pathway through the painting.

WPA Your paintings are an experience or experiment in visual linguistics for which there is limited external reference as if, despite whatever natural reference, you are using an alphabet that only exists in your work, to create an elaborate lexicon.

VJ The alphabet, so to speak, is made of line, both straight and curved, which is familiar to everyone, and repetition generates something that resembles a grammar

and a lexicon. If this were music we would be talking about meter and rhythm, interval, and dissonance. In any case, I don't think that this alphabet exists only in my work — in a way that sounds as if I am constructing a private language. That is antithetical to the concept of language, which is public. Everything in my paintings is completely legible. It is the way that these common forms are put together that gives the work its individuality and character.

WPA Your paintings have been compared to music, language, and architecture. Are these comparisons specifically apropos or merely inevitable results of form?

VJ Music, language, and architecture. Yes, that is it. All are systems with different components. Music and language are important to me in deep and overall ways, but with architecture, it's quite specific. At a very formative period of my life I served an apprenticeship of sorts — I was the young, resident artist in the firm of Mitchell/Giurgola in New York and Philadelphia. Aldo Giurgola, who, by the way, just turned 90, was one of the most important influences for me — especially on the way I think about art, the way I criticize myself and keep the whole project moving along. Aldo, who was Louis Kahn's younger associate, is one of the great postwar architects and I admire him immensely.

WPA There is a link between the minimalist aesthetic in your work and the work of minimalist composers like Phillip Glass. Is there a direct inspiration or a current emphasis?

VJ Philip Glass has been especially important for me. I had played flute since the 6th grade in Mississippi, and in the '70s I had private lessons on the Bowery with a young flute teacher who went on tour occasionally with Glass in Europe. What I liked about Glass was the way he combined the Modernist tradition of twelve tone music with Indian music, John Cage, and conceptual art. His whole project, for me at least, is actually Postminimal, even though it was called Minimalist music — probably because not that much seemed to be happening, although if you paid attention, lots was.

It is a matter of taking the basic elements of music and changing the terms, using repetition and different structures to make an entirely new way of arranging music. It was not difficult to see that this approach could work for painting and art in general. He and Steve Reich were so influential in the '70s for artists.

It is routine for me to listen to a variety of different music when I am in the studio, but while drawing in particular, I concentrate best with the music of Glass and Bach. Milton Babbitt is extremely interesting but is a different experience.

WPA Your paintings have unequivocally been interpreted as meditative. Does the infinite structure suggested in your work reach beyond the canvas, between canvases, meeting somewhere in the middle or do they stop at the compositional edge and reflect back? Are viewers meant to partake in the infinite or just catch a glimpse of it?

VJ That's quite nicely put, and I think all of the above. In terms of the infinite, I try and make it as elusive as possible.

Repetition really works for me. I have found that the simple geometrical or architectural linear elements in the paintings have visual links with any room they are in, and seem to extend beyond the canvas. In my large public work the same elements make connections with the architecture and immediate surroundings and actually gain strength from the context and reinforce it.

WPA The content of your painting suggests inward and outward movement, sometimes all over motion, as much as it does a material building up of paint and subsequent visual excavation all the way to the sized, unprimed surface. What is your goal?

VJ I want viewers to spend as much time with the painting as possible, and the more I can engage them, the better.

WPA Are your paintings static or fluid?

VJ Could we say they have a static fluidity?

WPA Your paintings seem to harness the exuberant energy of Abstract Expressionism's "all over" compositions tempered with the controlled process of Minimalism. What do you see as the next development in your imagery?

VJ The drawing in the white paintings started with short single directional shapes. At first I would draw a center module that I would rotate, reverse, mirror, or repeat in nine connecting parts to fill in to make a larger whole. The parts that connected past the grid lines were so surprising that I began using compound, articulated shapes made up of several different linked elements.

For example, a short horizontal bar could become a large circular one that suddenly changes direction into a tight curve and ends in a sharply turned diagonal. That shape could span a number of modules and form a shape that runs across the entire canvas. The most recent development has been to elaborate those compound shapes and turn them into one tightly wound line that covers the entire surface of the canvas. It unifies the painting and eliminates the need for an organizing module.

WPA Is your recent work a corollary or divergent consideration of Minimalism?

VJ My work is not Minimalist, but I am, without doubt, addressing certain concerns of Minimalism. There is no question, particularly in this body of work, that I am unifying the surface by the use of white paint, and as such, drawing attention to the object-like character of the painting. Minimalist work was the ultimate stand-alone object, but the complexity of my work quickly leads one to multiple associations of drawing, architecture, music, ornament, structures, and repetition. I think that my history, in relation to Minimalism, is interesting. When I was starting out Minimalism was so dominant that if you were an abstract artist, and you weren't an expressionist, which I never was, you had to set yourself against it. Making that all so much easier was the my-way-or-the-highway attitude of the Minimalists themselves and their critics. But now, all these years later, I see that there were many common areas in their work and mine. In any case, the general understanding of Minimalism is changing, and people are looking at the work in a more flexible, even referential way — which of course somebody like Dan Flavin would have hated.

WPA Your schema on the surface connects to something larger and potentially infinite, and is also bounded by the surface plane of the constructed format it resides within, existing as a concrete composition. The interplay between these two notions gives the work a tremendous amount of energy.

VJ Well, that's what painting can do. It is by its nature, bounded in place and time. It is this unmoving, two-dimensional object. But it has always had the power to be incredibly evocative, not just despite its limitations, but because of them. That's why I have been so attracted to abstraction — there's so much less distraction.

WPA Abstract works are notoriously difficult to understand. Especially with works of a minimal aesthetic, the concept of "meaning" can be fleeting. Despite the advanced state of visual art, viewers often approach a painting looking first for a narrative rather than an experience. In an attempt to satisfy the notion of narrative meaning, can you relate the experience that your work is about?

VJ It depends what you mean by a narrative, and it depends what you mean by an experience. They are really not mutually exclusive. Narrative implies a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, although not necessarily in that order. The narrative of my paintings lies first of all in their history and their reference. That's the beginning. When you figure out how a particular painting is put together, that's the middle. When you see it moving off somewhere else – outside of the canvas, or into your mind or maybe projecting itself into the future, that's the end.

Mississippi and the South

WPA Some of your earliest paintings had the names of Mississippi towns as their titles, imparting an epic sense of meaning and signifying an attempt to deal with personal history. What impact does your relationship with the American South continue to have in your work?

VJ When you are a young artist, you try and come to terms with your own history—your personal map. It was something about the flat landscape of the Delta, and the literary tradition that was so present that has stayed with me.

WPA If titles are an indicator of meaning in your work, your early paintings dealt with the concepts of establishing the mystery of a place through immersion in locale. Then your paintings seemed to deal with all the myriad concepts of making a painting and the process of art itself. Recent paintings deal with the ideas of language, cognitive process, and experiential phenomena. Is it correct to assume that all of the works suggest a sense of place?

VJ The titles are important as a way of giving the paintings a life outside of themselves. The first ten years of paintings were named after towns in Mississippi that I knew or had heard about while growing up. I had moved to New York when I made the paintings and was sure that the names of those towns would sound suitably mysterious to the average New Yorker, but I could remember them because they were familiar. My one regret was that I couldn't use the name of the little town near where my mother grew up. It was Money, Mississippi, but I was afraid people might get the wrong idea if I called a painting Money.

For one body of work I used old movie titles, since the paintings were high keyed and operatic. These recent paintings have one-word titles that are often loosely linguistic or semiotic – for example, Prologue, Epigram, or Axiom. I am interested in the role of language in art theoretically, but there is no one-to-one connection.

WPA There are other artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, and Robert Ryman who are from the South, and one can propose evidence of this in their work by their process, materials, or imagery. Where is the visible connection to the South in your work?

VJ My work has more of a visible connection to the paintings of Johns, Twombly and Ryman than to the physical South itself, so I guess the connection is maybe Southern at one degree of separation. There's a similar interest in surface and the use of white as kind of metaphorical ground on which to write.

WPA Is this connection visible in process, material, image, intention, or representation?

VJ Growing up in the South one becomes naturally saturated with its culture of civility, well-mannered forms of address and protocol, accompanied of course by undercurrents of complexity....the elaboration within given boundaries, the necessity to look between the lines. There are parallels there. Who said that if you ask a Southerner the time they will tell you how to build a clock?

WPA I recently saw the exhibition of Blinky Palermo's work (Blinky Palermo: Retrospective 1964–1977) and William Eggleston (William Eggleston: Democratic Camera—Photographs and Video, 1961–2008) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Recalling the experience of walking back and forth between the two exhibits, I somehow got the sense that your work lie somewhere in between, the complex gravitas or dignitas of the South and the elemental objectification of painting.

VJ That is gratifying thought. I would like to think it was true. I saw a terrific Eggleston show in Paris a year or so ago, and I remember first seeing Blinky Palermo in Europe in the late sixties when I went to school in London. I think both of them work in the area of a sullied, impure purity. Tough territory.

WPA Do you keep an eye on the South or your native state in particular?

VJ Yes, particularly Mississippi. I still have family and friends there.

