

Interview with Valerie Jaudon

by René Paul Barilleaux



René Paul Barilleaux: *I would like to start by exploring connections between your work created since the late 1980s and issues surrounding the Pattern and Decoration movement to which you were originally linked in the 1970s.*

Valerie Jaudon: In many ways, my concerns today stem directly from my earlier works and some of the issues that surfaced in the seventies regarding the decorative, the feminine, abstraction and painting in general. Ideas like *beauty*. Things that we have a difficult time talking about...they're invisible, but they don't go away. Aesthetics and philosophy seem so uncomfortable dealing with these issues. And now with art under attack both politically and philosophically, the stakes are even higher.

In the seventies, after Minimalism and Conceptualism had closed off all discussion of anything other than themselves, Pattern and Decoration wanted to explore everything at once—complexity, repetition, reference, beauty, disjunction, symmetry, sensuousness. Even though my work has undergone changes since then, I feel that I am still engaged with those very same issues.

RPB: *What about connections in your current work to recent interests in abstract painting?*

VJ: The recent interest in abstract painting has brought to light the fact that the traditional philosophical and theoretical understandings of abstraction are inadequate and need to be expanded. Historically, this situation seems to occur with amazing regularity. That is, older ideas about art—the explanations and interpretations of it—aren't satisfactory for the work that's being done at the present moment. Art, after all, is a language, and languages are constantly changing.

These are very interesting times. Today abstract painters are working with the conventions of painting in a “grammatical” sense. There is an awareness of the devices of abstraction—separating, deconstructing, recombining, reconstructing, bracketing the intuitive processes. There's a lot of thinking going on right now, a lot of excitement.

The most persistent issue for me appears to be a rather stubborn idea that I have about *making* an abstract painting. I could never bring myself to think of abstraction as a war waged against realism. Or, for that matter, a reduction toward the *essence* of anything.

I've always thought about my painting in a much more positive and productive way. For me, an abstract painting is clearly a work of representation, but of a very complex sort. It has more to do with *how* we see than what we see.

RPB: *When did you first become interested in art?*



VJ: That's a very complicated question. My interest in art has a clear beginning—second grade—Ella Darling Elementary in Greenville, Mississippi. From my first class with our art teacher, Maxine Holcomb, I was hooked. Growing up in Mississippi in the fifties, I saw very few “real” paintings except, of course, portraits and paintings of magnolias in the bank on Main Street. There were no museums as far as I knew; I spent hours in the library looking at books on Van Gogh, Gauguin, the Post-Impressionists and Albert Pinkham Ryder. I also copied figure drawings by Michelangelo, Leonardo, Albrecht Durer and Edgar Degas. Their work looked fresh and unfamiliar to me. Reproductions of religious works didn't really interest me—they reminded me of Sunday School. So much for medieval and Renaissance art. But, of course, I was only in elementary school. It all changed later. That's the wonderful thing about art. You can change your mind about it any time.

RPB: *So when did you finally see “real” painting?*

VJ: Seeing an actual painting was a different and wonderful experience for me. I was nineteen when I saw my first Van Gogh painting in The Museum of Modern Art. By the time I got to it, I was so overwhelmed by everything else in the museum that the Van Gogh took a back seat.

I went to art school in Mississippi, Memphis, Mexico and London, and along the way I traveled as much as I could. I saw every museum, archeological and architectural site that crossed my path. Going from Greece to Pompeii to Morocco to Stonehenge, I devoured rather than discriminated. Everything outside of Mississippi seemed foreign and exotic—I had a lot of catching up to do.

RPB: *Which artists influenced you first?*

VJ: Influences are difficult to pinpoint. There are artists who made great paintings that I admire and love to look at, but I'm not necessarily interested in their work in connection with my own. Some specific aspects of other artists' work that I can identify in my first serious work would include the building block brush strokes of Cezanne

and Seurat; and the clear, legible abstract elements—like an alphabet—of Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, Paul Klee, Jackson Pollock and Agnes Martin. Also, I admired work which avoided “drawing in paint”...the sort of thing abstract artists were supposed to do. Picasso, de Kooning and Pollock did it really well, and I felt that I didn’t have anything much to add. I was interested, in fact, in finding a way around that. *Bravura* markmaking was something that I felt would limit me rather than allow me to grow. Instead, I was attracted to artists who were more “device-oriented,” more systematic, more logical. They were people who used repetition and anonymity but did it in a way that was engaged and inventive. Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, early Larry Poons’s dot paintings, Andy Warhol, Eva Hesse, Roy Lichtenstein, Frank Stella’s black paintings, Jasper Johns’s alphabets and Matisse’s cut-outs come to mind.

RPB: *Whose work do you admire now?*

VJ: By the mid-eighties artists like Sherrie Levine, Allan McCollum, Philip Taaffe, Moira Dryer, Jonathan Lasker, Shirley Kaneda, Polly Apfelbaum.... They began to interest me because their work was doing something new with abstraction. I’ve never been very happy with traditional expressionistic painting. The idea that the painting is a stand-in for the *self* seems wrong-headed to me.

But, on the other hand, Minimalism and much of what followed seemed too limited, too much involved with the painting as an object that could only be defined on its own terms. It was the kind of painting that told you how to look at it. It was too clear in a way. I wanted to see painting that was logical but still flexible and ambiguous. I’ve always thought that the answer lay in referentiality—the abstract painting’s connection to the complex world of signs around it.

RPB: *What do you mean by that?*

VJ: A painting is a kind of decoding device for the culture from which it comes. We live in a world that’s complicated and abstract—nothing is simple anymore. We’re continually accessing different levels of image and information. This is what abstract art can do very well.

Even though I feel strongly about abstract art, that doesn’t mean that I only like one sort of thing. I collect and live with a wide range of art; I see hundreds of exhibitions a year. I look at everything. It’s a great pleasure.



RPB: *What are some of the other influences which surface in your work, consciously or unconsciously?*

VJ: Well, music. Playing flute and piccolo in the Greenville High School band eventually led me to Bach, jazz and Philip Glass, a big favorite of mine and an influence on my work.

I am also attracted to architecture, its theory, history and practice. In many ways I have come to understand and enjoy theoretical issues in art through music and architecture.

RPB: *Since you are established primarily as a painter, do you work in other mediums? What relationship do those works have to your paintings?*



VJ: Painting is the basis for all of my work. I use other materials and processes as nourishment, a reality check for the paintings. Printmaking has always been important. I've made etchings, screen prints, lithographs and woodcuts. Since printmaking generally involves "disassembling" the working process, you are constantly forced to rethink the structure of your work when making prints.

Also, since the mid-eighties I have completed a number of large-scale public projects using a variety of materials and in many very different situations. I designed steel fences, ceramic wall murals and stained glass windows. I also did a three and one-half acre public plaza in New York City, paved with brick and granite. In that project, the working process was much more like architecture, landscape architecture or maybe city planning. New York City's art commission gave me an award for that project.

Recently, I designed a garden in Alabama at the Birmingham Museum of Art, complete with plantings, pools and cast iron benches. I received an award for that one from the American Society of Landscape Architects. For me, that was like receiving a Nobel Prize.

My current project is a floor mosaic for the architect Cesar Pelli, which will be installed in the new Washington National Airport that he is designing. In these public projects, the existing site itself becomes the most influential factor in determining what I do. The materials I use are just other ingredients. Painting is similar for me. I see it as a cultural site, an arena in which I operate.

RPB: *In which directions do you foresee your work will go?*

VJ: Last year I started working in a very new way. Previously, I would generally begin a new body of work by taking an unfamiliar approach in the drawing stage. This time I wanted to change the actual painting process, shifting emphasis to different elements and see what would happen. By developing a new process, my whole way of thinking about painting and drawing changed. The possibilities now open to me seem so extensive—it's a whole new ball game.

RPB: *Is this evident in the current exhibition?*

VJ: I think that the last work in the exhibition both looks back to my earliest work and also moves ahead in a new direction. First of all, it is essentially monochromatic—black and gray tones—it's symmetrical and it has a strongly ornamental feel. But something else is going on, and it has a lot to do with a different working process. I think that the new paintings are quite evocative in sort of a Gothic, brooding way. The backgrounds are poured on and the surfaces are very shiny and rich. There's a kind of curtain or veil effect, which works in counterpoint to the almost knife-like crispness of the foreground figures. I've always wanted to be multi-lingual, so to speak. Abstraction, because it's not or at least shouldn't be tied down to one way of seeing, has the ability to cross boundaries—to be material and immaterial, outside itself and inside too, to be hot and cool, straightforward and elusive, familiar and also quite new. The paradox is that with each painting you are starting fresh, and yet each painting carries with it the stamp of everything that's gone before. I've been doing this work for about twenty years now and in a way it's as strange and exciting to me—and as full of possibilities—as it was when I started.

