

Valerie Jaudon

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Shirley Kaneda

Many styles come and go, faster than we can digest, to fully understand the significance of any particular point of view. Valerie Jaudon has been painting for 20 years, insistently transgressing the restrictions of modernism. Her unyielding commitment to employ the decorative, starting with *Pattern & Decoration*, a movement which later influenced younger artists such as Phillip Taaffe, has resulted in a new body of work which juxtaposes diverse systems of geometry. The result is an unexpected combination of the lyrical and the static, where the geometry is utilized to construct the image of calligraphy. Jaudon's intuition intervenes at each logical moment, subverting the viewer's expectations. To Jaudon, such an effect is a way to re-open painting as an experience—to see, rather than be seen.

Shirley Kaneda: What was it like growing up in Mississippi?

Valerie Jaudon: It's an entirely different culture. There are very few people. There aren't large industrial centers, there aren't even small industrial centers, there aren't urban centers. It has a historical backbone—the Civil War. The Civil War is its world history; it's American history, it's everything. It was a closed society. The whole society spoke in codes. The whole language was coded.

SK: What made you leave, decide that you wanted to come to New York?

VJ: The '60s. Growing up there in the '50s and into the '60s, made it very difficult to be proud of Mississippi. You know what it was? It was television and the international news. My hometown in the delta was very cultured. That meant they didn't have the Ku Klux Klan, they kept them out. Well, they kept them on the outskirts. Watching the national news during the Civil Rights Movement and seeing Mississippi and Alabama on the national news was a real education. There were things that were never talked about, never written about. There was no access to other ideas. There was no other way to think at all. But once you could see segregation: watch those little girls being sprayed with firehoses to keep them out of school... I remember thinking, "That's me, they're just like me." It doesn't take much, just common sense to see that it's not right, it's not justified, it's not legitimate.

SK: Was your family's attitude different from the others?

VJ: No, I was the different one. My family didn't want to see what was going on. I remember all the arguments after the evening news. They blamed the northern media for the commotion. Everybody did. I couldn't sympathize with them. I would say, "Don't you think this looks bad? Don't you think Wallace looks like fool on television? Don't you think this man's an idiot?" Tremendous arguments, and I'd find myself against my society, my culture. In the summer of 1964, I was going to school. My mother was working for the State District Attorney and by that time everybody knew what was happening. All the killings. I just had to get out of there. I knew there had to be a different world.

SK: Did growing up in the South during the Civil Rights Movement have anything to do with the propensity to be involved in the marginal?

VJ: Well, the strange thing is, I never thought of my childhood as marginal. It's not as if I felt that I *wanted* to be part of this society, just *was* part of that society.

SK: So you actually knew that you had power within your class, but not the power to change it?

VJ: Right.

SK: That's a very healthy understanding.

VJ: I didn't see myself as powerless. I didn't see racism as coming from the outside. I was one of them, and they were wrong. I wanted to fix it. But it was bigger than I was, and all I could do was leave. You know, we're sitting here talking, using the language that describes my childhood, and I'm thinking about the possibility of change, changing the language. The construct of a racial harmony was what kept the South together, and it still does. It sounds strange, but they *really did think* that except for a few troublemakers, everybody got along real well. Of course, the nice thing about America is that we do not have that kind of built-in-harmony. The fact is, we are all different and we have to find a way to deal with that.

SK: So you came to New York and began your painting career as *Pattern and Decoration* painter, but your recent work has more to do with systemic geometric abstraction.

VJ: I think these are terms for styles, terms that have a closed meaning. I don't bother thinking in terms of style. It seems to hold me back.

SK: Up until now, style could be identified by the similarity of appearances because those works were united in principle; at present the proliferation of styles seems to lack that unifying principle, but perhaps like with the Baroque, only in hindsight is there a unifying structure or closure. Isn't this like your own

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involvement with Pattern and Decoration, which itself was named by others?

VJ: Definitely. And the decorative has always been important for me. I guess what I always found very funny, even at the beginning of P and D, our first group show, was that everybody seemed to know what *it* was about. But everybody's idea was different. That's why it was so confusing. Of course the word "decorative" was so loaded with associations, references, that for something that was supposed to be pointless, it was hard not to be curious about what the point of it all was. What the decorative does call into question of course is the idea of the aesthetic itself. I suspect this story is not over. I am very aware of the boundaries of abstract painting. My work has always been a response to limits. And very early on, I came to see abstract painting as being framed by the decorative as much as it is framed by representation.

SK: What do you mean, framed by the decorative?

VJ: There is a difference between abstract thought and the goals of abstract painting. Let's start with the idea of representation as the opposite of abstraction. It sounds reasonable, but non-representation is an impossibility, a theoretical conceit. Earlier abstraction chose to represent itself and ultimately the authority of the artist. But if we can see that self-reference as an abstract device, rather than the validating sign for abstraction, then we can understand that abstraction can be used to represent many things. These ideas have been considered to be either decorative or representational. And representation is legitimized as abstraction's opposite, but the decorative acts as a No Man's Land. We know why the decorative was not part of representational painting, it was mechanical, repetitive, non-literary, and made by non-artists. But why should these qualities disqualify it from abstract art? I think the reason that the decorative was banned from abstraction was that it is not self-referential in the most basic sense. I see self-referentiality as being the problem. I used to think if you were making a painting, acknowledging its materials, its structure, its history, that you were going to make a better painting. I thought these were hints for starting out. Well it's not a hint; it's an order. People are trying to figure out how to get out of this one. Because they are thinking in terms of abstraction as a style. I didn't realize until I first did these explicitly decorative paintings, which I thought were completely abstract, by the way, that I had run into an aesthetic boundary, a boundary that separates art from other things in the world.

SK: In a way, Pop Art was attempting to challenge those same aesthetic boundaries by giving abstract art a representational form. All one needs to do is think of Lichtenstein's painting of "Ball of Twine" or "Composition Notebook" or Warhol's grid of "Marilyn." Were you influenced by Pop Art?

VJ: Oh yes. And by almost everything about it. They were very experimental, very shifty, not just in their take on culture, but also formally, all that seriality, reproduction, and repetition. I have a real appreciation for that. What I don't appreciate is Abstract Expressionism.

SK: Really? You're one of the very few. Why not?

VJ: The logic of it. All that free-floating transcendence. I resent the limits of it. People like to mush paint around, but they have to be more conscious of why they're doing it. You have to recognize that as an artist you are working *with* conventions, not just comfortably within a convention.

SK: There is so much material, it depends upon what point of view one takes at this point, that will open or close a situation. In terms of minimalism for example, we used to think that meaning relied on reducing painting to its essence, that that's where meaning would be.

VJ: I don't think we're talking about making meaning, we're talking about reading meaning. That brings up its relationship to language, and language is treacherous. Abstract things mean something in the real world. I realized, in my early paintings, that although I would start off with this small unit, a brushstroke, something that didn't seem to have meaning, when I put a couple of hundred of them down, the references or associations would be overwhelming. I was knocked out. There was no question of reducing it down to an essence. Meaning was already there and the application of each brushstroke altered and layered previous meanings. There is a

now is not so much that artists are changing meaning but that we are in a world of changing values. I used to be upset with Clement Greenberg. Now the older I get and the more information I have . . . I realize he didn't hate art. He was really trying in his own way to save it from dissolution and disillusion. I'm feeling much more kindly towards him these days. He was worried about those values. He was trying to ground art, to stabilize it, to make sure it was protected and separate from everything else. I see that now. But times are different. Unless abstract painting can change itself, it will only survive as a conventional craft, not as art.

SK: What would you say are the goals of your work?

VJ: To keep growing. To keep questioning.

SK: Is your present work more a reaction to, than an outgrowth of the paintings you were making in the '70s?

VJ: It's definitely an outgrowth. Having been making art for as long as I have, I am working with a lot of material. I'm at a point of expansion in my work now. Things are opening up, both forward and backward. As I mentioned earlier, if abstract art is framed by the decorative, then in very important ways it's framed by the culture it's embedded in. There are a lot of issues out there, such as gender, class, race. Issues normally thought of as being in the realm of representation, but there is no reason why abstraction can't deal with them, too.

SK: In other words, your work really is subversive.

VJ: I hope so.

SK: And through the subversion you hope that you will be able to create new values and open up your meaning?

VJ: It's not that I am criticizing earlier agendas of abstract art. I understand that people have had to do what they had to do at a particular time but that doesn't mean that we can't change things. It's not good enough to transgress just to transgress. Changes take place by recognizing *other* values that are very pressing. You have to take the responsibility of an editor. You have to be conscious. You're not just comfortably working in your studio and being this free, creative individual. You have a great deal of autonomy in terms of what you want to say, and the validity of your position. But you have to understand it's a position within something, you have to understand your relationship within and without. You have to understand what the limits are.

SK: I want to talk to you about this idea of seduction in terms of the decorative. I think it seems to be a common acceptance that something that's decorative is usually seductive, because it's attractive.

VJ: Well, I have to tell you the beginning of my idea about this. It hasn't changed much. It has to do with Eva Hesse. She had forbidden the word "decorative" be used with her work. And I imagine that was why she was using all this disgusting material, so that no one could call her work decorative. Believe me, they never called it decorative—that slimy, polyester, rubber stuff. I saw her response to the decorative, of having to deny something so heavily, and I didn't want to do that. Then I thought, well, let's just admit it, don't be afraid of the pretty, or anything else for that matter, don't be afraid of being classified as something. You have to simply go with it. At a certain point, I remember thinking, I'm going to make the most beautiful painting that I can possibly make.

SK: So you could be seductive for a completely different reason than what appears to be seductive.

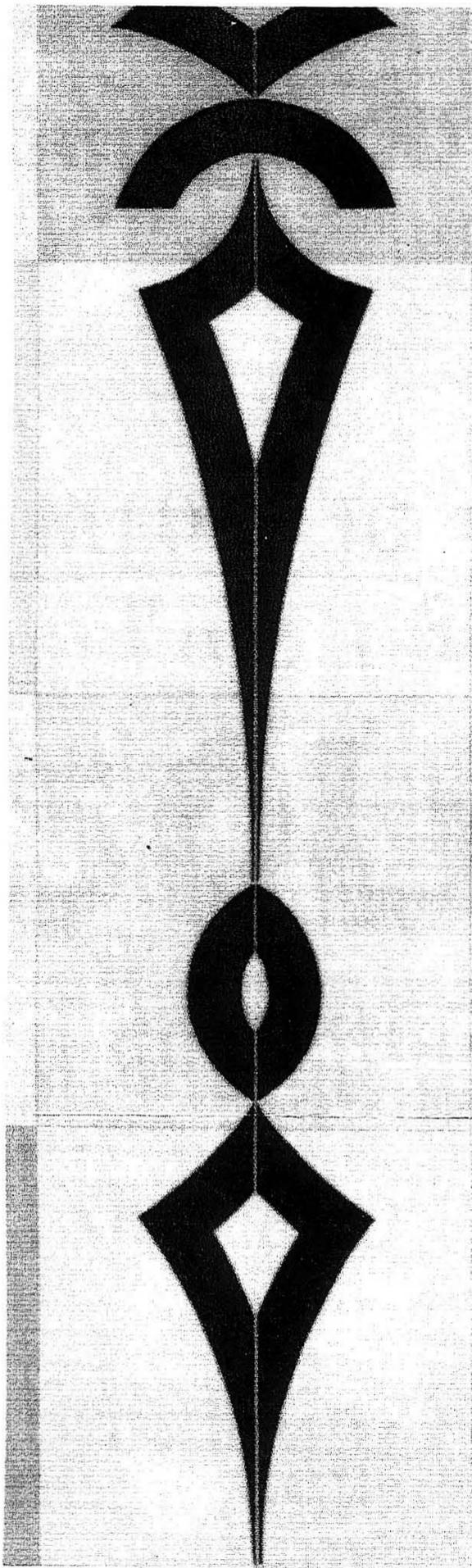
VJ: By being seductive, you are taking an action. It's a social action. It's almost an acknowledgement of manners. I would like to have a discussion with you. So would my painting. You are looking at it and it's looking at you and we are all talking. It's not a natural situation. It's one I've set up. I've just used a painting to do it.

SK: Which is a very feminine proposition. Or the seductive is very much associated with being feminine.

VJ: It is, but men are great seducers, too. They do the same thing [laughter] It has some association, you're right.

SK: From the beginning, your work had a dialogue between practice and theory which is strongly feminist.

VJ: Well, there are many feminisms. Feminism in the '70s was trying to create its own closure. It was trying to set up something outside of a dominant structure. Everyone has come to see that it



is a matter of changing the lock, not just breaking it. The world is falling apart so rapidly and it was a male-constructed world and I'm not rebelling against the fact that it's their language; it was their world, it was their construction, but it's their bridges that are falling. Old solutions are not working. But the new solution isn't going to be a universal one. It's going to take a local effort, and women are going to be a part of that.

SK: You said you didn't think your work could be made by a man, but there are actually a lot of men involved these days in the practice of P and D. It is the source for challenging modernism at this point. Do you think this renewed interest has to do with reclaiming what has been marginalized?

VJ: I'm not sure if that's the way to think about it. Celebrating the marginal keeps the center intact. It's not going to work just to play with the past. It has to have a consciousness to it. It has to be deliberate.

SK: So you don't think it's as risky for men to be taking this position, as it is for women, even at this point?

VJ: It's risky being a thinking human these days. The only thing that could keep you going is the idea of change, of constructing things in a new way. There's a need to think differently, and women today are in a particularly credible position to voice this need. Particularly, if you're planning on taking abstract painting in a different direction. At this point, post-structuralism is good for taking the text, or taking what already exists, which we call modernism, and exposing it. But post-structuralism doesn't have a solution because it is starting from the original model of modernism, and only thinking of different ways to work around it.

It's going to take a certain kind of energy to construct ways out of this. It's going to take practice. We're at the point now, where theory helps, but practice is the most important thing. There has to be a reconstruction in the way we think about the hierarchy. You can't tell the past what to do. You have got to negotiate with the dead; there is no way around that.

SK: We haven't been able to replace the meaning or the value of things; I think it's a question of interpretation at this point. Perhaps, if we can resolve the question of interpretation, we can get to other meanings...

VJ: Yes, and what we're talking about is critical methodology. At this point, there's not a satisfactory one, because they're operating out of the standard of self-referentiality.

SK: The recognition of differences is a recognition of individuals, which leads to less of a homogenized society. The nineteenth-century ideas led to homogenization, everybody lived the same way and everybody had the same values, etcetera.

VJ: It was a good idea at the time.

SK: The nineteenth-century people were coming out of monarchies.

VJ: Exactly! The overthrowing of authority is just one idea of the liberation. It's a step towards the creation of the individual, of the self. It's a wonderful thing to have done. But I think that if history shows any kind of progression at all, it is towards the ideal of a betterment for everyone, of a new interdependence. That's why I think the expansion of ideas and the finding of new structures is inevitable. Art is part of it all.