

Art/Kay Larson

FREEZING EXPRESSIONISM

“...Some of the ambiguities that make abstract painting so rich are intruding on Valerie Jaudon's woven surfaces. . .”

THE PATTERN AND DECORATION MOVEMENT, begun by a group of SoHo artists as a challenge to minimalist painting in the mid-seventies, hasn't always been kind to its members. After nearly ten years, its arguments with minimalism appear at times redundant; painters still caught up in those arguments now can seem trapped by the limitations of a single good idea. Other artists have moved on. Among them is Valerie Jaudon, who has emerged from pattern painting (was the label her doing, or ours?) to become a confident abstract artist with considerable potential.

Jaudon used to keep her patterns tight: The bands of color that intertwine on the canvas surface were once as tautly tangled as a pile of kitemans in a litter. The paintings' symmetry and density made clear references to architectural ornament and the sort of linear decoration one might find in a book on medieval Celtic design. Too clear, I thought. Jaudon seemed to be using those motifs to provide the intellectual justification for paintings that could perfectly well stand on their own.

Lately, however, Jaudon has relaxed. Not much—just enough to open the paintings up, to disrupt their symmetry and introduce some breathing room. They seem to be in the midst of a sigh of relief. Jaudon continues to weave together bright bands of color (including reds, blacks, gold-leaf golds, and silvers), but there is space between the bands. She still inserts veiled references to architecture and design (especially to the soaring arches of medieval churches), but there are suggestions of courtyards behind the arches. In other words, some of the ambiguities that make abstract painting so rich are now intruding on Jaudon's woven surfaces. Once those ambiguities begin to appear, the paintings become very painterly: done in lustrous hues, with glossy oil colors so thick they take on the texture of frosting.

Jaudon describes her art as “frozen

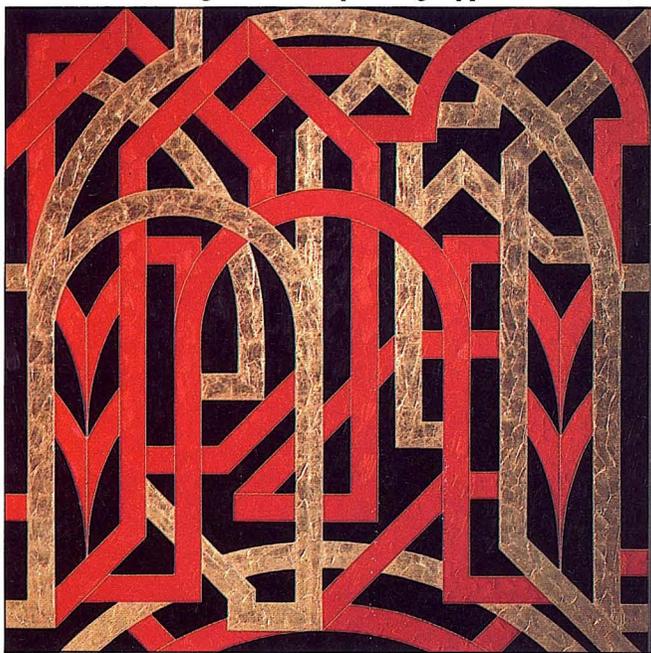
Abstract Expressionism,” a remark that would have seemed off the mark if it had been used to explain her work of the late seventies. Now, however, it seems very apt indeed. Jackson Pollock's gestures have been caught and stripped of spontaneity to reinforce their sweeping scale. Jaudon works large (the painting reproduced here is 72 inches wide), yet the size is right. Her new paintings appear to

object lesson in art history. A new group of sculptures here—round, cocoonlike bronze castings, one of which dangles from the ceiling — includes hanging human forms in cast-metal cloaks that directly recall Rodin's bronze statue of Balzac, in which the writer is wrapped in a cloak so voluminous that his body becomes pure volume and only his head remains visible. Rodin's *Balzac* has sexual overtones (the cloak hides an enormous erect phallus), so we may guess that Schnabel means to say something about the latent sexual energy in these human cocoons. (One of Schnabel's figures, in fact named *Balzac*, is the only one of the group to wear an antler on its head. Another reference to male potency? To the passion of stags?)

Schnabel seems intrigued more with tracing these connections than with making objects for their own sake. The paintings have always hinted that the painter had a story to tell, that the images had antecedents elsewhere. Goya's bullfight paintings, for instance, lent Schnabel's earlier show at Mary Boone some of its most striking, empty, brown, arenalike spaces. Schnabel's work is like an art-historical slide file

without the identifying labels: One sorts through almost at random, looking for chance associations. Is he waiting for a theorist of the magnitude of Harold Rosenberg or Robert Rosenblum to explain these references to us? He said so once, but I didn't believe him. Now I believe him, but I'm still not convinced that's a sane goal for a young painter. (Leo Castelli, 142 Greene Street; through April 30.)

Francesco Clemente IS THE LATEST artist to sprawl across the byways of SoHo in a two-gallery show. Earlier, I would have been happy to see such an excess of Clementes; I have liked his strange, visionary, semi-hallucinatory self-portraits since I first saw them in Rome. But he has recently moved to the United States, and seems to be working



Tough conversation: Jaudon's *Sebastopol*, 1982, at Sidney Janis.

carry on a dialogue not just with minimalism but with historical “expressionism” too—a tough conversation to have, but a dramatic one. (Sidney Janis Gallery, 110 West 57th Street; through April 30.)

Julian Schnabel REMAINS OUR MOST problematic painter. Perhaps it's just overexposure (this is his second New York show in six months, although the first to be solely at Leo Castelli). Perhaps it's something more profound.

There is undeniable energy in this group of large paintings on velvet and larger paintings on crushed plates, but it's the sort of exuberance one now associates with Schnabel: a gluttonous eagerness to assimilate every technique, every object, and every idea within reach. Schnabel has made of himself an