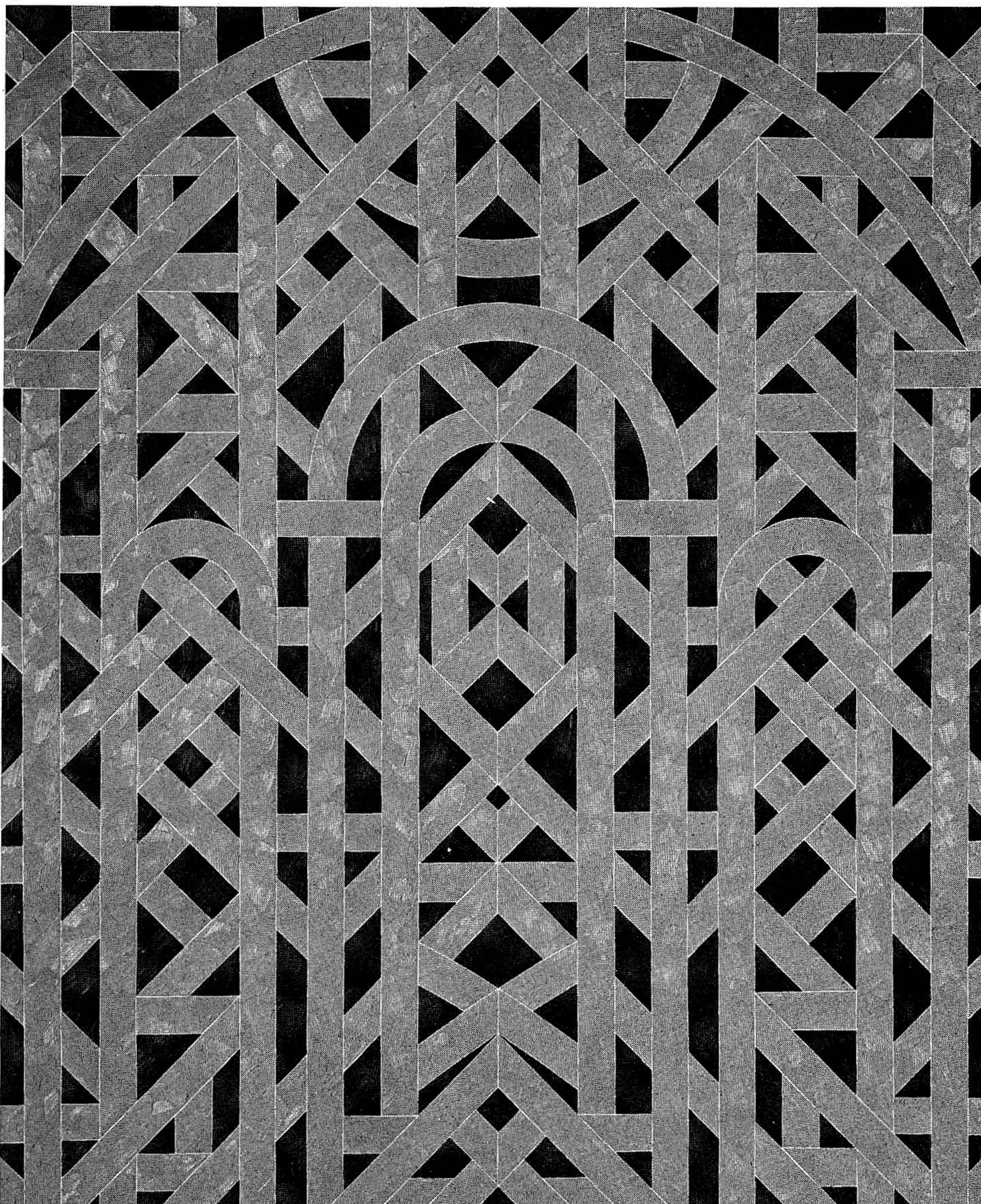


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Valerie Jaudon, *Batesville*, 1980. Oil on canvas, 100 x 84". Photo by D. James Dee.

VALERIE JAUDON AT JAMES CORCORAN

Los Angeles

The continuing controversy over Decoration vs. Real Art (that is, art with "significant" content) seems to be reaching alarming proportions. It has become fashionable to say that Agnes Martin never was about anything, that Warhol uses decorator colors in his portraits, and that Stella's French-curve-and-glitter constructions are a last desperate attempt to keep Modernism alive. Such highbrow critics as Donald Kuspit are repeatedly slipping venomous attacks into (otherwise) intelligently conceived articles. For example, from his article in the March 1981 *Arts Magazine*, "Decorativeness is

simply a weakened formalism, a post-minimalism without any rigors; it reduces the expressionist option of post-minimalism to trivial absurdity... Neo-decorative art is the new art game, carrying to a final ritualization the falsification of modern art as indifferent to and not originating in an effort to come to grips with alienation—the conversion of art into false consciousness"—that on the heels of his earlier diatribe, "Betraying the Feminist Intention: the Case Against Feminist Decorative Art" (*Arts Magazine*, November 1979). Then there's our own William Wilson, who, in reviewing David Hockney's new prints in the March 27 *Los Angeles Times*, says, "The work is such a complete pleasure to the eyes, the poor things fee-

almost decadent."

While artists as diverse as Robert Zakanitch and Jane Kaufman are being lumped together under the simplistic umbrella term "Pattern and Decorationists," the "serious" critics are aligning themselves with (and lionizing) Cucchi, Clemente, Chia, and Pozzi. This latest Artworld Cosa Nostra does fill Art with all the *right* art historical, political, and philosophical references. But, to add my two cents' worth to the decoration fracas, why can't some critics see the forest for the trees? Although finding laudable examples of "P&D" does hinge on a great deal of (as yet unexamined and unclarified) definition of the word "decorative," one can find plenty of content-laden, politico-/historico-decorative work around. To quote Herrick, "Nothing's so hard but search will find it out." Or, from the roster of respected critics, Amy Goldin has said, "Decoration [is] not stupid. It does yield to rational investigation."

Valerie Jaudon is a painter often neatly categorized, for curatorial ease, with other "neo-decorationists" like Joyce Kozloff, Cynthia Carlson, Miriam Schapiro, Kim MacConnel, and Mary Grigoriadis. She makes large, symmetrical, boldly patterned canvases with precedence in Matisse's rhythmic lunette murals; the Cubist Herbin's work; the Synchromies of the Delaunays; photography; Art Deco; Islamic, Tantric, and Celtic art; Stella's metallic and polychromed geometries; Al Held's complicated spatial arrangements; and Judy Chicago's centralized feminist imagery. I've been following Jaudon's development for several years now, and the basic organizing mode of drawing myriads of intricately intertwining and overlapping curved lines and straight parallel lines about three inches apart has remained constant. Earlier work simply emphasized the drawing: thin white or black lines formed a delicate tracery of concentric circles and maze-like forms on impastoed monochromatic grounds. That tracery is still apparent in the newer pieces, as is the high-contrast color—black and white; red and black; metallic bronzes, silvers, and golds—but both the linear elements and the field are now given equal treatment. Nearing relief, the shapes have been filled in with thicker contrasting pigment to become fully realized concrete "blocks" that vacillate between figure and ground. From a distance they look like pieces of giant filigreed lace laid on dark grounds, with the

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optical game being to see either the lace or the shapes in between. The paintings are saved from being simply a preoccupation with the retinal patterning tricks of figure/ground ambiguity by several factors, the first being Jaudon's rigorous, obsessive attention to sheer surface quality. Paint is brilliant, shiny, sensuous: scarlet reds, fiery oranges, creamy whites, pitchy blacks, and golds and bronzes. Like an Impressionist fascinated with the properties of light, Jaudon often changes the direction of her wide brushstrokes, setting the shapes aglow with reflected light. More important than these seductive painterly effects, however, is the curious perspective at work. Using graduated arches and appropriately placed diagonals and right angles, Jaudon has created a kind of receding pseudo-perspective, one that is completely non-illusionistic because illusion is mitigated by the flatness of the surface. While the pleasing formal qualities hold our attention, these strategic geometric elements exert a tremendous centripetal force. The eye travels every route in these labyrinthine lattices, inevitably drawn to central, angular, butterfly-shaped sexual orifices. As in the remarkably similar "Sacajawea" plate in Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, that "spatial pull" marks the crucial difference between the painting on the canvas (or plate) being mere surface embellishment or ornament and the creation of pictorial space as a purely psychological realm.

Since much art finds its roots in architecture, it's not surprising (in this age of retro-looking) that much current art evokes and examines our relationship to architecture. In all of Jaudon's work, I feel I'm looking at flattened, high-contrast, black-and-white photos of dome interiors, bridges, cloistered halls, or silhouetted aqueductian structures. Whether emphasizing verticality, as in *Lafayette Springs*, or the horizontal, as in *Egypt River* and *Crystal Springs*, Jaudon invokes a Gothic-spirited painting-as-window analogy. With its enormous rising arches leading upward to dazzling stained-glass windows (Jaudon re-creates the transcendental qualities of light with luminous paint), Gothic art was meant to be the liaison between God and spectator. In the sense that Gothic cathedrals were supposed to house the Divine Spirit, Gothic architecture became a metaphor for the human body, underscoring the fusion of interior and exterior worlds (self and God).

By this Gothic architecture comparison, I don't mean to suggest that Jaudon is mak-

ing religiously profound paintings, although a strong argument could be made for their mantra-like allusions. What I am saying is that Jaudon, by using the psychology of architecture as a device for leading us from the mundane to the contemplative, has kindred spirits in Giotto, Fra Angelico, della Francesca, Raphael, Cezanne, the Impressionists, Matisse, the Surrealists, Duchamp, and scores of "Pop" artists like Wesselman, as well as in current artists such as Alice Aycock and Nancy Holt. Not bad for a trivial decorationist.

—Constance Mallinson