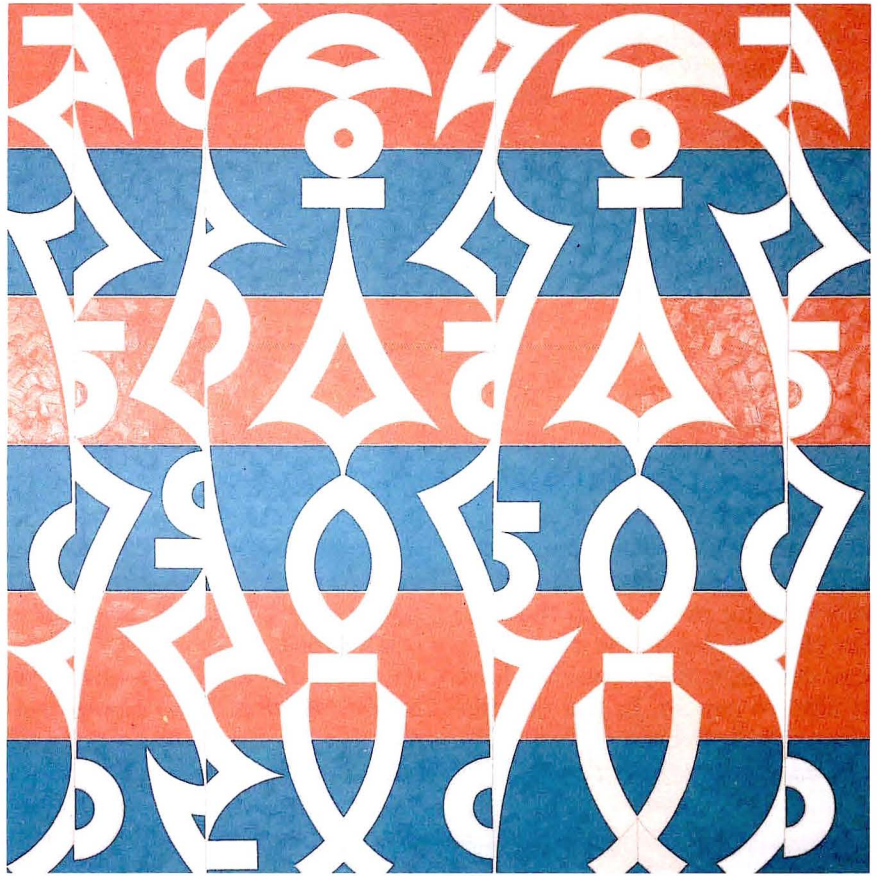


Valerie Jaudon

a conversation with DEMETRIO PAPARONI

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Valerie Jaudon, *Accord*, 1992, oil on canvas, 72x72 in. Sidney Janis Gallery, New York.

DEMETRIO PAPARONI: *How has the concept of abstraction changed over the last forty years?*

VALERIE JAUDON: It might be more to the point to ask first how some of our commonly accepted ideas about the world have changed in order to understand why we have an expanded sense of abstraction today. Thinking about the dramatic change in attitude toward nature, for instance, in the fifties as opposed to the nineties, abstraction seems like a minor linguistic problem. Several decades ago, nature was still a strong, unpredictable force, to be controlled, dominated, and exploited. Today it seems fragile, in danger of losing delicate balances long taken for granted and in need of exaggerated measures of protection. What seems important today is our

social and public nature, our shared survival. In the fifties the emphasis was on the nature of the individual, individuality in the face of the institutions and powerful conventions that dominated our social interactions.

Abstract art in the fifties was for the viewer a sign of the unconventional, something that transgressed the conventions of recognizable, figurative, representational painting. It was non-representational, but the non-representational did not mean that there was no subject matter or content. That was reserved for the Decorative... having no meaningful subject matter, that is. The only subject matter for non-representation was self-representation. Abstraction stood as a record and as a mirror of an artist's natural imagination, spontaneity, and

experience. It expressed the nature of the materials and of the natural physical process of painting without interference from the outside world. Abstraction was an objectification of the conscious and the unconscious self. Physical attention was confined to a working process, a working surface.

What has changed most in this picture is the dissolution of the larger social conventions and institutions that made possible the social act of transgressing their authority. Abstraction that insisted on defining itself against representation as the dominant convention has itself become the dominant convention.

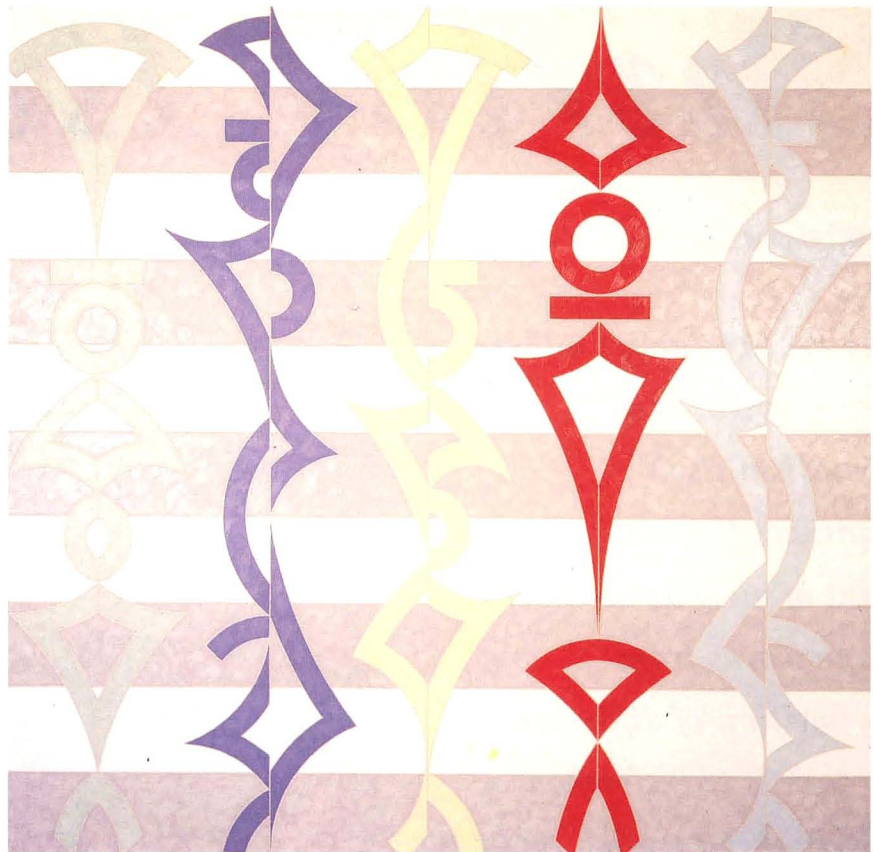
D.P.: *Do you think a work that is considered abstract necessarily has to renounce the presentation of a recogniz-*

able “image”? For example, in your works there are “modules” that seem to function as letters of an alphabet, an alphabet that is unknown to us, but then when you have seen the letters once, you immediately find them familiar, recognizable, and in a certain sense equivalent to a human figure. In fact, they could appear familiar, just as a figurative image does. But at this point another question is raised: does art, to be “new” and “contemporary,” have to surprise in a certain way? Or don’t you think categories like “new” and “contemporary” have any sense today?

V.J.: Does this mean that anything considered abstract is not recognizable? Is this a linguistic problem — abstract versus representation, abstracted “from” versus non-representation, or meaning versus no meaning? Ultimately it is a question of value and controlling interpretation.



Valerie Jaudon, *Certify*, 1992, oil on canvas, 90x36 in.



Valerie Jaudon, *Priority*, 1992, oil on canvas, 75x77 in.

Almost anything can stand for anything else. It is easy to recognize “non-representation.” My work is abstract. However it does not conform to formulas that mandate a closed discipline of self-representation disguised as non-representation. An alphabet can be read as a figure just as easily as a figure can be read as an alphabet. Rather than images being referenced, in my painting codes of representation are being referenced — it is not so much *what* we see as *how* we see. Art is like conversation, an entering into the everyday. Good conversation by its nature is surprising. Ideas of the “new” are all too often merely disruptions of taste, and that, after a hundred years of the modern, is scarcely a surprise. I am more interested in disrupting ideas.

D.P.: Which artists in particular have influenced your work?

V.J.: Speaking of disruption, I have been particularly attracted to artists that deal with a certain conceptual dissonance, that set you up to read things one way and then force you to change direction, to look at things in more than one way at one time. Robert Mangold does it, so did Eva Hesse. Philip Taaffe is doing it now,

and in her own way, so is Sherrie Levine. Someone else who was important for this was the American composer, Charles Ives. He was very good at taking separate systems and meshing them unexpectedly.

D.P.: In your opinion, can abstract art and conceptual art coincide? What do you think about artists’ using objects, while at the same time excluding the use of brush, color, canvas and frame?

V.J.: If seen in a traditional light, the coinciding of abstract and conceptual art — conceptual abstraction — would be an oxymoron. For me though, the play of ideas and language doesn’t exclude any materials or processes. In many ways, I think of myself as a public artist, a site artist, and I choose materials that echo the language and conventions of that particular site and acknowledge its connection to the world. If I work outdoors I might use granite, steel, or ceramic tile, but when I work with paint and canvas, I am dealing with another context, another site. Painting for me is the locus of a vital cultural debate. Today the frame of painting is a symbol, representing the changing aesthetic and philosophical boundaries of art itself. □