

Degrees of Symmetry

Linked, in the 1970s, to the Pattern and Decoration movement, Valerie Jaudon has more recently been associated with so-called Conceptual Abstraction. Viewing a recent retrospective, the author suggests that her paintings can be better understood by following their interplay of literalness and illusion.

BY BARRY SCHWABSKY

Valerie Jaudon first came into public view in the mid-1970s, along with such artists as Joyce Kozloff, Miriam Schapiro, Robert Zakanitch and Robert Kushner (many of whom, like Jaudon at the time, were exhibiting with the Holly Solomon Gallery), as part of the artistic current that quickly came to be known as "Pattern and Decoration." Yet we are now more apt to place Jaudon among a number of painters (including David Reed, Jonathan Lasker and

Jaudon's husband, Richard Kalina) whose work began to be loosely grouped together around the late 1980s and early '90s, sometimes under the rubric of "Conceptual Abstraction" (the title of a 1991 group show Jaudon participated in at the gallery by which she has been represented since 1983, Sidney Janis).

The "conceptual" tag always seemed misleading, in regard to Jaudon as well as to most of the others, insofar as their work had

nothing to do with the fundamentally linguistic and contextual bases of classic Conceptual art. But it could be loosely justified in terms of the rather cool, intellectual approach shared by most of these painters, as well as their taste for systems and seriality such as had been so essential to many of the original Conceptualists. As Robert C. Morgan has pointed out, "Jaudon's paintings . . . extend the rigorous specifications of LeWitt, Le Va, Bochner, and Bartlett (early) in terms of an explicit opticality."¹ This passion for systems must have made Jaudon something of an odd woman out among the Patternists who pursued an often raucous or whimsical anti-formalism. On the other hand, the Pattern and Decoration movement's interest in the applied arts—often in an explicit challenge to high-art taboos against functionality—seems relevant to the relatively restrained but user-friendly public and architectural projects that have occupied Jaudon regularly since 1988.

While the dichotomy within the reception of Jaudon's work may serve as a condemnation of journalistic and curatorial trend-mongering, it is equally a tribute to the breadth of implication in a body of work that, as the recent retrospective at the Mississippi Museum of Art (Jaudon is a Mississippi native) reminds us, has nonetheless always been as rigorously focused as it has been beautiful.

I bring up this question of categories not because I think it important to determine which one Jaudon's (or any artist's) work "really" belongs to, but in order to point out that while Jaudon's artistic development has been entirely consistent for the past 20 years, the two labels which have most often been applied to her art could hardly be more opposed in their implications. In her essay in the catalogue for the Jaudon retrospective, art historian Anna C. Chave fully explores the Pattern and Decoration context for Jaudon's early work, rightly emphasizing the distinctly feminist inflection of the movement. Chave



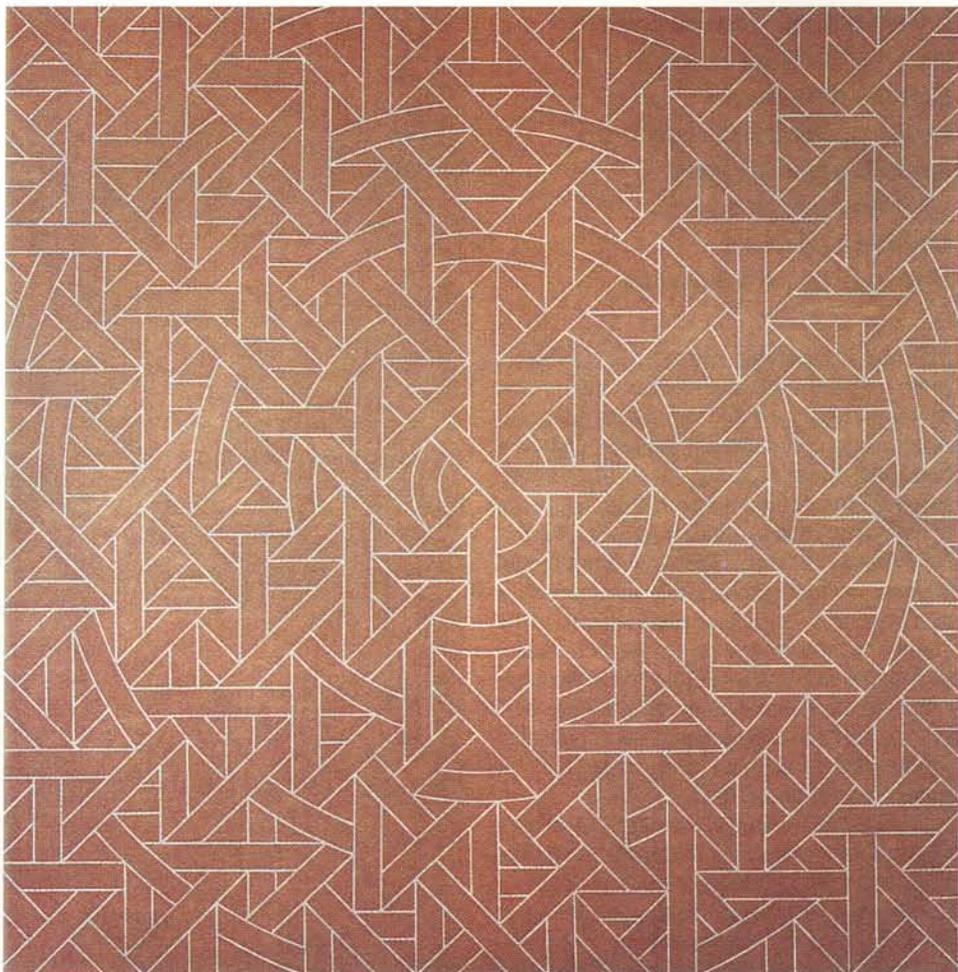
Valerie Jaudon: *Toomsuba*, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 72 inches square.

also explores the significance for the movement, and for Jaudon in particular, of the work of Frank Stella, especially his "Protractor" series of the late '60s. Strangely, however, for all the historical background Chave supplies, there is one name that never arises in her account, though it is that of one of Stella's most explicit sources—and also, I would argue, a crucial precursor for Jaudon as well. I am speaking of Jaudon's fellow southerner Jasper Johns, who could have been issuing a manifesto for the as-yet unheard-of Pattern and Decoration movement when he declared, in the catalogue for the Museum of Modern Art's "Sixteen Americans" exhibition in 1959, "Generally, I am opposed to painting which is concerned with conceptions of simplicity. Everything looks very busy to me."

The first hints of Jaudon's debt to Johns appeared in 1975 when her work narrowed itself down to a nucleus from which everything she has done since has developed. Not that the break from her previous work, represented in the retrospective by two paintings and three drawings from 1973, was total. The paintings of 1973 were already based on the interaction among horizontal, vertical, diagonal and circular geometrical elements on a square canvas, which would occupy Jaudon through the end of the decade. But these interactions had not yet resolved themselves into anything like a pattern, remaining tied to a more familiar mode of geometrical abstraction, though of a complicated and highly exuberant kind. In paintings like *Toomsuba* and *Bay St. Louis* (all of Jaudon's paintings



Parchman, 1975, encaustic on canvas, 24 inches square.



Jackson, 1976, metallic pigment in polymer emulsion and pencil on canvas, 72 inches square. Hirshhorn Museum.

until 1985 are named after towns in Mississippi), a multiplicity of colors are applied in fat, blocklike strokes of acrylic paint cemented together, as it were, by oddly shaped areas of bare canvas that emerge wherever her system of intersecting grids and rings has left an area blank.

In 1975, suddenly, all that color disappears, and with it the sense of jazzy anarchy that had characterized the previous work. Furthermore, Jaudon was apparently looking for something less "on the surface" than the acrylic she'd been using. The results included a work like *Parchman*, painted entirely in fleshy off-white encaustic, which is almost embarrassingly Johnsian. Couldn't this, one thinks, have been a one-off experiment by the painter of those equally symmetrical and undemonstrative encaustic *Targets* of the late 1950s? The image presented by the painting has become an intricate interlacing pattern, reminiscent of those, for instance, on Islamic tiles, with the implicit potential for infinite repetition. Things that are so patterned are not normally meant to be visually explored in all their

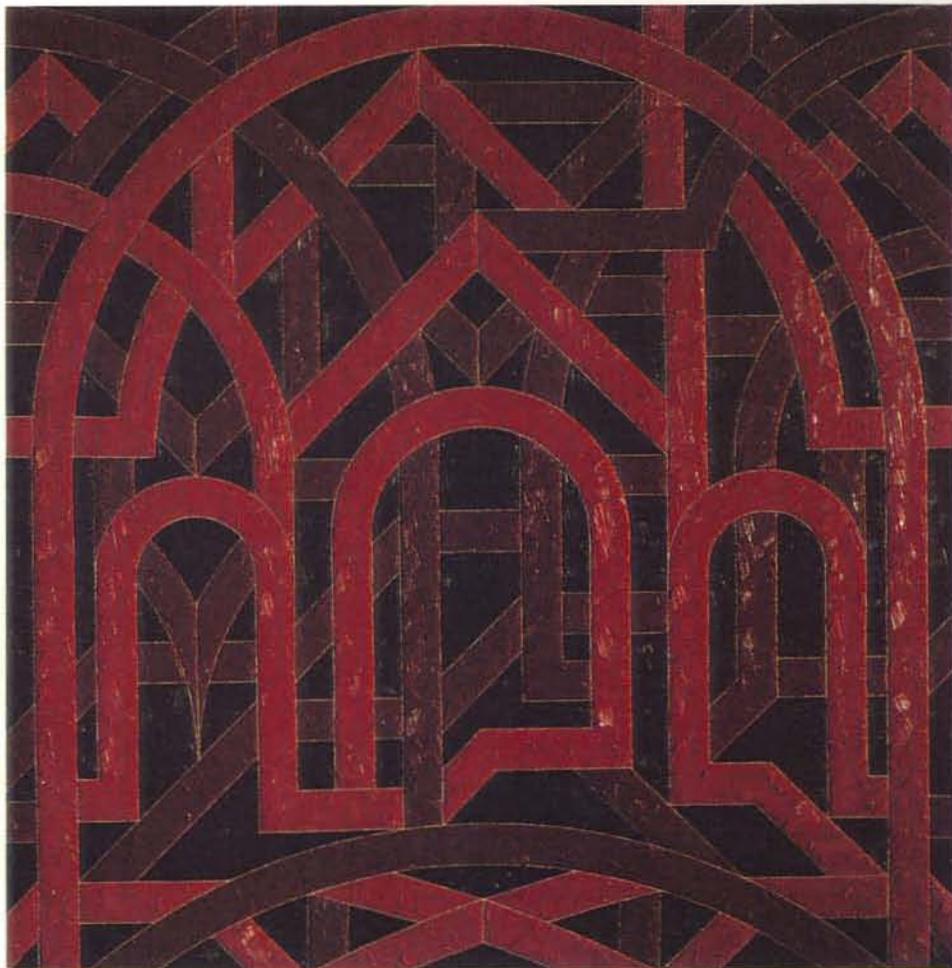
details. As Chave says, quoting E.H. Gombrich, decorative richness offers "a feast for the eye without demanding that we should taste every dish."² Yet by isolating a repeatable unit in the form of a unique, handmade painting, Jaudon focuses unwonted attention on it just as Johns did on his flags, alphabets or targets. Though less specific in reference, the kinds of patterns Jaudon was using always feel as familiar as they do vaguely exotic; the lulling, redundant aspect of patterns requires them, too, to be, in Johns's phrase, "things the mind already knows," banal images used abstractly which the paintings can simultaneously adhere to and turn away from. But with Jaudon's paintings, as many critics have pointed out, the tranquilizing, integrative function of pattern easily slips into something disturbingly labyrinthine, confusing or deceptive—an implication all the more threatening, perhaps, for being so elusive.³

Another of Jaudon's paintings of 1975, *Natchez*, is oil on canvas, and in part because it is made with black paint applied

In each of Jaudon's highly structured canvases an unsystematic and intuitive element is always present in the form of the painter's touch.

without inflection, like Stella's famous works of 1959, we can see that Jaudon was not prepared to commit herself to Johnsian indirection and wanted a degree of Stella's literalism. Retaining the mesh of circular, perpendicular and diagonal line segments from her previous paintings, *Natchez* is nonetheless frontal, assertive, "tough" and airless, in contrast to both the openness of *Toomsuba* and the reserved, brooding quality of *Parchman*. In a way, this dialectic—between Stella's tautological "what you see is what you see" and Johns's equivocal "one thing used as another"—has continued to play itself out, back and forth, in all of Jaudon's work since 1975.

In 1976, for instance, we can see the two tendencies continue to battle for dominion: *Jackson*, with the obdurate opacity of metallic pigment in polymer emulsion, emulates Stella's tough materialism, whereas *Bellefontaine*, which also employs metallic pigment, mixes it instead with oil—and deploys it against a much higher ratio of bare canvas—to create a softening effect of diffused light that bespeaks deferral rather than presence. All these paintings use a single color against the bare canvas, with the unpainted area sometimes appearing as line (*Jackson*; *Big Biloxi*, 1979), and sometimes as shape (*Bellefontaine*; *Cybur*, 1975). But whereas the bare canvas reserve between Stella's stripes always worked in favor of literalism, in even those of Jaudon's paintings closest to Stella's in appearance, bare canvas always underlines the collision between literalness and illusionism: what appear to our perception as patterns formed by the interweaving of criss-crossing bands are really, after all, self-contained segments of paint. Not only do they not cross—they don't even meet, a fact that is emphasized all the more in a painting like *Jackson*, where we can see Jaudon's penciled guidelines running down the middle of each unpainted canvas line, acting as a second level of demarcation. What all this points to is the fact that, in Jaudon's work, Johnsian impurity or duplicity is the constant to which Stellaesque single-mindedness, though often more apparent, is merely tribu-



Caledonia, 1982, oil on canvas, 72 inches square.
Collection Leonard and Stephanie Bernheim.

tary; it reminds us of Harold Bloom's observation that, among strong poets (or artists), an overt borrowing does not designate a profound influence but rather a defense against such influence, which remains tacit. As *Parchman* shows, Jaudon could easily have been swamped by Johns, but never had anything to fear from Stella, and could therefore use his techniques with impunity.

Jaudon's development has always been determined, logical and well-judged. The step-by-step nature of her career becomes very clear in the chronological progression of the recent retrospective. We see how in 1980, with paintings like *Big Springs*, Jaudon added a second paint color to each work, allowing, as the catalogue points out, "a greater sense of spatial development."⁴ In tandem with this new spatiality, she began using Gothic- and Romanesque-style pointed and rounded arch forms and abandoned her commitment to the square and to fourfold symmetry, so that the paintings now had a top and bottom and therefore a certain sense of natural gravity. As in much ecclesi-

astical building, a feeling of ascension is obtained by leading the eye toward an uplifted central axis. By recalling Christian churches rather than Islamic tiles, they also relinquished a certain exoticism in their style.

In 1982, as Jaudon cautiously increased the number of colors per painting to three, the degree of symmetry in her compositions began to decrease; the space became more complex, at times suggesting not simply architectural forms, but architectural structures within landscapes. The patterns became more loosely woven, the directions of the colored bands became more devious and less predictable. Where the pleasures of Jaudon's previous paintings had depended on a willingness by the viewers to let their vision be



directed, these works offer environments that the eye can explore at liberty, moving in and out, around and through, rather than simply migrating toward and away from a center (as in the works of the late '70s) or gradually up to a peak (as in 1980-81). What remains true is that each painting is painted in its own way—an intuitive and unsystematic element is always present in the form of the painter's touch, even or perhaps especially in the many works in which this touch does not call particular attention to itself. While Jaudon's application of paint is always consistent within each painting, it varies greatly among them, ranging from nearly imperceptible strokes to highly visible patchwork textures. This disciplined brushwork, which never aspires to bravura, acts as a kind of ornamentation to the painting's linear structure.

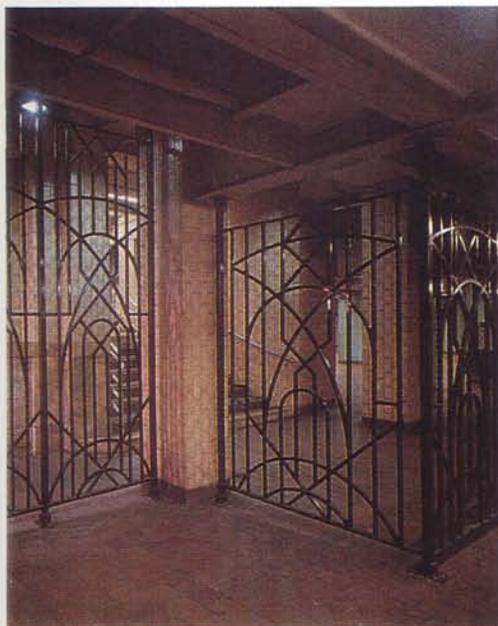
In tandem with her color choices, the textural aspect of paint gives Jaudon's paintings their diverse light effects. As her recurrent (but never garish) use of metallic pigments or gold leaf suggests, Jaudon's interplay between literalism and ambiguity also involves an interchange between the actual physical light of the paintings' surroundings and the suggested light of the painted colors. Elsewhere the texture of the paint produces similarly complicated effects. In *Arcola* (1982), whose black bands and blue ground make it one of Jaudon's darkest paintings, the actual light dispersed in front of the painting by a glossy paint surface in combination with conspicuous brushstrokes acts as a kind of veil. The dark image paradoxically appears as luminous as the stained glass window its form might suggest.

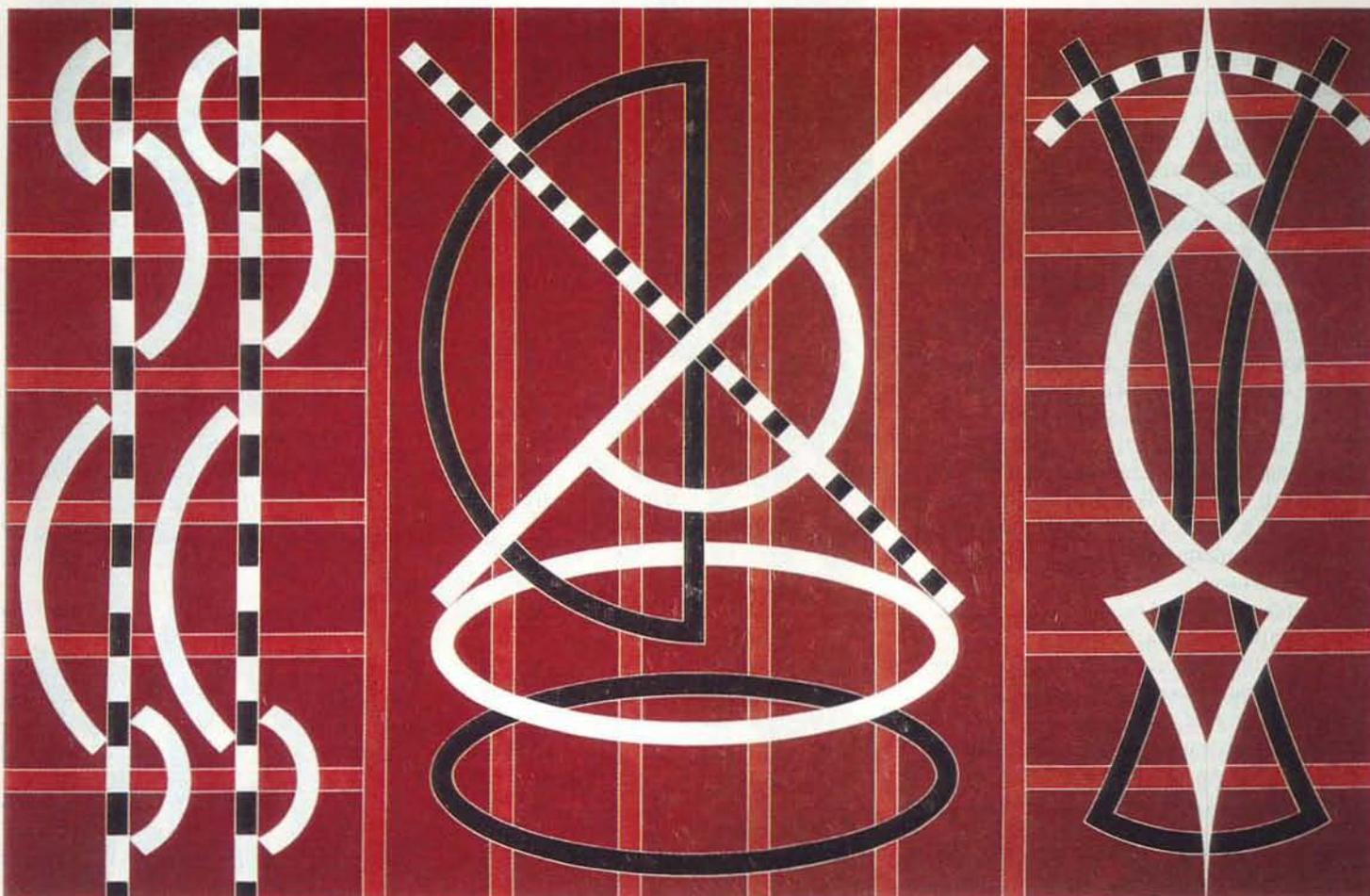
Changes continue: around 1985 the paintings become flatter and less architectural



Above, *Big Springs*, 1980, gold leaf and oil on canvas, 96 by 48 inches.

Left, *Long Division* (detail), 1988, painted steel gate, 12 by 60 feet; installed at the Lexington Avenue and 23rd street subway station, New York. Collection New York City Transit Authority.





Azimuth, 1990, oil on canvas, 90 by 138 inches. Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York.



Blue Pools Courtyard, 1993, garden designed by the artist at the Birmingham Museum of Art. Photo Beth Maynor.

and the bands rarely intersect with the edges of canvas. From 1986 through 1989 Jaudon once again limits herself to square formats. These paintings are generally cooler in color than her previous work, and have a somewhat impersonal, diagrammatic quality to them, especially since black-and-white "dotted" bands are now included. Tellingly, in 1986 Jaudon abandoned her repertoire of place names and began using mathematical and navigational terms as titles (*Prime*, 1986; *Constant*, 1988). Yet for all their evocation of an abstract mathematical world, the compositions are subtly weighted toward the bottom of the canvas, and interaction between the bands and the edge are limited to its lower half, so that there remains a distinct recollection of gravitationally naturalistic space.

Azimuth (1990) shows the system Jaudon had been developing at the point of breaking up. This horizontal painting, whose palette has been expanded from three to four colors (including black and white), uses a single canvas but is composed as if it were a triptych; it would seem, in fact, to have been modeled on an altarpiece with a comparatively wide central image and narrower wings. Furthermore, the formerly diagram-

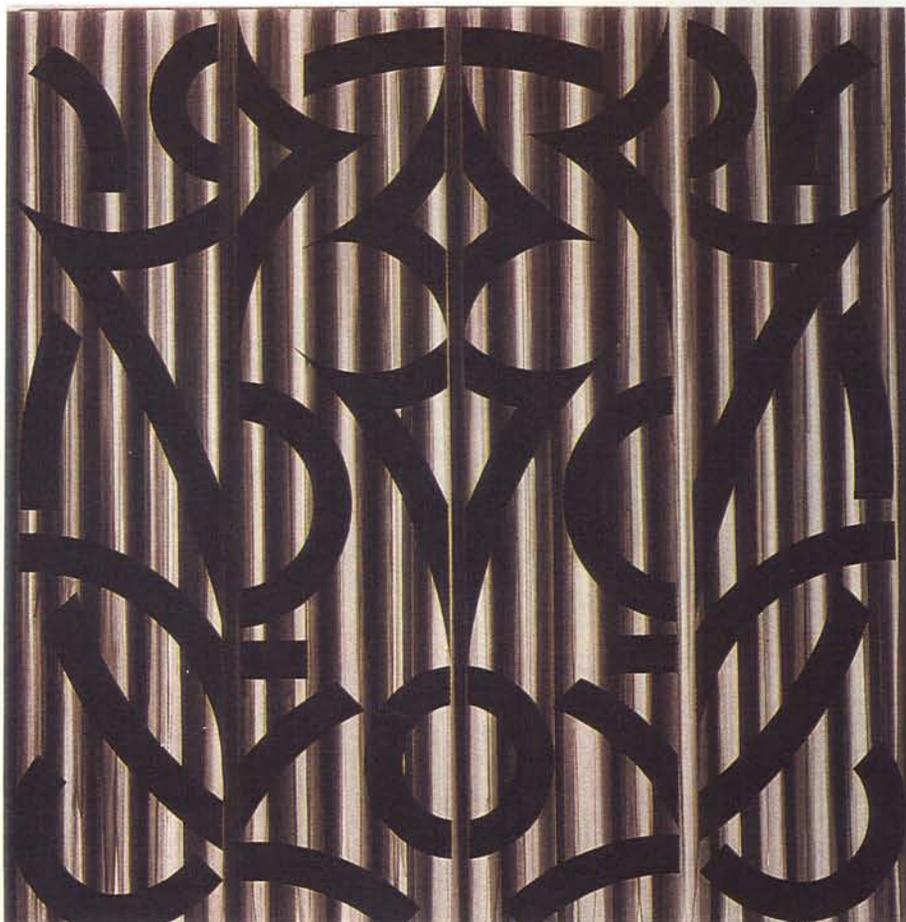
matic band segments now seem to form self-contained "figures." One almost wants to say that the central panel, with its upright half-circle cradling a diagonal cruciform above a pair of concentric ovals, corresponds to a pieta raised up on a stagelike platform, and that the wings represent saints. It's as though, in the face of the orderly, measurable, completely disenchant-ed world projected by a painting like *Constant*, Jaudon were considering the possibility of making a Pascalian wager by abandoning both Stellaesque materialism and Johnsian metaphor in favor of some kind of reconstructed representation, with allusions to religious architecture giving way to assertions of religious imagery.

Works from 1992 (*Social Contract*) and 1993 (*Ballets Russes*) show Jaudon withdrawing from this degree of allusive specificity though not entirely from figurative insinuations. Each painting is no longer limited to a given number of colors: multicolored checkerboards or horizontal bands are populated by monochrome vertical figures constructed of fragments of Jaudon's old arcs and straight lines. These are sometimes symmetrical, but even where they are not, each figure is organized around a central

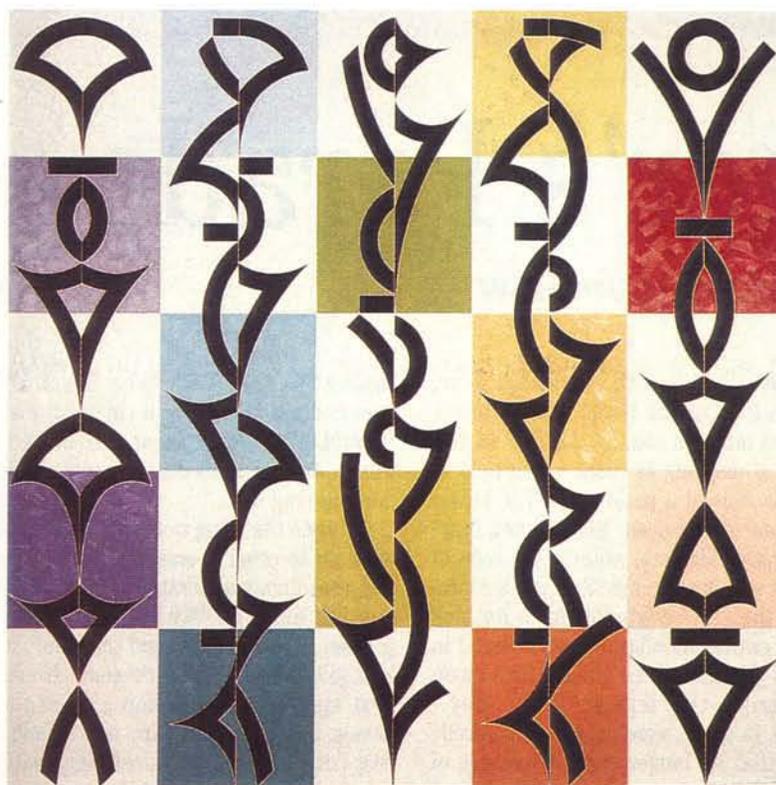
Mounted two years ago, this show might have offered a provisional conclusion to Jaudon's story, but with her recent breakthrough to illusionism, there's a sense of new beginning.

axis that continues to suggest symmetry in the way that a turning body always recalls the centrality of the spine. The overall unity of the painting, which had been on the verge of breaking up with *Azimuth*, is restored in these paintings by the modular similarity that links the self-contained vertical figures.

By this point, it seems, Jaudon has regained the liberty within her system that her paintings of 1973 had enjoyed, but with a far greater complexity, control and grace: she's come full circle, with the accent on the fullness, not the circularity. The paintings of the early '90s wear their explicitly Matissean lightness with impressive credibility. On one level this might have made a satisfying provisional conclusion to Jaudon's story, which it would have been had her retrospective taken place two years ago. As it turns out, however, the exhibition



Run Silent, Run Deep, 1995, oil and alkyd on canvas, 72 inches square. Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery.



Social Contract, 1992, oil on canvas, 94 inches square. Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery.

concludes in a way that is much more exciting: with a new beginning.

Sometime between 1993 and 1995, Jaudon made the biggest leap in her career since the one she'd made 20 years earlier, between the works of 1973 and those of 1975. And once again, an abstention from color and a shift in materials have been key to the transformation. More importantly, her paintings of 1995 are the first Jaudon has made as a mature artist that include any kind of layering. They are the first ones, that is, in which Stellaesque literalism has been completely repudiated and the possibility of illusionism completely accepted. Perhaps that's why the paintings are now named after movies (*The Best of Everything*; *Run Silent, Run Deep*)—our era's true haven for the suspension of disbelief. The dancing symmetrical or quasi-symmetrical figures of *Social Contract* and *Ballets Russes* are still here, and are still being painted in oil. But instead of the surrounding bands and patchworks in opaque oil paint and the familiar borders of bare canvas between each color area, the figures are traversed by translucent vertical streaks of slick alkyd, somewhat reminiscent in appearance of the grisaille stripes of Ross

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Bleckner's paintings in the early '80s (though completely distinct from them in execution). Although these fluid ribbons form the topmost layer of the painting, they act visually as a background for the elegantly Deco-ish figures. Despite such illusionism, the paintings retain Jaudon's habitual directness and economy of means, communicating, in fact, a far greater feeling of spontaneity than she has previously achieved. Still, there can also be something a little eerie about these paintings; as their figurative allusiveness has become more understated without quite disappearing, one re-experiences that childhood sensation of suddenly thinking one's seen a scary face or a threatening animal among the abstract entwinings of some household pattern—a sensation all the more fascinating and dislocating because it vanishes so quickly into homely normality.

Jaudon's oeuvre has on one level been a sophisticated formal game of her own devising, played superbly. Still, something about the intensity of meditation she seems to have focused on each move implies that this gamelike appearance masks some impas-

sioned pursuit. Yet Jaudon never quite reveals the work's subject. There is, apparently, an irreducibly private dimension to Jaudon's paintings. All the more surprising, then, that her work coexists so easily with public space; there is a whole other dimension to her career, not touched on by the retrospective although helpfully documented in its catalogue, that consists of the many architectural and landscape projects she has produced since 1977, ranging from murals, fences and stained glass windows to an entire garden courtyard she designed for Edward Larrabee Barnes's Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama in 1993. Yet on second thought, not so surprising, for Jaudon's marvelous discretion means that, while her art gives deeply, it never imposes itself.

At least it's clear what Jaudon's work is not about. "The idea that the painting is a stand-in for the *self*," she has said, "seems wrong-headed to me."⁵ Still, the development of her work implies something related, though crucially different: that through its investigation of the relationship between part and whole in both pattern and composition, painting can represent aspects of the relationship between self and context, individual and culture. Her work's affinity for structures associated with religious archi-

itecture thereby becomes explicable in terms of how religion has historically functioned to mediate between the individual and the collective. In art, at least, all the options can be essayed in turn, and observed with both disinterest and ardor. □

1. Robert C. Morgan, *Concept-Decoratif: Anti-Formalist Art of the '70s*, New York, Nahan Contemporary, 1990.
2. E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order*, quoted by Anna C. Chave, "Disorderly Order: The Art of Valerie Jaudon," *Valerie Jaudon*, Jackson, Mississippi Museum of Art, 1996, p. 39.
3. Chave cites John Yau and Carrie Rickey on this aspect of Jaudon's work.
4. "A Chronological Analysis of the Paintings," *Valerie Jaudon*, p. 54.
5. René Paul Barilleaux, "Interview with Valerie Jaudon," *Valerie Jaudon*, p. 75.

"Valerie Jaudon" appeared at the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson (May 24-Aug. 3). The exhibition was accompanied by a 96-page catalogue with an essay by Anna C. Chave, an interview with the artist by René Paul Barilleaux (the curator of the exhibition as well as the director of exhibitions and collections and chief curator of the museum), and an annotated listing of permanent public and architectural projects by Jane Nicol.

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