

# VALERIE JAUDON

## Painting as Open Work

Art progresses by negation, leaving things out.  
Anyone who makes a positive statement is disreputable.

— AD REINHARDT<sup>1</sup>

IF VALERIE JAUDON'S PAINTINGS do not exactly negate, there is no question that their success lies in banishing a great deal of the world and its materials, colors, and forms. Their complexity is built from precise and focused means: black-and-white oil paint, raw linen or canvas, and continuous bands that curve and turn on rectangular and square fields. It is now conventional wisdom that painting has been a conceptual practice since the late 1960s, the era when Jaudon first embarked on being a painter. But, standing in front of her work—and indeed that of many of her contemporaries who persist in making abstract paintings in 2015—suggests that the ineffable experience of beholding paintings, and the glimpses they offer of a sensual knowledge exceed language and logic. As has often been observed by critics, the pleasure and interest of Jaudon's work lies in its refusal to take a single position even while it raises pressing questions about what painting, and even art writ large, can do. Her work evokes the myth of painting while simultaneously revealing the structural artifice that supports such mythmaking. It is both conceptual and sensual. It insists on its material and visual specificity and evokes beauty, even while it lays bare the limits of language and representation.

Amongst the conceptualist tools Jaudon employs, the most fruitful and often used is that of assuming an open and receptive posture toward both her environment and her viewer. The extreme degree to which she pares down and clarifies the forms in her paintings enables the works to function, and in many ways, is in keeping with what Umberto Eco, in a groundbreaking essay from 1962, called an "Open Work"—a work of visual art or literature that functions a great deal like a musical score. It leads an existence that is necessarily responsive and contingent: rather than simply existing in a static moment or single place, it is played out differently each time it is read or perceived.<sup>2</sup> Instead of negating the significance of form, the open work proposes that meanings, even the pleasures offered by paintings, unfold in marked sites and across extended spans of time. This is a concept that many others took up—most famously Roland Barthes when he argued that a text came into being only through the process of being read.

Jaudon's paintings act as open works by gesturing to the physical world outside of them. The specificity of a site has long been important to Jaudon—who has maintained an ongoing parallel practice of creating large scale, on-site public art projects since 1977. The abstract forms in her paintings often evoke those of architecture and its materials—ornamental cornices and moldings, ironwork, or simply the edges and gaps of a structure. They reflect not only her formative experience working as an artist in residence for the architect Romaldo Giurgola during the late '70s, but also attest to her belief that abstract painting should relate to the world of forms around it. Indeed, even installed in the white cube of a modern gallery, the

shapes in her paintings not only interact with each other, they also gesture toward door frames, pillars, and baseboards, heightening our sense of the proportions, rhythms, and tones of our architectural environment. But even more, her most recent body of paintings, which bear such musical titles as *Cadence* (2015) and *Ostinato* (2014), assume “open” postures by inviting us to investigate their visual complexity over an extended period of time. What Jaudon wants most, she has remarked, is for her viewers to remain engaged in looking at each of her paintings for as long a period as possible. Indeed her paintings prompt an experience of durational time, slowing down the act of visual perception—typically the most frenetic of our senses—so that we are able, in the process of deliberately scanning the surfaces of her paintings, to begin to observe our own optical behavior. By inviting us to optically “perform” her paintings, she stages a scenario in which we are simultaneously visually absorbed and intellectually engaged.

The generosity of Jaudon’s attitude toward her viewers warrants emphasis. Describing her process of working out plans for new paintings, she has said that she carefully attends to her viewers’ capacity to grasp the complexity of her compositions. “I want them to be able to stay with me, and know that if I feel myself getting lost in the drawings, they’ll become lost too, which is not good. I don’t want that.”<sup>3</sup> Identifying this limit is very important to the artist. Tracking the courses of her black-and-white bands yields discoveries about how Jaudon has arranged, rotated, and linked her modules of labyrinthine forms, how the bands enter and exit the painting, and how, or if, patterns repeat and echo each other—without allowing us to ever really hold the entire structure of the painting’s surface in our mind’s eye at once. The increasing complexity displayed in the artist’s most recent works, such as *Continuo* (2015), and the desire to push the edge of comprehension further suggests her awareness of the changing relationship to information that has been forced by our increasingly data-driven existence. As Jaudon herself has observed, “Maybe the computer and Internet revolution has enabled us to handle more things at once—to keep more perceptual balls up in the air. It has certainly made reading works of art on multiple levels increasingly natural.”<sup>4</sup>

Jaudon spends extended periods of time drawing, revising drawings, and executing paintings in the studio—that supremely modernist setting for complete absorption and intellectual struggle. Working from freehand drawings inscribed onto graph paper, she devises the modules and fields that eventually fill her canvases, but the process is not systematic. Improvisation and experimentation determine the plan for each painting, while the forms and patterns are determined by stages of copying, rotating, sequencing, and inscribing that evacuate any organic quality or sense of drawn gesture from the arabesques, curves, and corners that cover the surfaces of her paintings. Through a laborious process of applying short, block-like strokes of paint, Jaudon also evacuates the facile expression conventionally associated with the brushstroke, and adds a final layer of an object-like skin to the works. Materially luscious, the brushstrokes convey conventional painterly qualities through unconventional means. Light appears literally by reflecting off the luminous, ridged surfaces of her strokes, and evidence of the artist’s hand can be glimpsed in subtle inconsistencies in the pattern of her strokes, offering a viewing satisfaction akin to that of spying signs of the artist’s hand in the white field of a Malevich or the slightly shaky edge of a Mondrian. But, other historical referents, such as Rauschenberg’s erased de

Kooning or Jasper Johns' wax "strokes," ironically deny the claims to subjectivity and authorship wielded by the brushstroke. This denial of painting's expressive qualities—and emphasis on ornament and pattern—supplied a politics that framed Jaudon's work during the late 1970s, when she showed with the "Pattern and Decoration" movement at the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York, and issued a manifesto in favor of ornament, non-Western art, and craft in the feminist publication *Heresies*.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the prevalence of Modernist critical language is especially striking in conversations about her work: the paintings "hold together," they employ an "all over" tactic while resisting "push-pull," they "work." Such language not only suggests Modernism's persistent relevance, but thinking about the politics of Jaudon's work now, its continued presence in conversations about her art also suggests that painting does not need to reach too deeply into the "expanded field" to subject itself to rigorous assessment: instead painting can engage and provoke within the confines of a stretched canvas hung on a wall. Within the parameters of the medium proper, Jaudon's works play out the great disturbance and rupture dramatized by Michael Fried's famous complaint against the theatricality of Minimalist sculpture.<sup>6</sup> Much like Fried's Minimalist adversaries, she intentionally errs by activating architecture, time, and the viewer's body—not with art in the realm of the sculptural or the performative, but with works that emphatically insist on their identity as paintings.

#### HARPER MONTGOMERY

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1. Irving Sandler quoting Ad Reinhardt, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists* (New York: Thames and Hudson Press, 2003), p. 70.

2. Umberto Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work," *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Claire Bishop (London and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel and the MIT Press, 2006), 20–40. First published in *Opera aperta* (Milan: Bompiani, 1962).

3. Valerie Jaudon in conversation with the author July 15, 2015, East Hampton, New York.

4. Valerie Jaudon, "An interview divided in four parts between William Pittman Andrews, Director, University of Mississippi Museum, Oxford, MS and Valerie Jaudon, artist, New York, NY," in *Valerie Jaudon: White* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Museum, 2011), np.

5. Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff, "Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture," *Heresies* no. 4 (Winter 1977–78).

6. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago