

Interview

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Valerie Jaudon

artist

abstract art

Pattern and Decoration

Phillip Barcio

An intuitive taxonomy

Valerie Jaudon has achieved an influential position within the contemporary field as an abstract painter and a professor of art. Generations of artists have been empowered by an article Jaudon co-authored in 1978 with Joyce K. The piece titled *Art hysterical notions of progress and culture*. Known today as the *manifesto* of the Pattern and Decoration movement, the piece was essentially an assemblage of quotes mobilised over the centuries to diminish and degenerate so-called decorative, ornamental and craft based art traditions largely associated with female artists. The piece called on artists to rethink “the underlying assumptions” of their education. Yet, as Jaudon points out, many of the same words and sentiments found in that article are still “unfortunately found every day in any current newspaper.”

To again quote that *manifesto*, Jaudon “does not pretend to neutrality”. In response to those biases today is the same as it was in 1978 — she pursues her ideas confidently and with authority, pushing herself towards greater virtuosity and continuously going bigger. She makes clear that she cherishes the opportunity to be part of the roll out of human culture and embraces the chance to elucidate the work she creates. “I have been most fortunate to be able to make what I want and exhibit publicly, she says. Making art for me is having a voice in the always changing construction of contemporary art history. I greatly enjoy talking about art every day, from any angle, and am interested in anything people say or ask about my work, and pay special attention to criticism, which I especially appreciate and welcome. Art criticism is a good thing.”

What are you working on at this moment?

This year I have begun working on a new group of paintings that are engaging and challenging and have opened up some surprising territory for me. What is ongoing in my painting, and has been its underpinning, is the use of simple linear forms — horizontal, vertical, diagonal and circular. This basic structural vocabulary continues in the current series. It is now used to construct individual knot-like configurations, lightly touching, related but not connected. The widths are constant and the lengths can be anything that will fill an open space. The drawing posits an overall field, connected by similar but independent forms. The wild card of multiple colours has led toward a loosened and energised pictorial arena. My painting has generally been a structured approach to working, and this is an attempt to balance logic and intuition. Now each shape, so to speak, in a painting is spatially different and forms an intuitive taxonomy, a sort of visual phonetics.

How has that “structured approach” you mentioned evolved over time?

In 1973, I wanted to find the tools and materials that I could work with over a period of time that would enable me to develop and change with each project. I began with freely painted brushstrokes that conformed to three overlapping grids drawn in pencil on the raw canvas. I thought of this as being a project similar to writing. First the alphabet, then I could begin to make words, sentences, paragraphs, on to essays, short stories and novels. The freely painted directional brushstrokes were promising, but when I drew blocks of similar widths with varying lengths and directions directly on the canvas with a ruler and compass, using the overlapping grids as a guide, that became

structural vocabulary with potential. What this preparatory step allowed greater structural clarity and seemingly limitless choices and connection told myself that anything could be represented with these limited forms, building blocks, primarily if they were a single colour. The painting could abstract and clear, yet indirect and suggestive, bringing to mind the art architecture of other cultures.

What led you to start making large scale paintings in the late 1970s?

My first one-person painting exhibition was in 1977 and as soon as the paintings were hung in the large gallery space, I could see what was possible for my future paintings. This early work was mostly in the six-foot range, related to the scale of the human body, rather than the more compressed of the typical easel painting. For the next exhibition the following year, I was working in larger sizes that operated in what I thought of as more of an architectural scale. It was where the experience of viewing became not only visual but physical as well, in the way one experiences architecture. The abstract forms in the paintings can also relate to the adjacent architectural forms and space around it. Around this time, I began to use forms that brought to mind Gothic and Romanesque arches, which made the architectural scale more explicit. The building blocks of horizontal and vertical segments resembled walls, windows and doors and the diagonal segments acted as perspectival connecting elements. The circular segments exaggerated the architectural aspect of elevations, plans and sections, recalling arches, roofs, columns, windows. Metallic pigments or gold leaf were often used in these paintings.

Those works almost resemble architectural diagrams. By the 1990s, you returned to all-over compositions?

These paintings were made with painted figures on grounds that are made with a layer of poured alkyd oil paint, and another ground poured over with liquid colour to sandwich the figures. Later the grounds have vertical horizontal pours resembling colour field plaids. The shapes, or building blocks, were off the grid and each element was now a free agent, relating to each other through the repetition of multiple similar parts. Then trips to Australia in 2003, then India in 2005 were transformational; I began reexamining what I knew about painting and abstraction to be able to take on greater complexity.

What was it about those trips that affected you?

I spent six weeks in Australia and New Zealand. A visit to the desert community of Alice Springs in the centre of the country cemented my greater interest in Australian Aboriginal art and its history. That art, I realised, was looking like a certain sector of Western abstract painting, came from an entirely different practical, spiritual and social tradition. And yet structural similarities that are not a result of direct lineage or influence can be even as influential and powerful to practicing artists as the western historical models that we typically use as touchstones. Of course, the vast and varied landscapes of both Australia and New Zealand — which were very much reflected in the art of both Australian Aboriginal and New Zealand Maori people — made me realise how dependent art is on its social as well as natural contexts.

I certainly saw this on my fourweek trip to India a few years later. We traveled with my sister-in-law, Leslie Orr, a scholar who specialises in the art, architecture and social positioning of the Hindu temples of the state of Tamil Nadu in southern India. We spent a good deal of time photographing and measuring these sites. I was very much taken with the way that sculpture integrated into architecture and ritual. We also traveled to Hyderabad where we visited the magnificent, yet neglected funerary architecture of its Muslim rulers. Visiting India deepened my understanding of how architecture, ornament

sculpture and ritual might be incorporated into a larger aesthetic vision. In 2006 I started drawing and painting with white paint on linen and quickly found a surprising way to build an entirely asymmetrical painting with his flexible modules and small geometric shaped blocks reminiscent of my earliest work. Some blocks join to form compound shapes made of a few different directions, then longer and longer connections spread through paintings, mixed with increasingly complex bands. In the 2010s it became possible for compound shapes of various directions and lengths to form a continuous line for each painting. There are parallels with language, architecture and music composition, in that their limited vocabularies all have working languages with structured variables. Then by 2020, two continuous lines, one black and one white, are building the painting on a linen ground.

What is the conceptual framework that has informed your process?

By artistic process we can assume the term relates to both the way a painting is imagined and executed and also how the art changes over time. For me it implies sets of logical boundaries that summon the painting into existence which are subject to change after a group of paintings is completed. Although I draw pretty much continuously, I never go into a specific painting thinking I do absolutely anything I want: I do not know exactly what it is going to look like, but I do know what it can and cannot do. A painting for me is not a *tabula rasa* — a blank slate, but rather a field where ideas and procedures collide and produce a complex image. I have always used certain common line forms and have given special consideration to colour and the physical shape of the paint and the support. As the paintings evolve, certain things remain the same and certain things change. This is a straightforward factual matter: the interior forces forming the paintings also generate abstract thought and concrete references outside of the painting itself. It both is something and embodies something. The mix or framework changes over time, the shepherding of this being my fundamental long-term task.

How did you and Joyce Kozloff come to author *Art hysterical notions of progress and culture*?

Joyce and I met in September 1975 at Bob Zakanitch's loft in Tribeca at an informal meeting with a dozen or so artists to discuss "pattern" in abstract painting. Every week there were artists' meetings, panels and performances of all kinds in the larger artists' community of SoHo and downtown Manhattan. Earlier in February of that year, I had been on a panel, "The Pattern in Painting," with another group of painters interested in the same topic. It was part of a weekly series of talks at "Artists talk on art" on Greene Street in SoHo. I had seen Joyce's shows in New York and was enthusiastic about her painting. I remember having a great studio visit with her after that group meeting. We agreed that the decorative in abstract painting was the real issue and that we should just say that our work was decorative. In the fall of 1976, we were painting a show at Alessandra Gallery, "Ten approaches to the decorative" shortly after that Joyce invited me to an open meeting of the newly formed feminist collective, *Heresies*, to brainstorm about ideas for a journal issue on women's traditional arts. The fact that they were organising to actually create something tangible seemed to be an exciting advance on consciousness-raising groups, which were more about discussion than actual production. At the *Heresies* open meeting there were dozens of artists and everyone was encouraged to speak. I mentioned that I had a number of noteworthy quaternions in my sketchbooks, collected over the years, that concerned the decorative. Taking notes in my sketchbooks on art-related subjects was always part of my working process and the decorative featured prominently. Everyone seemed to know what I was talking about, but wanted to know what I could do with them. I made it clear that I was not a writer but would be happy to give them to anyone who could use them in writing an article or for their research.



Almost immediately, a woman spoke up saying that she had a lot of experience with this and quickly laid out a plan. I learned that she was Barbara Novak, art historian and Chair of the Art history Department at Barnard, and the artist and writer Brian O'Doherty. She said not to worry about writing anything — you do not have to be a writer, the quotes will speak for themselves. Just collect the quotes, arrange them in a few categories with captions; if necessary, write a short explanation for each caption. This made it seem possible and Joyce spoke up and said that she was also interested in the language around the decorative and thought that we could work on it together. Joyce and I spent many hours over the summer of 1977 working on the project, asking everyone for good quotes and arranging the note cards with the quotes on her kitchen table. Joyce and I were both on the nine-member editorial board of the *Women's traditional arts and the politics of aesthetics* issue of *Heres* and we spent most of 1977 meeting every week with the group. The other editors were brilliant and meticulous, and ultimately this was the best selection you could hope for. The editors were also generous with their editing and which is most likely why *Art hysterical notions of progress and culture* is still being republished after 50 years.

What do you feel is the contemporary legacy of that writing?

Joyce and I originally wrote the piece thinking primarily about the language of art and how the social nature of art and language embeds art so thoroughly in the world. The quotes we chose, all concerning art, were several decades even a century old at the time, but the language was still being used by artists and critics. Today the art world has moved on considerably, and is no longer concerned with "purity" or "war and virility". However, the captions we used then are unfortunately found every day in any current newspaper. As for me, I feel that Barbara Novak was right. The quotes do speak for themselves.