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VALERIE JAUDON: PREPOSITIONS
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DC MOORE GALLERY
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The Knight's Tour & The Continuous Line © Raphael Rubenstein, 2020
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Valerie Jaudon

PREPOSITIONS

Essay by Raphael Rubenstein

THE KNIGHT'S TOUR & THE CONTINUOUS LINE

music, the titles of these paintings tell us, was on the artist's mind and, we can easily imagine, playing in her studio while she was at work, suffusing that space so generously supplied in natural light near the eastern end of Long Island with a presence that was as purely invisible as its painterly counterparts here in front of us are so purely visible; music on the mind of an artist who as a child learned to play the flute and piccolo for the Greenville, Mississippi, High School Band, an experience she once told an interviewer that eventually led her to jazz, Bach and Philip Glass, whose music has long been an influence on her work, Glass who rejected the tag of "minimalism" for his style in favor of the phrase "music with repetitive structures," just as we might want to set aside, at least for a moment, the term "decorative" in relation to Jaudon's paintings for something

like “painting with repetitive structures” except that this is as insufficient for Jaudon as it is for Glass, all the more so because the structures of these new paintings don’t at first seem repetitive at all for by the time our eyes have encountered one of Jaudon’s repeating patterns, as in the flipped and flopped halves of LYDIAN, too much has happened along the way, too many shapes have momentarily announced themselves, too many lines have interlocked, too many symmetries have been insinuated and broken up, too many bands have tantalizingly grazed past each another, slipped under or over, abruptly changed directions, oscillated between the rectilinear and the curvilinear, that by the time we have strayed into what should be familiar territory it isn’t that way at all, so perhaps the only thing we can do is wonder what might have been on the artist’s playlist while she was working on one of these paintings, maybe Glass’s Arabesque in Memoriam (1988), a piece for solo flute in which the Glassian pulse is artfully divided so that the flutist has a chance to breathe, or Debussy’s Syrinx (1913), widely considered the first significant composition for solo flute since C.P.E. Bach’s Sonata in A Minor some 160 years earlier, working for instance on CANTABILE, or maybe on one of CANTABILE’s many preparatory drawings through which we can trace the serpentine and forking paths by which Jaudon finally arrived at a composition that could sustain the scale and physicality and precision of a painting, drawings delineated on all manner of paper—tracing paper, stiff brown paper, soft graphite-friendly paper, graph paper from a spiral-bound 21-centimeter-square Rhodia “Reverse Book”—drawings sometimes done (like those on brown paper) in Paris, where the artist has been spending a month every year for more than a decade and where some years ago she found herself fascinated by a 1933 painting by Mirò at the Centre Pompidou, which she translated into a small sketch in which pliant pendulous shapes drift like clouds, which gave her a new sense of permission to discover similar irregular shapes waiting within the camouflage of her exacting geometry (“was I ready for real shapes?” Jaudon asked herself)—this encounter with Mirò conjures an approach to painting in which Surrealism and Pattern & Decoration could establish kinship, perhaps in the out-of-body state that can come with prolonged absorption in the contemplation of decorative patterning or maybe via the shifting filigree patterns that accompany powerful hallucinogens—or another set of drawings she made with marker on graph paper at the Bogliasco Foundation on Italy’s Ligurian coast, and while these drawings are always “working drawings” destined like countless streams and rivers to empty into the ocean-painting, the progress they make is not at all linear for sometimes Jaudon will use the medium of drawing to, as she says, “take apart” an older painting, working backwards, reverse engineering, in order to retrace her process to one of the roads not taken, and as she keeps thinking-withdrawing every tempting possibility gets pursued: put in more circles, take them out; mix together thick lines and thin lines; include “more shapes” and “few lines”; make a composition with “all shapes touching” or another where none of them do—there can never be too many drawings because all the decisions have to be made before she actually begins to paint, she wants

“no surprises” when she stands with brush in hand before one of her unprimed canvases because as she says “there have already been too many surprises” in the labyrinth of drawings she has spread around herself, but this doesn’t mean that the execution of the painting is a mechanical process or one that could be carried out by assistants: if we look closely at any of Jaudon’s paintings the history of her hand’s passage is imprinted into every square inch, countless tightly controlled but nonetheless declarative brushstrokes define her bands, no matter how thick or thin, handiwork as precise as that of a Persian miniaturist, as robust as a traditional plasterer or professional spackler, a crucial aspect of the paintings that doesn’t usually translate well into photography, especially when squeezed into the screen of a mobile phone—not unlike the work of Shirley Jaffe, a painter with whom Jaudon had a lively dialogue and whose paintings, like Jaudon’s, feature surfaces that are far more haptic than they might at first glance appear; recently Jaudon discovered, long after the fact, another affinity with a veteran of the postwar Parisian expatriate art scene when someone showed her Jack Youngerman’s *Composition White on Black* from 1953, a work she had never seen before but which uncannily anticipates her work, but unlike Youngerman and Jaffe and all those other older American artists who gravitated to Paris after the war, Jaudon has always been a New York painter, formed by and forming the painting culture of the city, engaged early on in the project of shattering the straightjacket of Minimalism, redeeming the decorative not merely as a pictorial device but as part of a deconstructive campaign against sexism, racism and ethnocentrism, connecting in the mid-1980s with a younger cohort of abstract painters for whom she instigated the influential and prescient 1991 exhibition “Conceptual Abstraction,” collaborating with architects and city planners in a string of public-art commissions, all the while ceaselessly introducing new and subtly disruptive elements into her own work, embracing a restlessness that can sometimes be overlooked because of the glacial control and diagrammatic clarity of her finished canvases where baroque complexity is always tempered by chromatic austerity, and it’s because of her constant hunger for change that unexpected events can occur, as we can see happening in one of the key components of her recent work: the continuous line, an early instance of which is *CONTINUO* (2015), a quadrant-based painting in which Jaudon has repeated and rotated a single sinuously intertwining motif to achieve what looks like an unbroken white line on a darkgray ground (an Italian musical term, *continuo* refers to the task that certain instruments—usually harpsichord or organ—were given in the Baroque era to hold compositions together through the use of a partially improvised bass line); altogether new in Jaudon’s work, the unbroken line has now assumed a starring role: we can see it in the white band that enters the field of play on the left side of *ADAGIO* in order to trace an elegantly eccentric path across the unprimed linen with sweeping curves and sharp turns that evoke scimitar and axe blades, knot-tying manuals and Arabic calligraphy, never touching the edges of the support until it makes its exit on the right side, at the exact altitude of its entry point, barely suggesting a horizon, catching

the viewer's eyes so thoroughly that we might miss the rotated symmetrical relationship of top to bottom, while in AEOLIAN, a painting in which black and white lines are draped with sensuous interpenetration across the square, muted-blue canvas, the left/right symmetry is easier to spot, but good luck trying to find your way through ARIETTA (white band on raw linen) or PORTAMENTO (thin bent-wire lines on a white ground), these nine-unit grids of mazy modular density in which the artist carefully works through variations like a mathematician devising a solution to the "Knight's Tour" chess problem in which a knight piece must visit every square on a chessboard exactly once (it was this ancient challenge first mentioned by the Kashmiri poet Rudrata in the ninth century that French novelist Georges Perec employed in *Life: A User's Manual* to determine how the narrative of his book moved through the apartment building where it was set)—as so often before, and maybe more so than ever, Jaudon is drawn to "the fascination of what's difficult" but unlike the complaining Yeats, the artist has found such challenges to be inspiring rather than desiccating, and, like Perec and his Oulipo companions, she finds that constraints lead to unforeseen artistic discoveries, things that amaze even their creator, "I couldn't believe the continuous line could do this," Jaudon confesses, marvelling at the disorienting elastic energy of paintings such as TOCCATA, another continuous-line work like CANTABILE but with a slightly thicker line, which changes everything (among the drawings in Jaudon's studio is a page of graph paper on which she has used a marker to set out examples of the eight different line widths she uses: $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch, $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch, $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch, 1-inch, $1\frac{1}{2}$ -inch, $1\frac{3}{4}$ -inch, 2-inch, and $2\frac{1}{4}$ -inch), and among the consequences of Jaudon's continuous line is that any "all-at-once" experience of the painting is rendered impossible: with her work, looking is durational and sequential; her rejection of the all-over picture is long-standing, she also very early on rejected any trace of Abstract Expressionist painterliness (she didn't want to join the "drawing-in-paint" tradition: "Picasso, de Kooning and Pollock did it really well. . . . I was interested in finding a way around that" she told René Paul Barilleaux in 1996 and even very recently felt compelled to point out to a visitor that "it's not Ab Ex because of the repetition"), but the idea that Jaudon has no relationship to Abstract Expressionism may need to be rethought in light of her recent work where flow can be stronger than modularity, where the hierarchical and architectonic structures of her earlier work have given way to pictures that live in the vicinity of the "great, sweeping continuous lines" that Manny Farber found in Pollock's 1945 show at *Art of This Century*; hearing Jaudon confess "I couldn't believe the continuous line could do this" one wants to ask why continuity is so able to astound us, and wonder what its relation is to the fragmentation that was so central to the modernist mainstream, from Eliot's "fragments shored up against my ruin" to the junkshop poetics of Rauschenberg's Combines, against which is a vibrant counter-tradition that runs from the nonstop circularity of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* to Piero Manzoni's *Lines* to one-shot films like Alexander Sukurov's *Russian Ark* (2002) and Sam Mendes's recent First World War epic *1917* and, of course, to Jaudon's equally mesmerizing new paintings, but, nota bene,

her continuous line is no emblem of absolute freedom, of sheer improvisation—we must never forget the constructed nature of Jaudon’s paintings, their exultation in their own sublime rules, their fidelity to a preordained sequence of marvellous inventions as inexorable and exacting as a score in music

all quotes attributed to Valerie Jaudon, unless otherwise noted, are from studio conversations with the author in early February 2020

Raphael Rubinstein is a New York-based poet and art critic whose numerous books include *Polychrome Profusion: Selected Art Criticism 1990–2002* (Hard Press Editions). He was a senior editor at *Art in America* from 1997 to 2007, where he continues to be a contributing editor, and he is currently professor of critical studies at the University of Houston School of Art

Valerie Jaudon

DC Moore Gallery
April 2 – May 2, 2020

Valerie Jaudon’s recent paintings continue her longstanding examination, begun in the mid-1970s, of the bounded, yet infinitely expandable world of the finely wrought, intricate, and mazelike abstract image. This exhibition is titled *Prepositions*, and refers—obliquely of course—to a word or words governing, and usually preceding, a noun or pronoun and expressing a relation to another word or element in the clause. These paintings function as abstract connectors, as visual demonstrations of organizing, placing, locating, and explaining. Prepositions are most often simple words—“inside,” “outside,” “next to,” “before,” “after”—but they allow for complexity, accuracy, and comprehensibility. Jaudon’s paintings are similarly complex, exact, and knowable. They combine clarity, flatness, precision, and ready apprehension with a slowed down, demanding part-to-part, part-to-whole read. It is an arena where sensual, carefully worked and refractive surfaces push up against the steady rhythm of structured lines—forms laid out in arrays that seem to be on one hand perfectly logical and legible, useful and practical (in a metaphorical way), and on the other, tantalizingly elusive and austere romantic. Most of her titles come from the world of music, and the musical underpinnings of her work show themselves in multifaceted contrapuntal organizations combined with visually melodic passages nearly undone by carefully implanted dissonance, and by the persistence of organizing themes and articulated movements. A simplified palette, evocative of the classical world—white, black, the rich umber of exposed linen, the occasional blued steel gray—gives the work a certain deliberate (and deliberative) cadence and calm. It turns the eye to the painting as a whole, away from the artist’s evident virtuosity and steady hand, her involvement in every part of the carefully crafted object.

This work has been long in the making and Prepositions is the latest phase of a career that has approached painting with the gravity and seriousness it deserves, paintings to think about, but also with a sense of playfulness, pleasure.

Valerie Jaudon is the recipient of numerous awards and grants. Her work is in the collections of many museums including, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; The National Gallery, Washington, DC; The Art Institute of Chicago, IL; The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX; St. Louis Art Museum, MO; The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY; Städel Museum, Frankfurt, Germany; The Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaeck, Denmark; Suermondt-Ludwig Museum, Aachen, Germany.

Recent museum exhibitions featuring Jaudon's work include With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972–1985, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA (2019–20); Less is a Bore: Maximalist Art & Design, Institute for Contemporary Art, Boston, MA (2019); Les Chemins du Sud, MRAC, Sérignan, France (2019); Pattern and Decoration: Ornament as Promise, Ludwig Forum, Aachen, Germany, traveled to mumok Vienna and Ludwig Museum, Budapest, Hungary (2018–19); Pattern, Decoration & Crime, MAMCO, Geneva, Switzerland, traveled to Le Consortium, Dijon, France (2018–19).

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