

IN HER OWN WORDS



LEE STALS WORTH

Valerie Jaudon, *Avalon*, 1976, oil and metallic paint on canvas, 72 × 108 in., Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay

Avalon

by Valerie Jaudon

Curator's note: Valerie Jaudon's abstractions are characterized by complex patterns of mostly linear shapes. Like visual puzzles, they invite the viewer to decipher the grammatical structure embedded in each work. While Jaudon (b. 1945) is best known as a painter, she has also executed numerous public art projects, including murals and landscape designs of public gardens. As with all her works created before 1985, the title *Avalon* refers to a town in Mississippi, the artist's home state.

I painted *Avalon* in the summer of 1976. At six by nine feet, it was a large painting for me, and an important one. It surprised me when I finished it because it clarified many of the issues I was working on at the time. Perhaps most interesting to describe is the methodology, since it is so bound up with the evolution of my work. Although I have continued explorations, many of the approaches I developed at the time I painted *Avalon* still underlie and inform my work to this day.

First of all, the paint: the color is a deep silver, and I ground it myself from aluminum pigment, ivory black oil paint, and cold-pressed linseed oil. I laid down the brushstrokes with a one-inch sable brush in an impastoed crosshatched manner. I wanted the shiny pigment sitting up on the surface, catching and reflecting the light that fell across the canvas, keeping the eye moving over the painting. The canvas was primed with clear acrylic so that the canvas color would show. In this way, the ground would become an integral part of the painting.

In my earliest work, I had used over 200 colors in one painting. In the group of paintings done at the time of *Avalon*, I limited the colors in each painting to a monochrome palette—white, black, gray, or a metallic scheme of gold, copper, silver, or metallic reds.

This simplification seemed to fit well with the complexity of the drawing. The drawing—then, as now, key to my work—superimposed horizontal, vertical, diagonal, and circular grids. I found my forms in these overlays.

In the *Avalon* group of paintings, my aim was to generate an open-ended system—a visual vocabulary that could recombine itself

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flexibly and communicate in a straightforward manner. For *Avalon*, I constructed an asymmetrical module that was 18 by 18 inches with one-and-a-half-inch-wide building-block-like elements. Starting in the center of the canvas, and using a soft pencil and tracing paper, I transferred the original drawing to the canvas, reversing and mirroring the module 24 times. I painted each shape close to the edge of the pencil line leaving a thin seemingly incised web of raw canvas and exposed drawing. This mirroring of square asymmetrical modules actually set up an all-over structure that is symmetrical, logical, yet surprisingly ornamental and evocative. With *Avalon* I could see a good deal of potential, and indeed, this painting's method, beginning with elements generated from superimposed multiple grids, extended and developed through repetition, mirroring, and symmetry, has proven to be a fruitful working process for paintings as well as larger architectural projects since 1976.

The ornamental and decorative quality of this work carried with it sets of references. While *Avalon* and many of my other paintings recall the art of other cultures, particularly Celtic and Islamic art, these were not specific sources or models for me, despite the great admiration I have for both. I was primarily involved, as so many others in my generation

were, in pondering the challenges set out for painting by minimalism, post-minimalism, and conceptual art.

I wanted to take advantage of the traditional language of abstraction, but I felt that it was necessary to confront the strictures put upon it. The decorative and the feminine were seen as signs of a lack of seriousness,

and I felt strongly that this was a mistake. Why did I have to cede logic to masculinity? Why couldn't I claim both objectivity and femininity for myself? Logic and objectivity are without gender, but not so expression and reference. Since to merge these is essentially a philosophical problem, the proof would have to be in the painting.

For me, *Avalon* and the paintings of that period staked out two seemingly contradictory positions—those of non-referential abstraction and referential ornament. By combining them I hoped to expand the field and work towards what I saw as a new future for painting.