

S P A C I A L G E O M E T R Y ART IN ARCHITECTURE

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An important intellectual and visual shift has been made in the lobby of the INA Building at 17th and Arch Sts. in Philadelphia. The space, originally conceived as a finely detailed, glowing box by Mitchell/Giurgola and Associates, has been irrevocably altered by the addition of a ninety-foot, blue and white, geometric pattern painted on the ceiling by a young New York artist, Valerie Jaudon. A mural painting is not a radical idea, although the casual passer-by may wonder if this is a mural at all since it does not illustrate local history or glorify civic virtue. Aside from its subject matter, which is architectural ornament, what is radical about the mural is the commission itself. During the past decade, as painting and sculpture have become more and more reductive; so has architecture become purer and purer and extraneous decoration has become an anathema. It would seem, therefore, that the Jaudon mural which adorns the Mitchell/Giurgola lobby challenges certain assumptions about painting and architecture.

For the past couple of years Jaudon has allied herself with a group of artists who proudly refer

to themselves as decorative painters. Ten of them exhibited together for the first time last fall in the show, "10 Approaches to the Decorative," at the Alessandra Gallery in New York. The artists included Jane Kaufman, Joyce Kozloff, Tony Robbin, Miriam Schapiro, Arlene Slavin, George Sugarman, John Torreano, Robert Zakanych, Barbara Zucker,

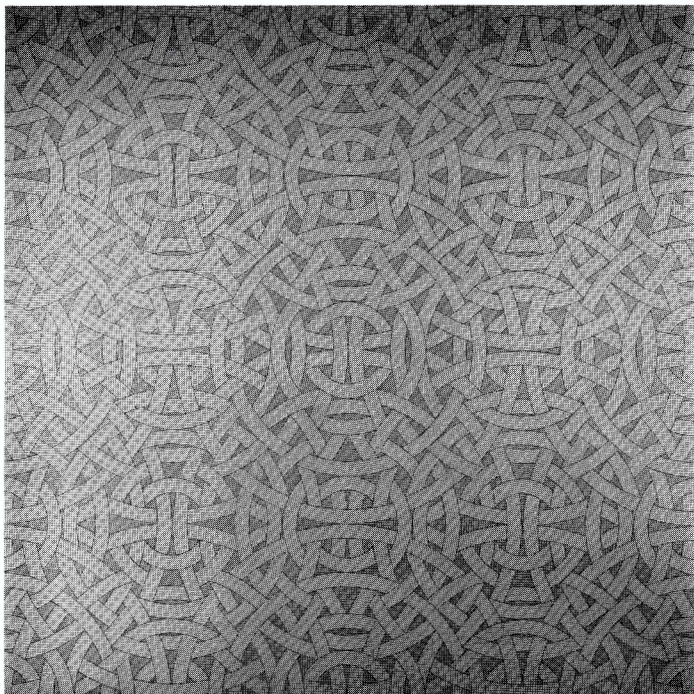
tings has attracted considerable critical attention; several more "decorative shows" are planned for this fall, and there was recently an exhibition of Jaudon's paintings at Peale House. However, these artists remain iconoclasts, for they use such words as "sensuous," "opulent," "personal," and "colorful" to describe their paintings, words that are alien to

the vocabulary of formalist criticism. Their work revives old arguments about paintings, which many of these artists are in the process of re-examining both pictorially and intellectually.

These decorative painters challenge present-day modernism which claims for its roots the work of Manet, Cezanne, and cubism. The problem with this evolutionary concept of painting is that there were other artists, some of

them major figures like Gauguin, Matisse, and Kandinsky, whose work has never fitted comfortably into the mainstream of modern art. What the new decorative painters want to do is to reclaim the tradition of these other artists whose work has been shunted to history's sidelines by being labeled, "mere decoration."

This prejudice against the word



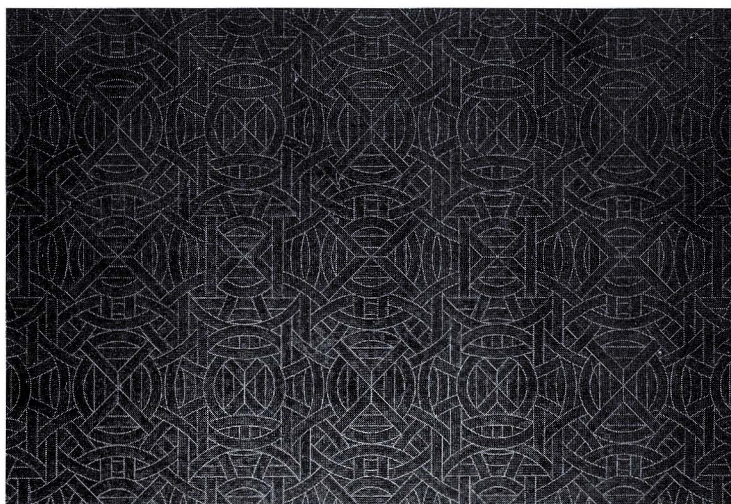
Valerie Jaudon, *Wenasoga*, 1975, oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches.

and Jaudon. Color and pattern characterize their work, which often contains specific references to decoration, such as hints of Islamic carpets in Kozloff's work, a dainty handkerchief in Schapiro's, the bugle beads in Kaufman's, the rhinestones in Torreano's, and the references to wallpaper in Zakanych's paintings. The newness of these pain-

decorative has prompted these younger painters to re-examine its meaning. Does it imply the minor arts, the decorative arts, traditional art, or wallpaper? Is it what art is all about, or is it mindless repetition of geometric pattern? What further haunts the decorative painters is Matisse's definition of art: "What I dream of is an art of balance, purity, and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which might be for every mental worker, be he businessman or writer, like an appeasing influence, like a mental soother, something like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fa-

only one color on raw canvas. She paints, in oil, flat, non-illusionistic, interwoven patterns reminiscent of Islamic decoration or Turkish carpet. Traditionally, this kind of decorative patterning evolved from a system, be it a conscious numerical one based on the Vedic square, or a natural one which emerged in response to the structural demands of the materials. Jaudon is aware of these ancient traditions and has evolved a system of patterning which is as old as architecture and as new as the most advanced theories of painting. In retrospect, her decision to paint a mural can be seen as the natural extension

INA Building's interior by allying the geometry of her patterned ceiling with the complex asymmetrical space of the lobby. This she has accomplished by intertwining and reproducing her pattern unit four times across the ceiling's surface. She has also selected a shade of blue that fairly competes with the florescent blue of the balcony walls. Just as, in ancient times, ceilings were often painted blue, either as a symbol of the sky or the dome of heaven, so Jaudon has chosen, with little self-consciousness, to do the same. Jaudon's mural works in this space because it is not an intrusion. It is a decoration which



Valerie Jaudon,
Avalon, oil on canvas,
72 x 108 inches.

tigue." The problems this statement presents for the contemporary artist are obvious, since it implies an art for the bourgeoisie, an art without program or manifesto, an art which is to appeal primarily to the senses. Thus, individually and collectively, the decorative painters are seeking to redeem paintings as a beautiful, opulent, decorative art, and to make it valid for the post-industrial age.

Jaudon, like other decorative painters, places equal emphasis on color and pattern. Unlike most of her colleagues, she works in

of her interest in relating the internal geometry of her interlaced pattern to an external, spacial geometry which reinforces and enhances her painting as pure decoration.

Over the centuries, many aesthetic theories have emerged around mural painting, ranging from those that promote the balanced integration of painting and architecture, as in the Byzantine tradition, to those theories of the High Baroque which advocate the dematerialization of the architectural structure. Jaudon, in 1977, has chosen to enhance the

gives this off-center entranceway an ordering, while complementing the structure and the color of its interior. Above all, it is a soothing ornament. It does not make such grandiose claims as Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling, but then, a Philadelphia insurance company's office building is not the chapel of the Pope. Yet to juxtapose these two traditions, the High Renaissance and our own, may prompt us to rethink our aesthetic requirements and to demand more from our artists than pure form and unadorned surfaces.