

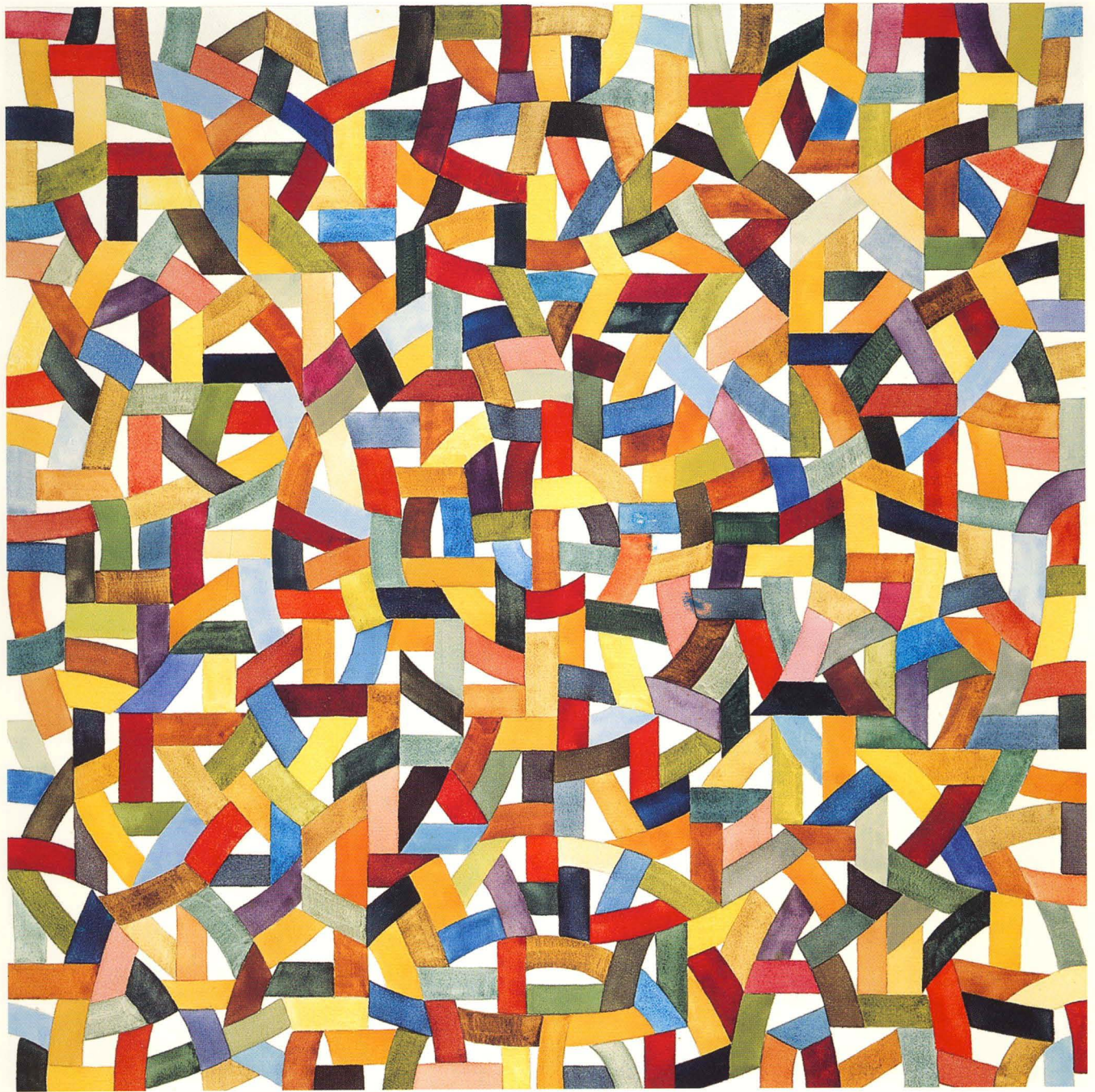
# **Abstraction at Work: Drawings by Valerie Jaudon, 1973-1999**

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## On Some Drawings by Valerie Jaudon

by Paul Mattick

### A Short History of Drawing

This is the first public exhibition of drawings by painter Valerie Jaudon. In concentrating on painting she has followed Giorgio Vasari's dictum that, though "good in themselves," drawings are better translated "into works which have a longer life." Physically more fragile (though of some paintings Vasari could see, only the drawings remain), typically smaller in scale and less complex in their material surface, drawings are more personal and thus, metaphorically, more feminine than paintings, the artistic territory whose Western definition as masculine is only recently being challenged by women artists like Jaudon. Vasari himself, however, was a fanatic collector of drawings. And from his collection to today's market for "works on paper," drawings have been highly valued precisely for the particularly intimate access they seem to offer to the artist's act of production. Much as for autograph collectors the anonymity of language is overwhelmed by the intimacy of contact a signature preserves, so even the most impersonal drawing offers the alert viewer the trace of a self in action.

For the premodern artist, the special value of what Vasari called *disegno*, with its double meaning of "drawing" and "design," lay in its clear statement of the essentials of a subject, of which it gave the form or idea in the classical sense of those words. As such it pointed to the object, not the artist, even while its status as preliminary gave it a private, as opposed to public, character. The modern drawing, in contrast, tends first of all to evoke the artist in its character as handmade mark. This is a correlate of the change in the social character of art that has seen painting itself take on characteristics, and often enough the form, of drawing, as a direct expression of the artist's emotion or point of view. (It is only natural that the line between them should erode, with watercolor, gouache, oil paint and other mediums counting as drawings when on paper and purely linear images counting as paintings when on canvas.)

In the late work of Piet Mondrian, for instance, pencil sketches, sometimes made on something as small as a matchbox, give only the roughest indications of the planned configuration of an image; but paint is used to draw in producing the final work, in which line is as fundamental an element as planes of color. Jackson Pollock, to cite a very different artist in whose painting Mondrian expressed an interest, came to employ line as his primary pictorial material.

Like these two artists, Jaudon is an heir to cubism, using paint systematically to construct a picture. Her work is closer to Mondrian's than to Pollock's in its formal orientation toward geometry and the creation of visual complexity out of a small number of simple elements. Like Pollock, on the other hand, Jaudon has realized her artistic ambition in the making of very large paintings. In this regard she has gone farther than her American predecessor could toward actualizing Mondrian's wish for the integration of art into life. Besides wall-size images painted for specific places, she has been hired to create such real-world structures as a garden, a public plaza and subway station fencing. Decoration, a function art naturally takes on when set to work within an architectural space, has, given the built nature of such spaces, a natural affinity for linear design. In such projects Jaudon's painterly interests have found a more than painterly purpose, one in which line—the traditional essence of drawing—has a central place.

### **An Artist's Workshop**

The drawings Jaudon has made over twenty-five years offer a look inside her working process and the evolving pattern of her oeuvre. What no museum exhibition can show is the mass of drawing, the thousands of sketches and carefully worked out designs that record this evolution. But even the selection on view on this occasion provides a record of continual experimentation. There are drawings from the early seventies, for instance, in which groups of pencil marks figure brushstrokes in various directions determined by a variety of superimposed grid systems [1, 2].\* Used in studies for a series of paintings, these sketched brush marks, restated in colored pencil and watercolor, coalesce into a vocabulary of straight and curved blocks of color. These units are combined to produce images at once centered (thanks to the presence of fragmentary concentric circles) and filling the picture from edge to edge, the blocks spreading out like chunky linear ripples in a pool of multihued geometry [3-8]. The foot-square studies have a bright, jumpy quality absent from the paintings, thirty-six times larger; their preparatory function over, they live on as intense concentrations of life and light.

While the 1973 paintings employed a palette of 250 colors, the following year brought a radical reduction of means: the use of one color (black or various metallic pigments) set against bare canvas, and the simplification of the interacting grid patterns, which, letting air and light into the earlier dense constructions, transformed their elemental blocks into continuous ribbons interlaced in patterns reminiscent of Moorish tiling or decorative brickwork [9]. The lovely watercolor and pencil study for

*Grand Gulf* [10]—in which the strong centering of the image produced by the design's fourfold symmetry is countered with edge-to-edge delicacy and steadiness of execution—suggests the density of effect Jaudon achieved in her paintings, where the visible touch of the brush, mark of the artist's physical presence, together with the richness of black or metallic pigments, matches the patterned impersonality of the design.

A small-format version of these paintings' richness is to be seen in the 1979 untitled drawing in gold ink [12], which glows like a medieval miniature, suspended in artistic space midway between cabalistic diagram, decorative scheme and space-alien hieroglyph. Its suggestion of spatial relationships attests to a long-term interest in three-dimensionality, both represented and real. Images from the early 1980s, however clearly originating in Jaudon's interlaced bands, suggest Romanesque and Gothic arches along with Islamic architecture [15-19]; in others, windows and doors provide entry to interior spaces into which diagonals lead the eye [22, 23]. The loosening of the weave in the 1979 drawing, by allowing for a localized clustering of line fragments, also prefigures the pictorial dramas, figurative in flavor despite their rigorous commitment to abstraction, of ten years later [27, 28]. But the complexity of this luxurious image is social as well as optical. Its simultaneous reference to such different areas of artistic practice as decoration, weaving and minimalist painting unites associations to different areas of experience (the useful and the purely aesthetic), which correspond to distinct social statuses (menial and refined) and genders (female craft work and masculine high art).

### **Syntax and Semantics**

Jaudon's architecturally inspired drawings make especially clear her career-long engagement with the relation between bodily experience and the materials and activity of picture-making. Perspective studies [13, 14] explore conventions of representation, seeking new uses for old signs, while experiments in modeling represent a path looked into but finally not taken [20-26]; the attractions of illusion evidently proved weaker than a commitment to the material reality of the constructed picture, in which spatiality is flattened into pattern [24]. In the 1987 study for *Event* [28], a brilliant red ground drawn with a marker pen supports a space through which a schematic airborne figure soars. At the same time, this bird's or person's movement is checked by the white square, oval and diagonals that catalogue the image's linear materials. The eye experiences three dimensions even while the absence of perspective draws attention to the fact that this vivid sensation is produced by signs on paper.

In other pieces from the same year [29-31], the representation of space is disrupted by the grids marking out the picture plane. In Jaudon's most recent work [44-47], tightly outlined black shapes, at once like decorative designs and suggestive of standing figures, float metaphorically on a literal, loosely constructed surface of poured paint like an insistent but unreadable message. The formal contrast between linear and painterly elements suggests the juncture of a mysterious symbology that invites response with a space closed by a tangible curtain of lines. One can look into it but not enter it. But isn't this a truth about pictures, which at the same time are always in a real space that one *has* entered?

A series of studies from 1990-1991 [32-37] shows the artist systematically exploring the variety of things that can be said with different combinations of items from a small set of shapes, colors and positions relative to each other in the picture space. The study for *Conversion* [32], for instance, tells a story as it moves a family of shapes across a double-square grid by increasing the complexity of interaction among shape, color and size. *Azimuth* [33], like an old altarpiece, has a large central image flanked by two "standing figures." In *Eastern Standard* [34] shapes hang like constellations from points on its grid over a combination of sea and terra firma constructed from short curves and bars. Two untitled watercolors from 1990 [35, 36] try out different arrangements of horizontal shapes against dot- or line-defined planes, and a page of "field notes" from the following year [37] sets the same vocabulary against the grid reconfigured as a checkerboard to explore the differentiation of elements—color, shape of support, density of design. A 1991-1992 group of paintings represented here by two untitled studies [38, 39] represents one use of this vocabulary; the checkerboards in these drawings are replaced with horizontal stripes in 1992 [40, 41] and monochrome planes in the following year [42, 43], when the linear shapes that curve and jab their way across the earlier images turn to stand upright as stocky, powerful figures in the deep red and blue light of their graphite grounds.

The manipulation of a set of elements to produce a variety of meanings isn't exactly syntax and semantics, but comparison with language can remind us of the high level of abstraction, of distance from the unspeakable complexity of reality, long associated with drawing. Though as materially embodied as painting, music or gesture, language is the most abstract of human signifying systems, in that the signs it employs bear a purely conventional relation to their referents, and also the one most capable of conveying abstract ideas. Today language is part of "the universe of drawing that has entered our everyday life in the form of comics, animated cartoons, cartoon sketches, advertising, metropolitan graffiti, video graphics and

on computers.”<sup>1</sup> In this universe the handmade pictorial mark can suggest a language at once private and open to others, with meanings not arbitrary but underdetermined by context and convention. Valerie Jaudon’s pictures explore the potential of such signs to suggest thought about everything from sensory pleasure to structures of social inequality. Carrying individually constructed meanings into public spaces, they embody a dialectic of private and public, of modest means and high ambitions, for which drawing seems in our time a particularly apt expression.

<sup>1</sup> Fondazione Antonio Mazzotta, *Il disegno del nostro secolo* (Milan: Ed. Gabriele Mazzotta, 1994), p. 9.

\*Numbers in brackets refer to works listed on the exhibition checklist, pages 37-39.