VALERIE JAUDON

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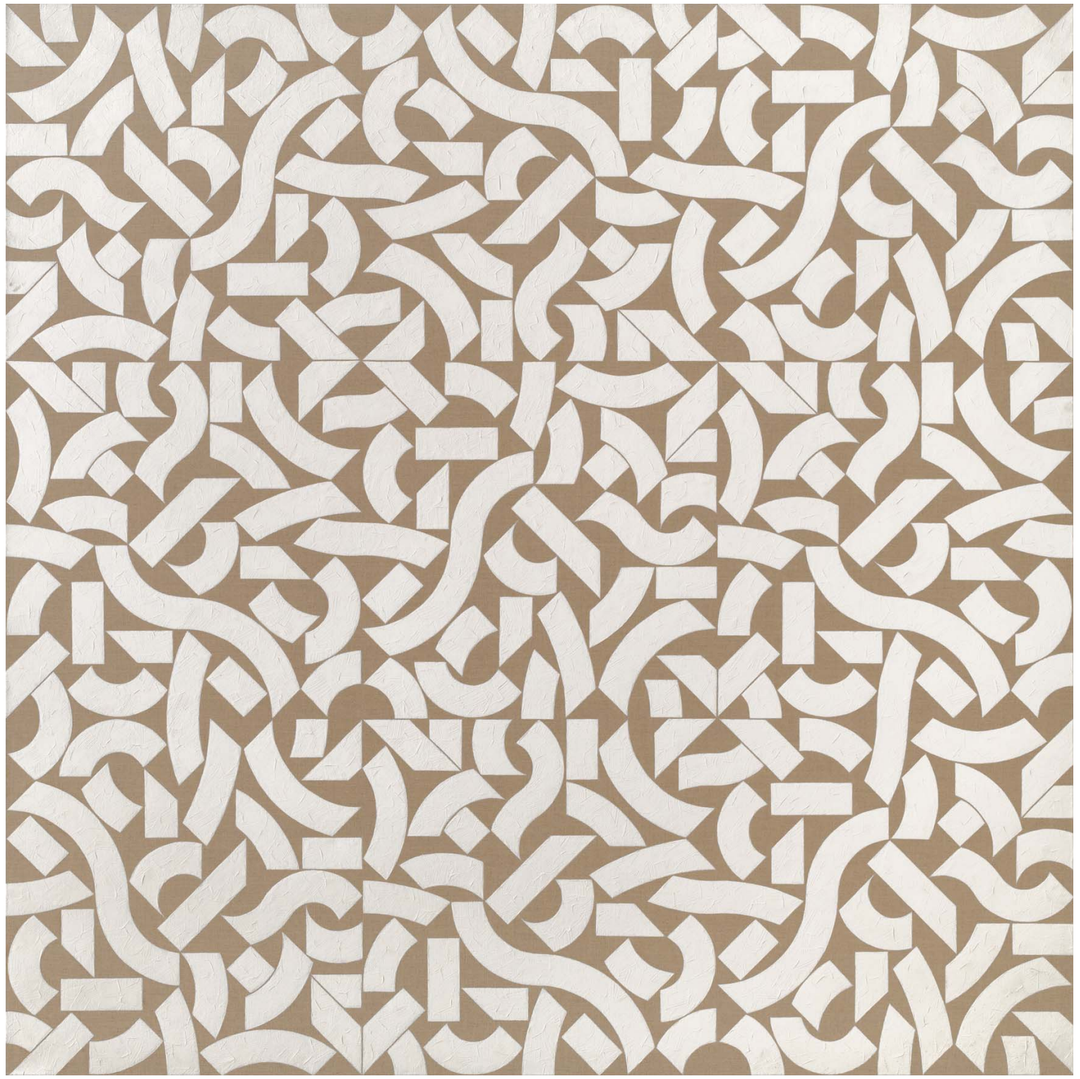
Parameters

Essay by Pepe Karmel

DC MOORE GALLERY

PROLOGUE 2006. Oil on linen, 72 x 72 inches



VALERIE JAUDON
Symmetry and Its Discontents

PEPE KARMEL

What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them.

– T.S. ELIOT, "TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT," 1919

PAINTED WITH SCULPTURAL STROKES of white and black oil paint on textured brown linen, Valerie Jaudon's recent paintings are at the same time boldly assertive and disarmingly understated. The preoccupation with symmetry that has been a hallmark of her work for half a century co-exists with a nomadic line seemingly indifferent to borders. Quietly radical, the new paintings demand a rethinking of both Jaudon's own art and the longer history of abstraction.

Duetto, 2023 (detail). Oil on linen, 66 x 84 inches

THE INTERLACING CURVES AND LATTICES of Jaudon's early canvases seem at first glance to respond to Frank Stella's well-known "Protractor Series" of the late 1960s. As Anna C. Chave writes in her authoritative account of Jaudon's early work, "she began, as he had, with sized, unprimed canvas, covered with hand rendered (not squeegeed or taped) monochrome stripes of even width, demarcated by thin canals of reserved, unpainted canvas, and organized in a symmetrical manner."[1]

In fact, Jaudon was part of a generation of artists exploring how simple, iterative procedures (what we would today call algorithms) could be used to generate complex images. In 1972, for instance, Sol LeWitt published a book, *Arcs circles & grids*, illustrating all possible combinations of these forms.[2] Diagram #59, showing "circles and arcs from four sides" (FIG. 1) seems to anticipate a 1974 drawing by Jaudon (FIG. 2) consisting of radiating circles accompanied by arcs entering from all four sides of a square, plus a lattice of diagonal lines not found in LeWitt.[3] A simplified version of this geometric construction underlies *Yazoo City* (FIG. 3), where the palimpsest of pencil lines has been translated into a bold arrangement of interwoven black bands.

At the time, however, Jaudon's work was perceived neither in the lineage of high modernism nor in the context of Postminimalism but as part of the iconoclastic "Pattern and Decoration" movement associated with feminist art and criticism. As Chave notes, Jaudon's compositions seemed to invite "comparison with such humble, yet often technically and visually complex crafts as basketry, weaving and wallpaper or fabric design."[4] Having moved from Mississippi to New York, Jaudon became an active participant in the group that published the feminist journal *Heresies*. In a 1978 issue devoted to "Women's Traditional Art: The Politics of Aesthetics," she and Joyce Kozloff assembled a brilliant compilation of quotations exposing how sexist, racist, and colonialist assumptions were profoundly imbedded in modernist aesthetics.[5]

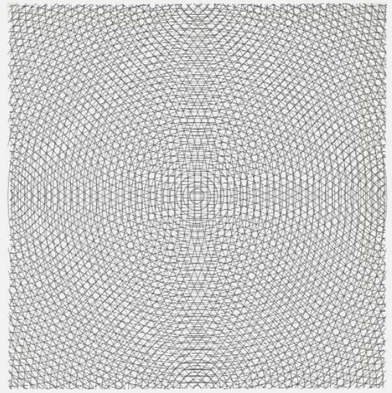


FIG. 1: Sol LeWitt. *Circles and Arcs from Four Sides*, from *Arcs, Circles, & Grids*, 1972. Silkscreen on paper, 27 ½ x 27 ½ inches.

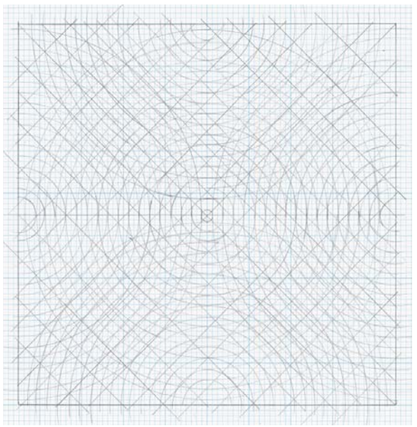


FIG. 2: Valerie Jaudon. *Drawing for Direction of Brush Strokes*, 1974. Pencil on graph paper, 9 x 9 inches

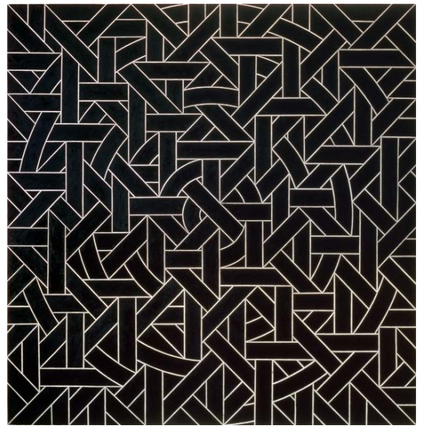


FIG. 3: Valerie Jaudon. *Yazoo City*, 1975. Oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches. Private collection

FIG. 4: Valerie Jaudon. *Big Springs*, 1980. Oil on canvas with gold leaf, 96 x 48 inches

In the late 1970s, Jaudon's work assumed a new, architectural character. In paintings like *Big Springs* (FIG. 4), the tightly woven bands of *Yazoo City* gave way to independent strips silhouetted against a contrasting ground, curving upward like the ribs of Gothic arches. In 1983, when her work appeared in a survey of "New Masters" at the Amerika Haus in Berlin, the critic, curator and historian Sam Hunter noted that Jaudon was associated with "a recent current of decoration in art" but added that she had "clearly transcended the interests and methods of the movement." Comparing her interlacing compositions to "the large-scale expressive gestures and archetypal motifs of Abstract Expressionism," Hunter concluded that she made "something formally rigorous and mysterious of a labyrinthine motif."[6]

Soon after, Jaudon's work underwent another transformation. In works like the 1986 canvas *Sound* (FIG. 5), the circles, squares and lines in the foreground resembled a cosmic diagram, floating in front of a monochrome grid. The asymmetrical arrangement of the circles and squares stood out against the regularity of the backdrop.

Meanwhile, the American art world was changing rapidly. The Minimal and Postminimal movements from which Jaudon had emerged now seemed like the final acts in the narrative arc of modern art. The figurative, Neo-Expressionist painters tried to set the clock back to the beginning of the twentieth century, while a rival band of Postmodernists used text, photography, and montage to nail shut the coffin of Modernism. Building on the achievements of the Pattern and Decoration artists (without fully acknowledging their influence), the Neo-Geo painters infused abstraction with a Postmodern sense of stylish despair.

While these clashing movements monopolized critical attention, it seemed to Jaudon that abstract art—including but not limited to Neo-Geo—was in fact experiencing an important revival. By then, she was showing at the Sidney Janis Gallery, which had exhibited classic abstractionists from Piet Mondrian to Mark Rothko before pivoting to an emphasis on Pop artists like George Segal and Tom

VERBATIM 2007. Oil on linen, 72 x 72 inches

Wesselmann. Together with the gallery's director, Carroll Janis, Jaudon assembled a survey of twenty young abstract painters, which opened in November 1991 under the title *Conceptual Abstraction*. News of the impending show at Janis inspired a half-dozen other galleries to organize additional exhibitions of new abstract art.

What unified the diverse young painters in these exhibitions was a rejection of the critical clichés associated with high modernist abstraction. They didn't believe that abstract painting was an exploration of purely formal issues or, conversely, a vehicle for indirect self-expression. Rather, as Jaudon wrote in the catalogue of *Conceptual Abstraction*:

> To have an exclusively visual experience in the presence of an abstract painting is now understood to be an impossibility…Abstract painting has much in common with abstract thinking, and abstract thinking is…part of the way we understand and interact with the world.[7]

The sense of abstraction as an allegory of thought is also visible in the new series of paintings that Jaudon began the following year. Setting aside the large circles and squares of pictures like *Sound*, she returned to the intersecting curves of the 1980s, breaking them into segments and pairing them to create self-contained shapes in which the vertices were as prominent as the sides, so that they seemed like fragments of elegant calligraphy.

At first, Jaudon arranged these calligraphic fragments in columns, floating in front of multicolored checkerboards. Then, in pictures like *Another Language* (FIG. 6), she supplemented the fragments with elongated vertical curves. Arranged symmetrically across the canvas, the long and short curves unfurled in tandem: one slowly, the other rapidly, like the multiple rhythms of a *concerto grosso* by Handel. The checkerboards in the background were replaced by shimmering vertical streaks, introducing an "optical" element new in Jaudon's work. She continued to experiment with this style, introducing audacious color combinations, until 2006, when she once again dramatically transformed her approach.

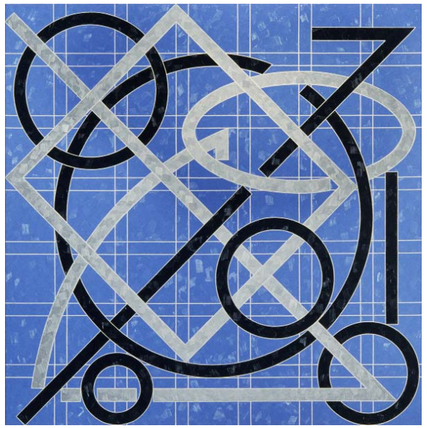


FIG. 5: Valerie Jaudon. *Sound*, 1986. Oil on canvas, 94 x 94 inches

FIG. 6: Valerie Jaudon. *Another Language*, 1996. Oil and alkyd on canvas, 84 x 76 inches. Private Collection

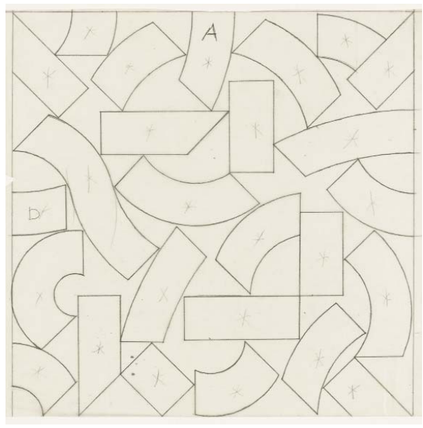


FIG. 7: Valerie Jaudon. *Study for Alphabet*, 2006. Pencil on tracing paper, 14 x 15 inches

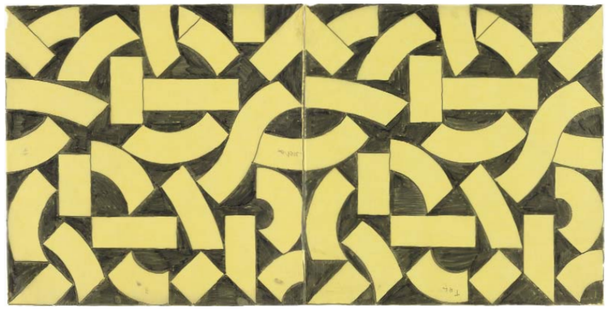


FIG. 8: Valerie Jaudon. *Study for Alphabet*, 2006. Ink on yellow tracing paper, 14 x 28 inches

Jaudon's new compositions, such as *Alphabet* [P. 13], included in the present exhibition, were constructed from a short, broad bands of white paint—some curved, some straight—on bare brown linen. The technique of the new work was strikingly austere. The compositions felt homogenous but not repetitive; the individual shapes seemed to be in vigorous motion, but their overall effect was curiously tranquil. At a microscopic level, the freedom and dynamism of Jaudon's brushwork strained against the geometric clarity of her individual shapes.

The studies for *Alphabet* clarify the process by which she arrived at this powerful, paradoxical result. An initial drawing on tracing paper (FIG. 7), resembles a deconstructed version of *Yazoo City* (FIG. 3). The curved and straight bands might have been taken from a similar composition of concentric circles interwoven with a grid and a lattice. However, they have been shuffled into new locations. Groups of curving segments suggest one circle at top center; a second, incomplete circle at lower right; and a smaller fragment of a circle at lower left. Diagonals enter the frame from three corners but not the fourth.

Jaudon expanded this idea in a two-part drawing of yellow bands against a black ground (FIG. 8). Here, each panel is based on the previous drawing, flipped left-right. The short band exiting the first panel at center right continues into a curved band on the left edge of the second panel. The diagonal that ascends into the upper-right corner of the first panel rebounds in a band descending from the top-left corner of the second panel. The complexity of the underlying composition means that the repetition of the composition is not immediately apparent, but its recurrence creates a subliminal sense of harmony between the two halves of the doubled drawing.

Details from *Alphabet*, 2006. From top: Top row, left square; middle row, left square; bottom row, left square

The finished canvas of *Alphabet* (OPPOSITE) is divided into a three-by-three grid, with each square containing a variant or a repetition of the initial drawing.

TOP ROW. Left square: rotated 180°. Center square: rotated 90° clockwise. Right square: matches the top left;

CENTER ROW. Left square: flipped top to bottom. Center square: rotated 90° clockwise and flipped left to right. Right square: again matches the top left (and therefore the square immediately above it);

BOTTOM ROW. Left square: rotated 90° counterclockwise. Center square: rotated 90° clockwise (as at top center). Right square: rotated 90° counterclockwise and flipped left-right.

These permutations also generate a certain number of links between adjacent squares (AS IN FIG. 8). In the top row, a band seems to continue from the center square into the right. In the center row, the left and center squares are linked by a similar band. (This is in fact a mirror-image of the link in the first row.) There are no horizontal links in the bottom row, but continuous curves provide vertical links connecting the bottom left and bottom right squares to the squares above them.

The practices evident in *Alphabet*—the construction of a composition from a series of modular units, the differentiation of identical units by rotation and inversion, and the creation of points of linkage between adjacent squares—become fundamental in Jaudon's subsequent work. Before examining the further evolution of Jaudon's painting, however, it will be useful to consider the tension between symmetry and asymmetry that is already evident in *Alphabet*, and that is central to her recent work's expressive power.

ALPHABET 2006. Oil on linen, 42 x 42 inches

WITHIN THE WESTERN TRADITION, symmetry is associated with decoration rather than "art." However, this generalization breaks down if you go back far enough in time. The figures in Sumerian, Babylonian and Egyptian reliefs and wall paintings are generally arranged in symmetrical patterns. The superbly naturalistic portrait sculptures of ancient Egypt still obey the "law of frontality" discerned in 1892 by Danish scholar Julius Lange, who noted that, in such sculptures, a straight line can be dropped from the top of the head to the base of the torso, and that the parts of the body are distributed symmetrically around it.[8]

Classical Greek sculpture unmistakably derives from Egyptian models, but it changes definitively in the 5th century B.C. when Greek artists introduce *contrapposto*. Henceforth, the classical body rotates at the hips, so that its elements are no longer arranged symmetrically around a central axis. *Contrapposto* is not merely a formal device: it corresponds to a fundamental fact of bodily experience. Try standing up with your weight evenly balanced on both legs. After less than a minute, the pose will begin to feel tiring. Now relax. Without thinking about it, you will shift your posture so that your weight rests on one leg, tensed at the knee, while your free leg swings slightly forward. Responding to this uneven weight distribution, your torso will pivot slightly. You are now standing in a *contrapposto* pose. This is why classical Greek statues seem more "alive" than Egyptian statues, even if the Egyptian sculptures are more accurate in their details. The viewer unconsciously identifies with the kinesthetic experience embodied in the Greek sculpture. And this sense of the lived body in turn imbues figures such as the "Kritios Boy" with an unprecedented aura of psychological inwardness.

After being adopted by Roman artists, *contrapposto* co-existed with new forms of frontality in Byzantine and Medieval art, regaining its status as the dominant convention of Western art only in the 15th century. Toward the end of the century, it began to influence the practice of pictorial composition more broadly. Detached from the anatomy of the individual figure, it inspired the idea of a *group* of figures integrated by their stances and movements, but not arranged according to the rigid laws of symmetry. In the 16th and 17th centuries this led to the idea that *all* of the elements of a picture—the setting as well as the figure—might be unified within a composition that was neither merely additive nor mechanically symmetrical.[9]

While the pioneering abstract artists of the early 20th century rejected recognizable figuration, they remained faithful to Old Master principles of composition. The gestural abstractions of Wassily Kandinsky echoed the dynamic asymmetry of Baroque art. The geometric abstractions of Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich derived from the Cubism of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, preserving its subtle asymmetries and its mysterious sense of inwardness.

The first wave of abstraction came to an end in the early 1930s, its utopian aspirations smothered by Stalinism and Naziism. When abstraction revived after World War II, it was associated with an existential craving to plunge into the abject (Paris and Milan) or ascend to the sublime (New York). Some artists dissected Kandinsky's style into its most basic component: the stroke. Some borrowed the interlacing webs and biomorphic shapes of 1920s Picasso, suppressing their figurative content. Yet others tried to eliminate shape, leaving only fields of color.

No one style dominated this welter of different abstractions. Nonetheless, in April 1948, the American critic Clement Greenberg noted a tendency among artists as diverse as Jean Dubuffet, Jackson Pollock, Janet Sobel, Mark Tobey, and Joaquín Torres-Garcia toward what he called "polyphonic" or "allover" painting, "knit together of a multiplicity of identical or similar elements," repeating itself "without strong variation from one end of the canvas to the other."[10]

The repetition and symmetry of the polyphonic style led some contemporary critics to condemn it as merely decorative. In fall 1948 *Life* magazine convened a round table to discuss modern art. The fifteen panelists examined a group of paintings extending from Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror* (1932) to Jackson Pollock's recently completed *Cathedral* (1947). Greenberg pronounced the Pollock "one of the best paintings recently produced" in the United States. Yale philosophy professor Theodore Greene said that it seemed "a pleasant design for a necktie." Aldous Huxley, the author of *Brave New World*, compared it to "a panel for wallpaper which is repeated indefinitely around the wall."[11] (Thirty years later, Jaudon and Kozloff quoted Huxley's remark in the "Decoration and Domesticity" section of their 1978 article in *Heresies*.[12])

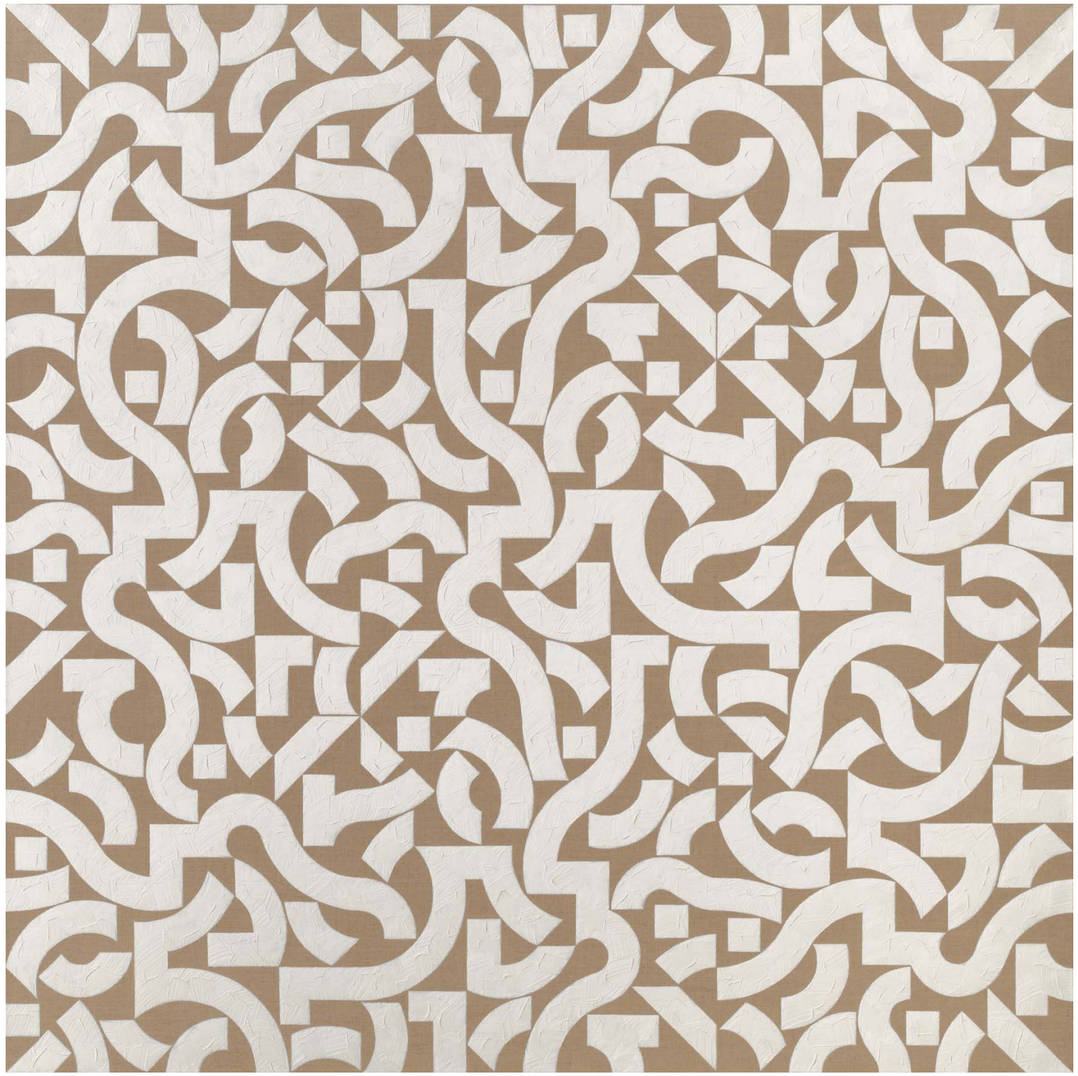
Greenberg himself worried that the "uniformity" of the new painting was "antiaesthetic." Nonetheless, in his April 1948 essay he concluded that:

> This very uniformity, this dissolution of the picture into sheer texture, sheer sensation, into the accumulation of similar units of sensation, seems to answer something deep-seated in contemporary sensibility. It corresponds perhaps to the feeling that all hierarchical distinctions have been exhausted, that no area or order of experience is either intrinsically or relatively superior to any other.[13]

The qualities that struck Greene and Huxley as merely decorative seemed to Greenberg to announce a significant cultural shift, which serious contemporary art was compelled to respond to.

Greenberg's analysis was prescient. If Pollock's drip paintings were characterized by repetition and alloverness, artists like Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko were moving toward more familiar kinds of symmetry. In Newman's 1948 canvas *Onement* a single orange stripe rose through the center of a red field. In 1948, Rothko was still painting his asymmetrical "multiforms."

By the following year, in paintings like *Violet Black Orange Yellow on White on Red*, he arrived at his canonical format of one or more squares of color stacked dead-center, surrounded by a symmetrical frame of contrasting colors. In such pictures, Newman and Rothko used central motifs, vertical orientations, and glowing colors to create abstract versions of Byzantine icons. Together with the deadpan facticity of Jasper Johns's flags, targets and number paintings, they pointed the way to Frank Stella's revolutionary "black" paintings of 1959. Fulfilling Greenberg's prophecy about the exhaustion of hierarchical distinctions, Stella's pictures—repetitive, symmetrical arrangements of vertical and horizontal bands around a central axis—divided the area of the canvas into exactly equal units, none more important than any other. The "antiaesthetic" black enamel of Stella's paintings made it impossible to dismiss them as decorative. The paintings proposed a new, minimal aesthetic based on rigid symmetry and repetition, banishing inwardness in favor of an iconic sense of presence.[14]



LEXICON 2009. Oil on linen, 72 x 72 inches

WHILE STELLA'S "PROTRACTOR" SERIES of the late 1960s offers a proximate model for Jaudon's work of the 1970s, it might be more useful to consider his black paintings of 1959 as the matrix from which her early centralized pictures, such as *Yazoo City* (FIG. 3), emerged. Despite her participation in the Pattern and Decoration movement, it doesn't seem accurate to describe Jaudon's work as "decorative." As Anna Chave notes, even the critic Amy Goldin, a champion of the new movement, acknowledged that "Pattern still seems to imply a lack of inwardness and freedom."[15] However, these are not the qualities that Jaudon's early work strives for. From *Yazoo City* through *Big Springs* (FIG. 4), her paintings are aggressively iconic, using symmetry and repetition to transfix the viewer. Rather than inwardness, they achieve an overwhelming degree of presence.

In Jaudon's paintings of the next two decades, such as *Sound* (FIG. 5) and *Another Language* (FIG. 6), she finds a variety of ways to strike a balance between symmetry and asymmetry, between presence and inwardness. However, Jaudon's ascetic white-on-brown paintings of 2006, like *Alphabet* [P. 13] and *Prologue* [P. 3], announce a fundamental rethinking of her artistic project. On one hand, there is a dialing-down of visual drama and an apparent abnegation of artistic individuality. As she said in a 2011 interview:

> The alphabet, so to speak, is made of line, both straight and curved, which is familiar to everyone, and repetition generates something that resembles a grammar and a lexicon. If this were music we would be talking about meter and rhythm, interval, and dissonance…. I don't think that this alphabet exists only in my work—in a way that sounds as if I am constructing a private language. That is antithetical to the concept of language, which is public. Everything in my paintings is completely legible.[16]

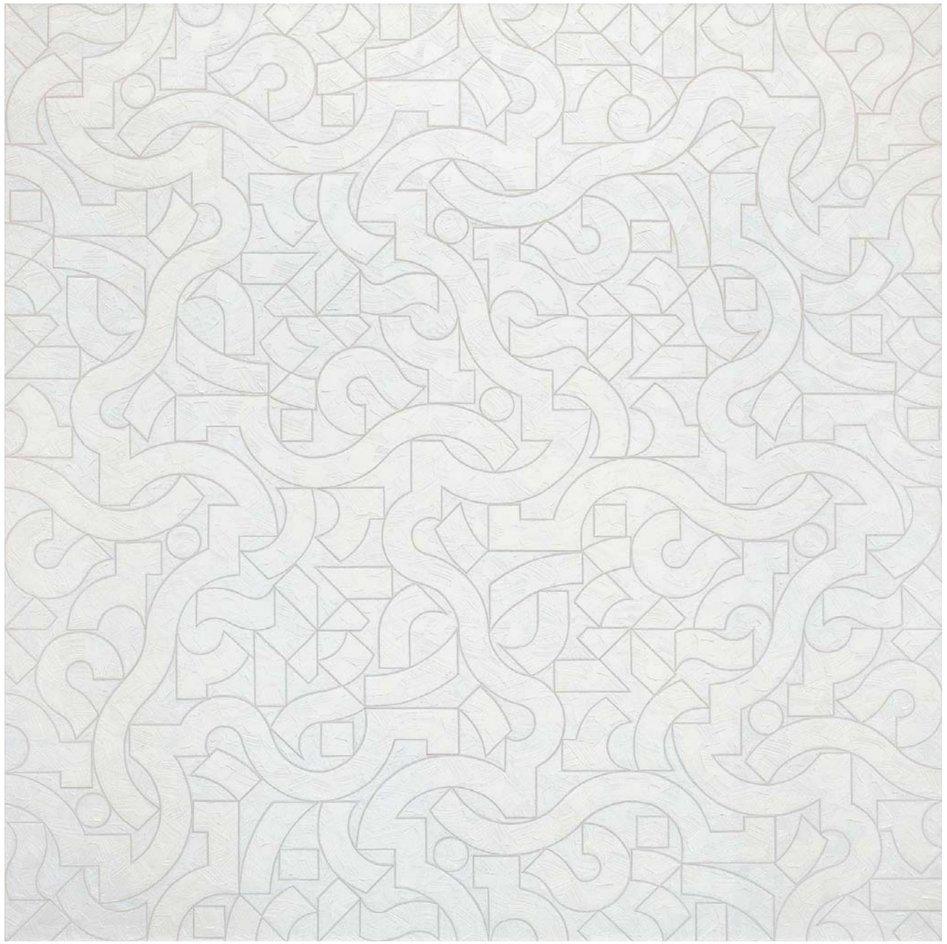
Here, Jaudon echoes a longstanding ambition of modern art: to discard individuality and inwardness, replacing them with the idea of art as a shared visual language immediately accessible to its public. Picasso said in 1944 that he and Braque had developed Cubism in the hope of creating "an anonymous art." Three decades later, the critic Rosalind Krauss defined the key achievement of Stella's 1960s paintings as the creation of a pictorial language that was "public"—that no longer signaled "the privacy of intention."[17]

On the other hand, in the same interview, Jaudon also noted that: "It is the way that these common forms are put together that gives the work its individuality and character."[18] This tension between form as a public language and form as a mode of individual expression is apparent in Jaudon's creation of the basic module of *Alphabet* (FIG. 7), which, as discussed above, can be seen as a deconstructed version of the symmetrical (hence public) composition of *Yazoo City* (FIG. 3). However, in subsequent studies (FIG. 8) and in the finished canvas [P. 13], the variation and recombination of the module generates new, more complex symmetries. These are perceived subliminally even if the viewer does not systematically identify and enumerate them. In sum, Jaudon's work offers a regenerative experience of disruption and restoration.

While this visual narrative has remained a constant since 2006, Jaudon has consistently varied her *dramatis personae*. First, the short bands of *Alphabet* and *Prologue* merged to form the longer, more complex bands found in *Lexicon* [P. 17] and *Anagram* [OPPOSITE]. Jaudon commented in 2011 that:

> The parts that connected past the grid lines were so surprising that I began using compound, articulated shapes made up of several different linked elements. For example, a short horizontal bar could become a large circular one that suddenly changes direction into a tight curve and ends in a sharply turned diagonal. That shape could span a number of modules and form a shape that runs across the entire canvas.[19]

Where Jaudon's earlier juxtapositions of forms had suggested calligraphic markings, her combinations of vertical, horizontal, diagonal and curved sections evoked new references. As Harper Montgomery noted in a 2015 essay, "the shapes in her paintings… gesture toward door frames, pillars, and baseboards, heightening our sense of the proportions, rhythms, and tones of our architectural environment."[20]



ANAGRAM 2011. Oil on linen, 54 x 54 inches

More recent paintings like *Arietta*, *Scherzo*, and *Segno* [PP. 23, 30 & 31] extend this process of architectural allusion. Even within this thematically related group, however, there are significant structural differences. A page from Jaudon's hand-drawn catalogue of recent work (FIG. 9) summarizes the composition of *Arietta* by placing characteristic motifs within a single box of the 9-part grid; in contrast, the motifs from *Segno* unfurl into the space of the composition as a whole.

The 3x3 structure of *Arietta* [P. 23] remains evident in the finished canvas, painted in 2019. As in the 2006 *Alphabet* [P. 13], each square of the grid contains a version, rotated or inverted, of the same complex design, achieving symmetry without monotony. Separated from their neighbors by narrow bands of reserved canvas, the squares are linked by curved lines extending from the midpoints of their edges. (In the series of related works, Jaudon makes it a regular practice to include a line extending to the middle of each edge, providing a point where the module can be attached to its neighbor.)

In contrast, the canvas of *Segno* [P. 31], from 2021, is *not* divided into discrete modules. The complex motifs are assembled from a consistent vocabulary of large and small curves, loops, right angles, and acute angles, but no two motifs are identical. Free to follow their own paths, the bands convey a sense of symmetry without in fact belonging to a symmetrical whole.

Portamento [P. 29], from 2019, is based on complex module similar to that of *Arietta*. (Compare the square at the upper right of *Portamento* to the one at upper left of *Arietta*.) But the modules have been subjected to a different series of rotations and inversions and the white bands have been reduced to narrow lines of reserved canvas, engraved into a field of white brushstrokes. The result is to unify the composition into what feels like a unified whole, which seems to have been drawn with a single continuous line although it actually contains numerous line breaks.

Aria [P. 35], painted in 2022, appears at first glance similar to *Portamento*. It too is "drawn" with narrow lines of reserved canvas traversing a white field. This time, however, the lines actually are continuous.

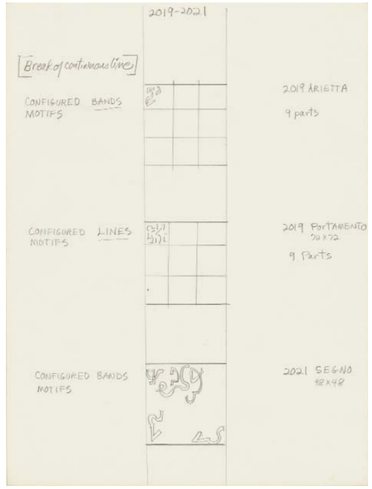


FIG. 9: Valerie Jaudon. *Analytical studies*, 2021. Pencil on paper, 12 x 9 inches

FIG. 10: Valerie Jaudon. *First study for Aria and Consort*, 2021. Ink on lined paper, 11 x 8½ inches

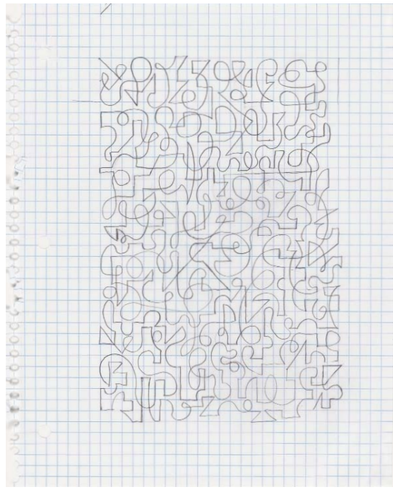


FIG. 11: Valerie Jaudon. *Study for Aria*, 2022. Pencil on grid notebook paper, 11 x 9 inches

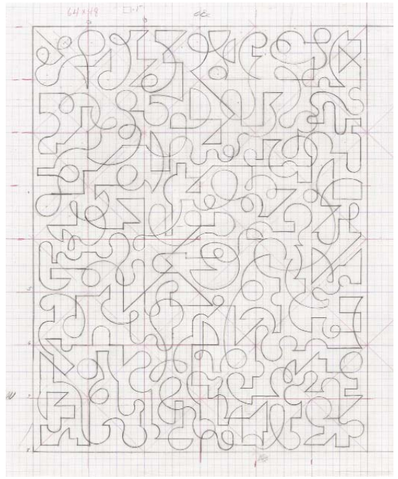


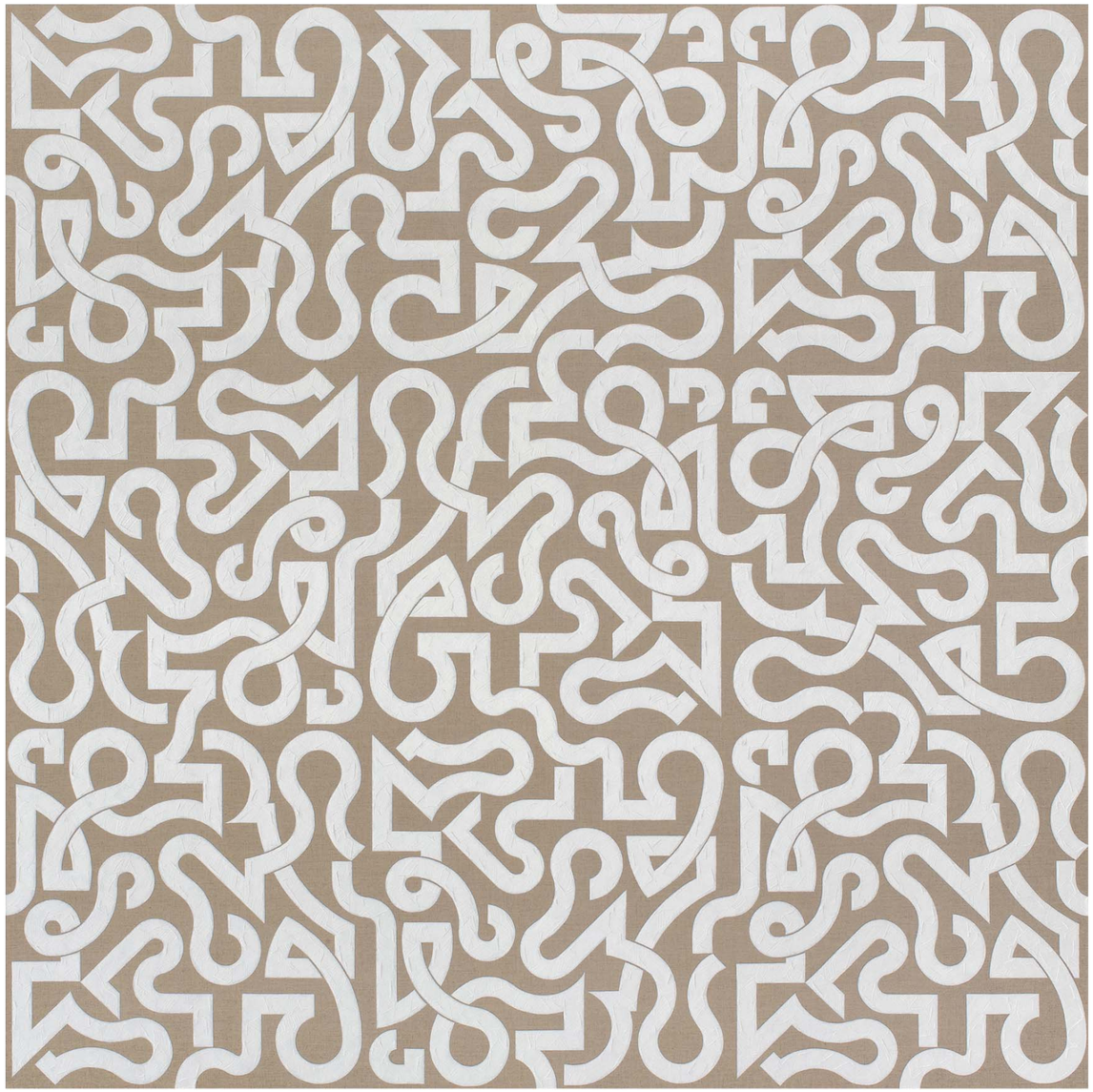
FIG. 12: Valerie Jaudon. *First study for Aria*, 2022. Transparent graph vellum, 18 x 14½ inches

A series of drawings make it possible to reconstruct the working process leading up to the finished painting. The series begin with a drawing that Jaudon made absent-mindedly, while listening to a discussion (FIG. 10). Such drawings are conventionally referred to as doodles, but Jaudon's design has nothing in common with the repetitive loops of the typical doodle. It is, rather, an elegant arrangement of the abstract motifs found in her paintings of 2019-21. She begins at upper left, works her way four lines down the notepaper, then moves right and back to the top of the sheet. The continuous line then descends to the fifth line of the notepaper, veers left, descends to the eighth line, moves right, and ascends once again, inscribing what becomes the top of the rightmost column of forms. Dropping down again to the ninth line, the pen moves left and right, up and down, filling in the rest of the rectangle. Although un-premeditated, the movements of Jaudon's hand obey a rigorous compositional logic, responding to the horizontal lines of the notepaper, to a series of invisible vertical axes, and to diagonal axes running at 45° in both directions. The semi-circular curves and acute angles echo one another, as they do in contemporary paintings like *Scherzo* and *Segno* [PP. 30 & 31]. However, the drawing is denser and more complex than any of Jaudon's paintings prior to this date.

The doodle was followed by a drawing in pencil on graph paper (FIG. 11), similar in its continuity, vocabulary, density and proportion, although different in its details. The new drawing ultimately provided the point of departure for three paintings, *Consort* [P. 34], *Aria* [P. 35], and *Ritornello* [P. 37]. However, it required further refinement and study before it could be transferred to canvas.

This process is visible in a third drawing (FIG. 12) where Jaudon copied the design to a new sheet of graph paper while making numerous small modifications. Comparison between the two versions reveal that the top three motifs along the left edge are the same, as is the motif at lower left. However, the multiple small forms in the intervening space have been replaced by two simpler motifs. Throughout the rest of the composition, strong forms have been retained, while weaker ones have been replaced. Jaudon has also drawn a

ARIETTA 2019. Oil on linen, 81 x 81 inches



larger-scale grid over the image; her notations indicate that each box of the original graph paper will correspond to an inch on canvas, while the larger, hand-drawn boxes will be eight inches on a side.

Before transferring the composition to canvas, however, Jaudon decided on a major change: to create a greater sense of symmetry and coherence, she would lop off the right side of the composition and replace it with a duplicate of the left side, rotated by 180°. Each motif on one side would have a counterpart on the other, but in a different location and orientation.

This radical reworking created a problem. The original composition had not been conceived in modular fashion; it therefore lacked the attachment points found in the modular designs of works like *Arietta* [P. 23]. To compensate for the lack of attachment points, Jaudon created a new column between the left and right sides of the revised composition. She filled this column with a series of connective configurations, making the bottom half into the rotated mirror-image of the top half. In a small drawing recording this solution, the connective column is highlighted with red shading (FIG. 13).

Having resolved this problem, Jaudon copied the design onto large sheets of tracing paper, making a full-scale "cartoon" so it could be transferred to canvas (FIG. 14). At this point, she faced another question: how would she actually execute the painting? From 2006 through 2021, she had translated her drawings to canvas either by expanding the lines into broad bands of paint or by rendering them as narrow reserved channels in a painted field. She now considered a radically different approach: to fill in some of the configurations as self-enclosed painted shapes, leaving the space around them blank. Jaudon experimented with the new approach on the first, lefthand sheet of the full-size cartoon, using reddish shading to indicate where she would fill the shapes with white paint. She then traced the design from the left side, rotating it to fill in the right side of the composition, but leaving it mostly unshaded.

Ultimately, she decided to paint two versions of the painting. In *Aria* [P. 35], the background is painted white, while the lines of the

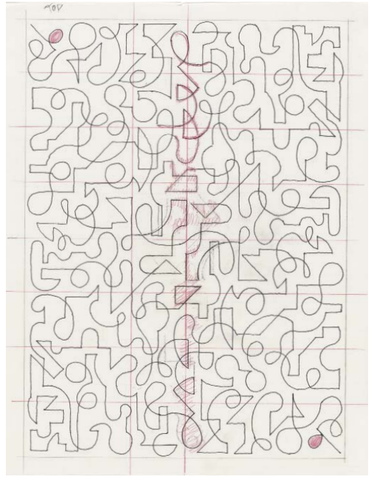


FIG. 13: Valerie Jaudon. *Final study for Aria*, 2022. Ink on vellum, 17 ½ x 14 ¼ inches

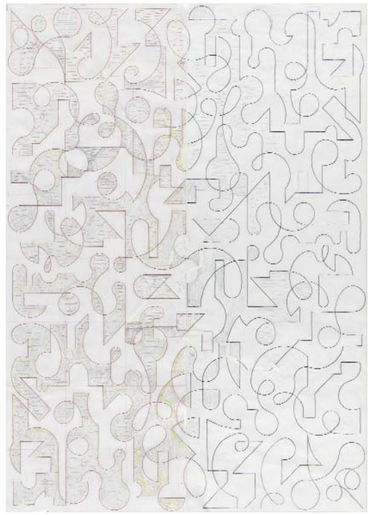


FIG. 14: Valerie Jaudon. *Cartoon for Aria and Consort*, 2022. Vellum and tracing paper with ink, pencil, red pencil, and tape, 64 x 48 inches

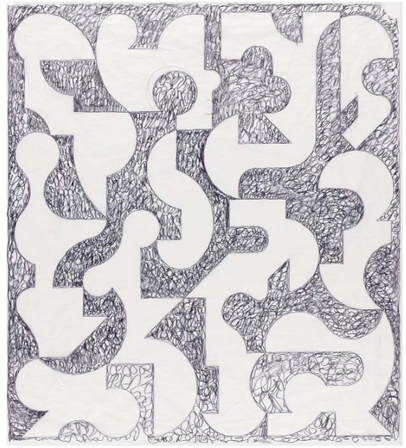


FIG. 15: Valerie Jaudon. *Study for Rubato*, 2022. Ink on tracing paper, 42 x 40 inches

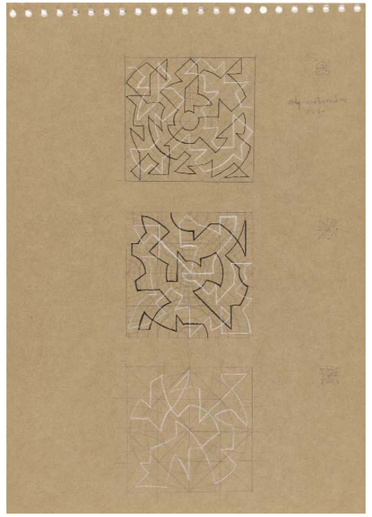


FIG. 16: Valerie Jaudon. *Sketchbook studies*, 2019. Ink and pencil on kraft paper, 16 ½ x 11 ½ inches

composition are indicated by reserved channels of bare linen. In a recent canvas, *Ritornello* [P. 37], Jaudon returned to an early study for *Aria* (FIG. 12). This time, she deleted the left side of the design, duplicating the right side and rotating it by 180° to fill the empty space. The resulting composition was rendered as reserved channels within a black field. In contrast, in *Consort* [P. 37], the shapes are painted white while the background is unpainted. Comparison to the original drawings reveals that the process of filling in shapes required significant sacrifices: some of the original lines were covered over by paint, while others were omitted from the interstitial spaces. But the sacrifice is worth it: there is a strangeness to the bold shapes, held in check by the underlying discipline of the design. As Jaudon told Raphael Rubinstein, her study of a 1933 painting by Joan Miró showing Surrealist blobs floating in space "gave her a new sense of permission to discover similar irregular shapes waiting within the camouflage of her exacting geometry."[21]

Jaudon also utilizes painted shapes in *Etude* [P. 33], and *Rubato* [P. 39], In the former, the configurations at upper left and lower right are rotated versions of the same motifs; the intervening shapes avoid strict symmetry. In *Rubato*, each shape seems unique, but the underlying lattice and the repetition of related forms insure a sense of harmony. The playful quality of the composition is emphasized in a study (FIG. 15) where the shapes are bare paper while the background is filled in with energetic scribbles.

The most recent group of paintings in the current exhibition are works where a tracery of white bands is interwoven with a tracery of black bands. Here, Jaudon looks back to some of her paintings of the 1970s and 1980s and reinvents them in her current style, simultaneously more complex and more ascetic. The immediate point of departure for the new paintings seems to be a series of drawings in a recent sketchbook (FIG. 16), showing designs based on concentric circles within a square, accompanied by arcs emerging from the sides or corners and by rectilinear grids and lattices—in other words, by an matrix similar to that of Jaudon's 1974 "Direction" drawing (FIG. 2) and of *Yazoo City* (FIG. 3). In 1970s paintings like

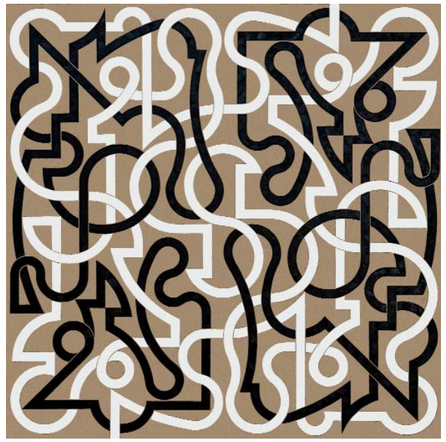


FIG. 17: Valerie Jaudon. *Quattro Voci*, 2023. Oil on linen, 72 x 72 inches

Yazoo City, Jaudon created symmetrical compositions evoking the totality of the underlying matrix. In contrast, in her new studies she picks out diverse elements of the matrix—larger and smaller curves, fragments of the lattices and curves—and combines them into irregular shapes. In several of the studies, one set of lines and shapes is drawn in white, while a second set is drawn in black. This bichromatic coloring of the lines recalls early paintings like *Tallahatchie* (1984), painted with gold and red bands on a black ground, and *Aquilo* (1985), painted with red and pale green on white. But the palette of Jaudon's recent paintings and drawings—black and white on brown—is sober and severe, in contrast to the inebriated freedom of the lines.

Three of the recent paintings—*Duetto*, *Quattro Voci*, and *Cantata*—are based on underlying matrices of concentric circles like those in Jaudon's sketchbook studies. Two of them display the same mode of symmetry found in *Aria* [P. 35]. In *Duetto* [P. 43], the bottom half of the composition is a rotated version of the top half. At the center of the painting (see the frontispiece to this essay), two incomplete circles meet to form a version of the Chinese yin and yang sign, signifying the wholeness of a universe made out of contrary qualities. Radiating outwards from this core, the composition pulsates with an energy comparable to the Chinese concept of *qi*, a life force circulating through both living beings and the natural world.[22] The same conjoined circles appear at the center of *Quattro Voci* (FIG. 17), where the right side of the painting is a rotated version of the left. In contrast, *Cantata* [P. 47] avoids perfect symmetry. The circular white forms occupying opposite corners of the canvas are similar but not identical; the composition as a whole is full of deliberately imperfect rhymes.

Interwoven white and black lines also appear in *Prelude* and *Fugue*. (Indeed, the title "Fugue," with its suggestion of musical counterpoint, seems to describe this entire series of works.) These two paintings are not based on matrices of concentric circles. Their coherence depends on other forms of symmetry. In *Fugue* [P. 41], as in *Quattro Voci*, the right side of the composition is a rotated version of the left. The composition is freer in *Prelude* [P. 45], as in the musical preludes in J.S. Bach's *Art of the Fugue*. Here, as in *Cantata*, the composition is held together by constant near-rhymes between different forms.

This process is particularly evident in the upper and lower left-hand corners of the canvas. The two can be compared more easily if the bottom corner is rotated 90° to match the top (FIGS. 18 & 19). In both corners, a white band with an curved top like an arched doorway advances toward the edge of the canvas. In the upper corner, this form has a rectangular notch; in the lower corner, it does not. In the upper corner, there is a protruding curve at the base of the "doorway;" in the lower, this becomes concave. At top, the right side of the "doorway" makes a quick loop up and down, then circles slowly upward. At bottom, it sinks downward and quickly rebounds, ascending into a large, irregular ovoid. The black lines in the upper left corner form a band terminating in a sharp 45° angle; a similar angle appears in the bottom corner, but the band descending from the point is curved instead of straight. The black band at upper left sits

FIG. 18: Valerie Jaudon. Detail from *Prelude*, 2023. Top left corner

FIG. 19: Valerie Jaudon. Detail from *Prelude*, 2023. Lower left corner, rotated 90° clockwise

atop a concave curve; the band at bottom rests on a rectangular indentation, which gives way to a wandering, convex curve. Instead of deconstructing an underlying symmetry, Jaudon unifies the composition by creating a series of significant resemblances.

THE SYMMETRICAL ABSTRACTIONS of the 1960s, by artists like Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland, seemed to reveal their full meaning at first glance. As Michael Fried wrote in 1967, "at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest," in the sense that, for an ideal viewer, "a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness."[23] In contrast, although Jaudon's paintings of the 1970s and '80s (FIGS. 3 & 4) were equally symmetrical, their complexity and their richness of facture demanded the viewer's prolonged attention. Indeed, over the decades, the process of looking at Jaudon's pictures has become slower and even more rewarding. (In Raphael Rubinstein's words, it is "durational and sequential.")[24]

On one hand, symmetry creates a pre-existent, satisfying harmony among the different elements of a painting. On the other, it limits the painter's freedom. And it makes life too easy for viewers, who may think that they have grasped a composition when its actual richness and complexity escape them. Navigating between the Scylla of obvious symmetry and the Charybdis of visual chaos, Valerie Jaudon's new work bears witness to a creative process of repeated disruption and regeneration, inviting the viewer to enter into a long, rewarding conversation.

PEPE KARMEL

NOTES

1. Anna C. Chave, "Disorderly Order: The Art of Valerie Jaudon," in René Paul Barilleaux, ed., *Valerie Jaudon* (Jackson, MS: Mississippi Museum of Art, 1996), pp. 16, 18. In fact, Jaudon's personal archives reveal the existence of several paintings from 1972–73 executed in a different manner; these await further study.

2. Sol LeWitt, *Arcs, from corners & sides, circles, & girds and all their combinations* (Bern: Kunsthalle Bern & Paul Bianchini, 1972), plate 59.

3. In an email of July 26, 2023, Jaudon recalled that "every geometric painter" of the early 1970s owned a collection of tracing pads with different "sketching grids" on their covers. She enclosed a photograph of a Canson Vidalon No. 110 pad from the era, with a cover design of concentric circles superimposed on a grid.

4. Chave, "Disorderly Order," pp. 9–14, 21. For a comprehensive recent study of the Pattern and Decoration movement, including Jaudon, see Anna Katz and Rebecca Lowery, eds., *With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972–1985* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2019).

5. Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff, "Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture," in *Heresies*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1978, pp. 38–42. Jaudon and Kozloff gathered quotations from critics and artists such as Rodolf Arnheim, Le Corbusier, Roger Fry, Clement Greenberg, Aldous Huxley, Wassily Kandinsky, Willem de Kooning, El Lissitzky, Adolf Loos, André Malraux, F.T. Marinetti, Barnett Newman, Pablo Picasso, Herbert Read, and Diego Rivera under headings like "War and Virility," "Purity," "The Superiority of Western Art," "Fear of Racial Contamination, Impotence and Decadence," "Racism and Sexism," "Hierarchy of High-Low Art," "That Old Chestnut, Humanism," "Decoration and Domesticity," and "Autocracy." The issue can be found online at: http://heresies-filmproject.org/archive/

6. Sam Hunter, *Valerie Jaudon* (Berlin: Amerika Haus, 1983), pp. 1, 3.

7. Valerie Jaudon, artist statement, in *Conceptual Abstraction* (New York: Sidney Janis Gallery, 1991), n.p.; reprinted in Pepe Karmel and Joachim Pissarro, *Conceptual Abstraction* (New York: Hunter College / Times Square Gallery, 2012), pp. 86–87.

8. Julius Lange's "Study of Representation of the Human Figure in Primitive Art Up to Greek Art of the 5th Century B.C." was published in Danish in the *Billedkunstens Fremstilling af Menneskeshkikkelsen* (Copenhagen), 5th series, vol. V, no. 4, 1892. It became influential thanks to French scholar Henri Lechat, who published a summary, "Une Loi de la Statuaire primitive: la loi de la Frontalité," in the *Revue des Universités du Midi* (Bordeaux), vol. I, no. 4, January–March 1895, pp. 1–27. See particularly pp. 4 and 7. Lechat's text is available online at: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiQs6mn5MqAAxWCmIkEHS9gDMQQFnoECBYQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Ftpsalomonreinach.mom.fr%2FReinach%2FMOM_TP_135200%2FMOM_TP_135200_0001%2FPDF%2FMOM_TP_135200_0001.pdf&usg=AOvVaw32e2x_odhFyE8T6ImzN1Tk&opi=89978449

9. The canonical studies of the evolution of composition in Renaissance and Baroque art are of course Heinrich Wölfflin's *Classic Art* (1899, translated 1948) and *Principles of Art History* (1915, trans. 1932). The brilliance and prestige of these volumes seems to have discouraged further scholarship on this topic, with the exception of Thomas Puttfarken's superb *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition: Theories of Visual Order in Painting, 1400–1800* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

10. Clement Greenberg, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," *Partisan Review*, April 1948; reprinted in John O'Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945–1949* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 222–223.

11. Russell W. Davenport, "A Life Table on Modern Art: Fifteen Distinguished Critics and Connoisseurs Undertake to Clarify the Strange Art of Today," *Life* magazine (New York), vol. 25, no. 2, October 11, 1948, p. 62.

12. Jaudon and Kozloff, "Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture," p. 42.

13. Greenberg, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," p. 224.

14. The critic Michael Fried was an important supporter of Stella's early work. See, or instance, Fried, "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings," *Artforum*, vol. V, no. 3, November 1966; reprinted in Henry Geldzahler, ed., *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940–1970* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art and E.P. Dutton, 1969), pp. 403–425. Nonetheless, he famously denounced the emphasis on "presence" in the minimal art inspired by Stella; see Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum*, June 1967; reprinted in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), pp. 116–147.

15. Amy Goldin, "Patterns, Grids and Paintings," *Artforum*, vol. 14, no. 1, September 1975, p. 50; cited in Chave, *Disorderly Order*, p. 14.

16. William Pittman Andrews, interview with Valerie Jaudon, in Andrews, V*alerie Jaudon: White* (Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Museum, 2011), n.p.

17. Picasso's remark about Cubism as an anonymous art appears in Françoise Gilot and Carlton Lake, *Life with Picasso* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 75; see the extended discussion of this idea in William Rubin, *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1989), pp. 19–20. On Stella's 1960s paintings as a public language, see Rosalind Krauss, "Sense and Sensibility," *Artforum*, vol. 12, no. 3, November 1973, p. 47.

18. Andrews, interview with Valerie Jaudon, n.p.

19. Andrews, interview with Valerie Jaudon, n.p.

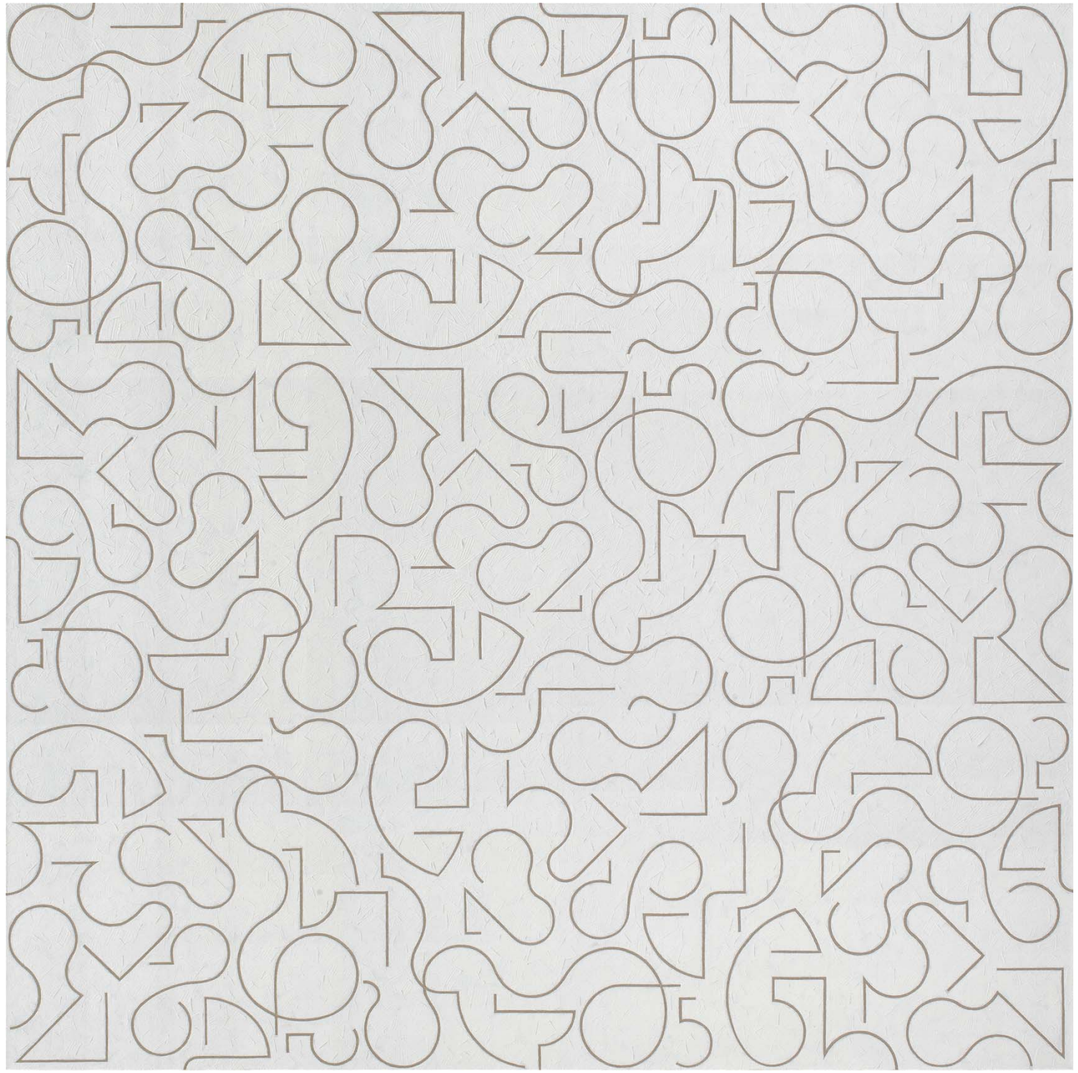
20. Harper Montgomery, "Valerie Jaudon: Painting as Open Work," in *Valerie Jaudon: Alignments* (New York: DC Moore Gallery, 2015), p. 14.

21. Raphael Rubinstein, "The Knight's Tour & The Continuous Line," in *Valerie Jaudon: Prepositions* (New York: DC Moore Gallery, 2020), n.p. Rubinstein's essay includes a reproduction of a 2003 drawing by Jaudon after a 1933 *Painting* by Miró.

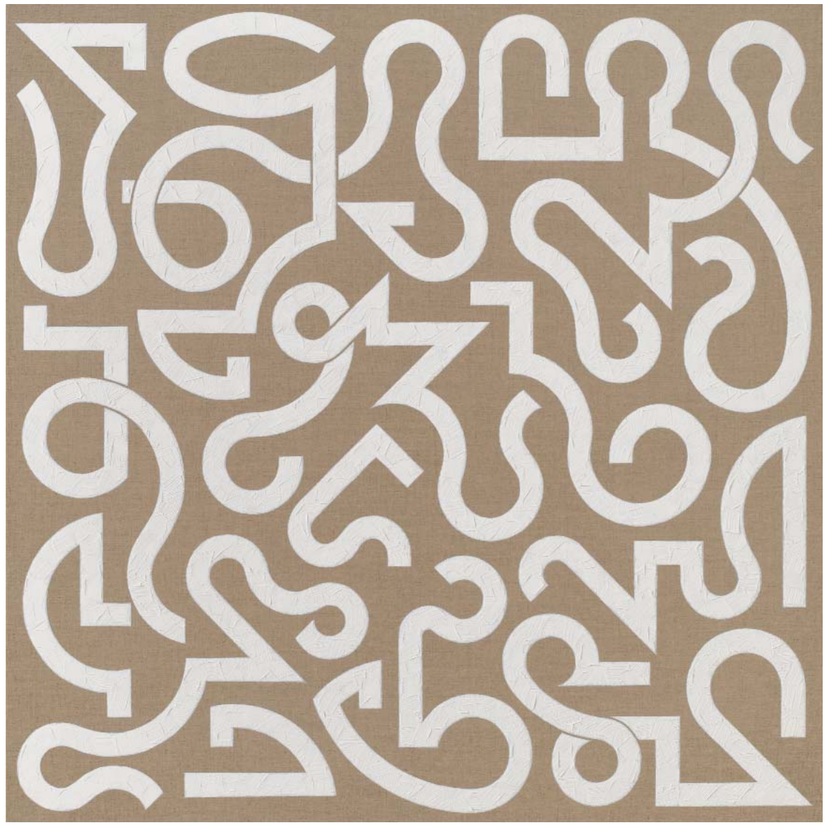
22. *On qi* as a force active in both living beings and the natural landscape, see John Hay, "The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?," in Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow, eds., *Body, Subject & Power in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 42–77.

23. Fried, "Art and Objecthood," pp. 145–146.

24. Rubinstein, "The Knight's Tour & The Continuous Line," n.p.



PORTAMENTO 2019. Oil on linen, 72 x 72 inches

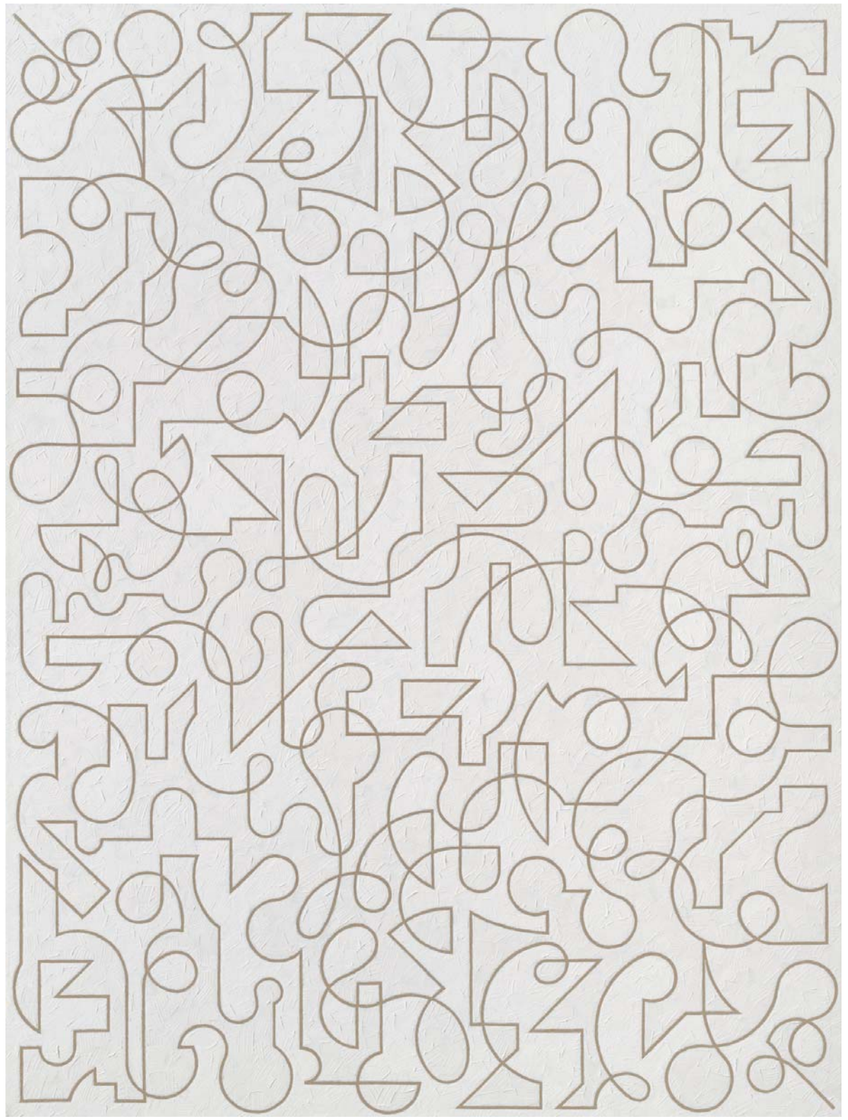


SCHERZO 2021. Oil on linen, 48 x 48 inches

SEGNO 2021. Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches

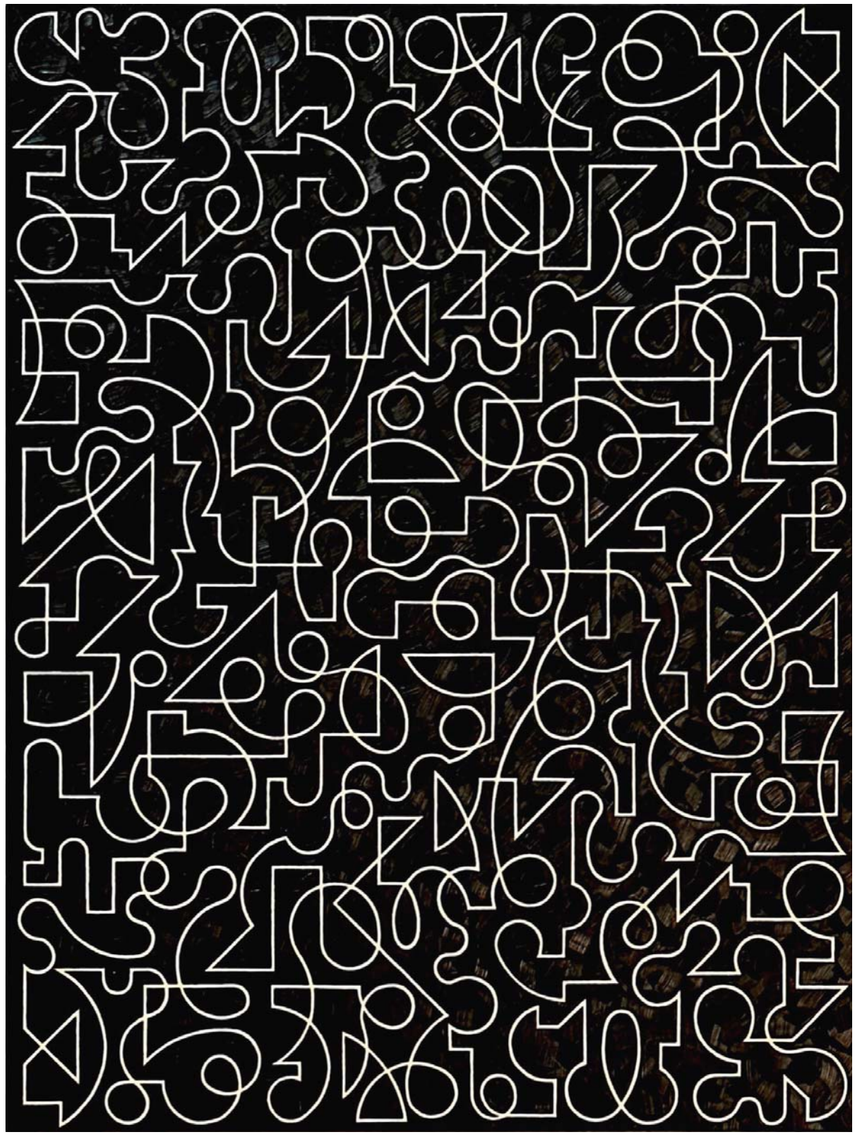
ETUDE 2022. Oil on linen, 40 x 40 inches

CONSORT 2022. Oil on linen, 64 x 48 inches



ARIA 2022. Oil on linen, 64 x 48 inches

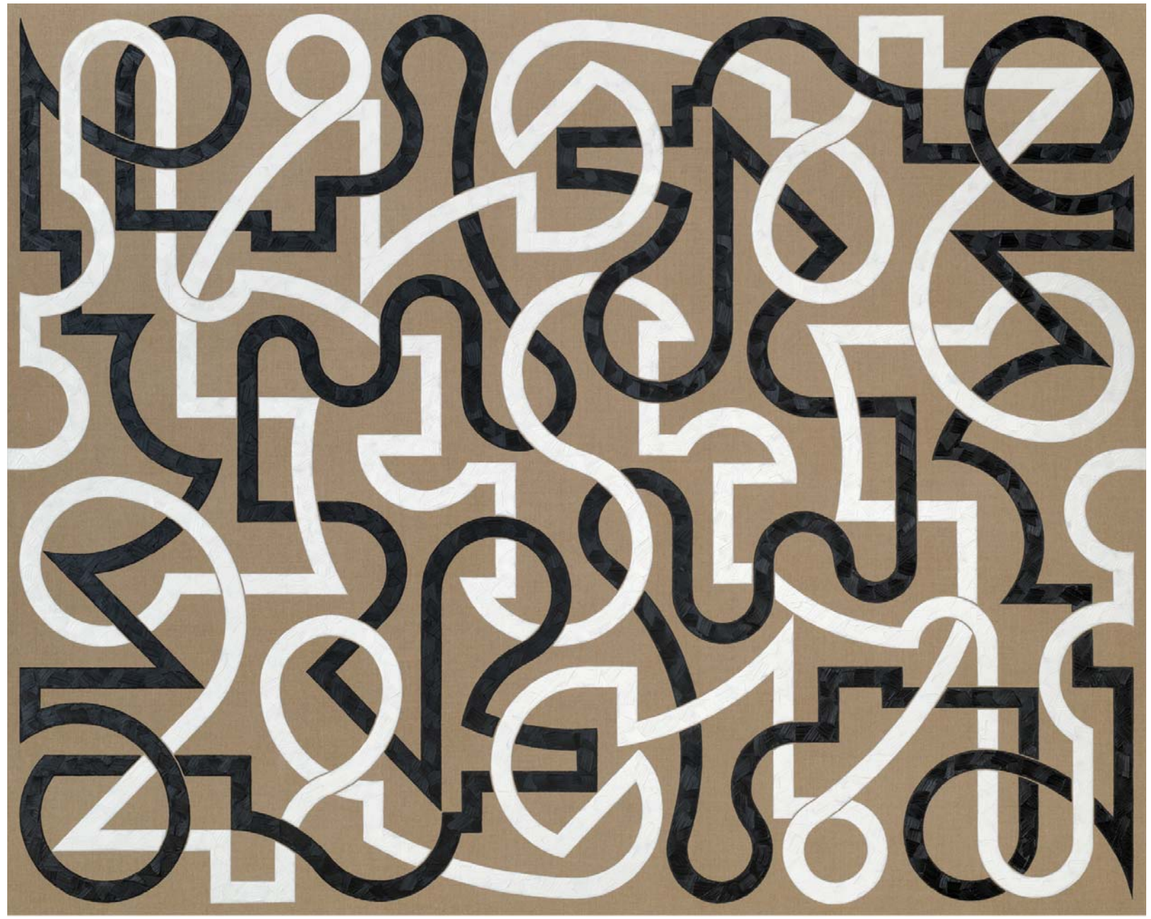
RITORNELLO 2023. Oil on linen, 64 x 48 inches



RUBATO 2022. Oil on linen, 43 x 37½ inches

FUGUE 2023. Oil on linen, 72 x 72 inches

DUETTO 2023. Oil on linen, 66 x 84 inches



PRELUDE 2023. Oil on linen, 66 x 66 inches

VALERIE JAUDON

VALERIE JAUDON (b.1945) continues her longstanding commitment to redefining the parameters of the abstract image. Over the course of her fifty-year career, her work has consistently operated within the language, history, and cultural context of abstraction. A member of the original Pattern & Decoration group in 1970s New York, she is also closely aligned with important dialogues in the larger Postminimalist movement. Using recognizable forms drawn from geometry, art, and architecture, she builds a visual vocabulary that is endlessly generative.

Recent museum exhibitions including Jaudon's work include *Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA (2023) and National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (2024); *Somewhere Downtown: Art in 1980s New York*, UCCA Beijing, China (2022–23); *With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972–1985*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA (2019–20) and the Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY (2021); *Less is a Bore: Maximalist Art & Design*, Institute for Contemporary Art, Boston, MA (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).

Jaudon is the recipient of numerous awards and grants and her work has been collected by and exhibited in major 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 D.C.; McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX; St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO; Buffalo AKG Art Museum, Buffalo, NY; Baltimore Museum of Art, MD; Städel Museum, Frankfurt, Germany; the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaeck, Denmark; Ludwig Forum Internationale Kunst, Aachen, Germany.

PEPE KARMEL

PEPE KARMEL is a Professor in the Department of Art History, New York University. His first book, *Picasso and the Invention of Cubism*, was published by Yale University Press in 2003. His second book, *Abstract Art: A Global History*, was published by Thames & Hudson in fall 2020. Thames & Hudson will also publish his next book, *Looking at Picasso*, in fall 2023. Karmel has contributed to numerous exhibition catalogues and written widely on modern and contemporary art for publications including *The New York Times*, *Art in America* and *The Brooklyn Rail*. In 1989, he curated *Robert Morris: Felt Works* at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University. He was co-curator, with Kirk Varnedoe, of the 1998 retrospective, *Jackson Pollock*, at The Museum of Modern Art. He organized *New York Cool: Painting and Sculpture from the NYU Collection*, in 2008, and was co-curator, with Joachim Pissarro, of *Conceptual Abstraction*, seen at the Hunter College / Times Square Gallery in 2012. His other curatorial projects have focused on Pablo Picasso. In 2004, he organized *The Age of Picasso: Gifts to American Museums*, seen in Rome and in Santander, Spain. His installation, *Dialogues with Picasso*, was recently on view at the Museo Picasso Málaga.

CANTATA 2023. Oil on linen, 54 x 54 inches

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Duetto, 2023. Oil on canvas, 66 x 84 inches

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