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Valerie Jaudon: *Prepositions*

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By Alfred Mac Adam



Valerie Jaudon, *Quadrille*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 54 x 54 inches.

Courtesy DC Moore, New York.

On View

DC Moore Gallery

Through October 3, 2020

New York

Valerie Jaudon, like nature, abhors a vacuum. Faced with an empty pictorial space, she accounts for every square centimeter: if it's canvas, she covers it with paint; if it's linen, she paints a pattern on it and lets the linen become part of the picture. She is obsessive, meticulous, and, paradoxically, lyrical at the same time. Another cue from nature: The pattern on the butterfly's wing or the spider's web constitute a visual order, but they also contain a rhythm. Mute physical objects, they nevertheless evoke sound.

The titles of Jaudon's 11 paintings refer explicitly to rhythmically organized sound—music. But terms like *Aeolian* (2017) and *Lydian* (2019) are strange to most of us and require a dictionary for elucidation. Even after we decipher the words, we wonder how we spectators are supposed to make the leap from visual experience to the music these titles ask us to hear? They demand not only dexterity but some help from Walter Pater's 1873 essay on Giorgione. There, Pater famously states that, "All art constantly aspires to the condition of music," by which he means that all arts, visual or verbal, seek to meld their subject and their means of presenting that subject into a single system: a Beethoven symphony moves us without our necessarily being aware of the role of each instrument. Pater says this is accomplished through an "*Anders-streben*—a partial alienation from its own limitations, through which the arts are able, not indeed to supply the place of each other, but reciprocally to lend each other new forces." So, no art exists in its own vacuum, and each, if we care to take notice, alludes to its sister arts.

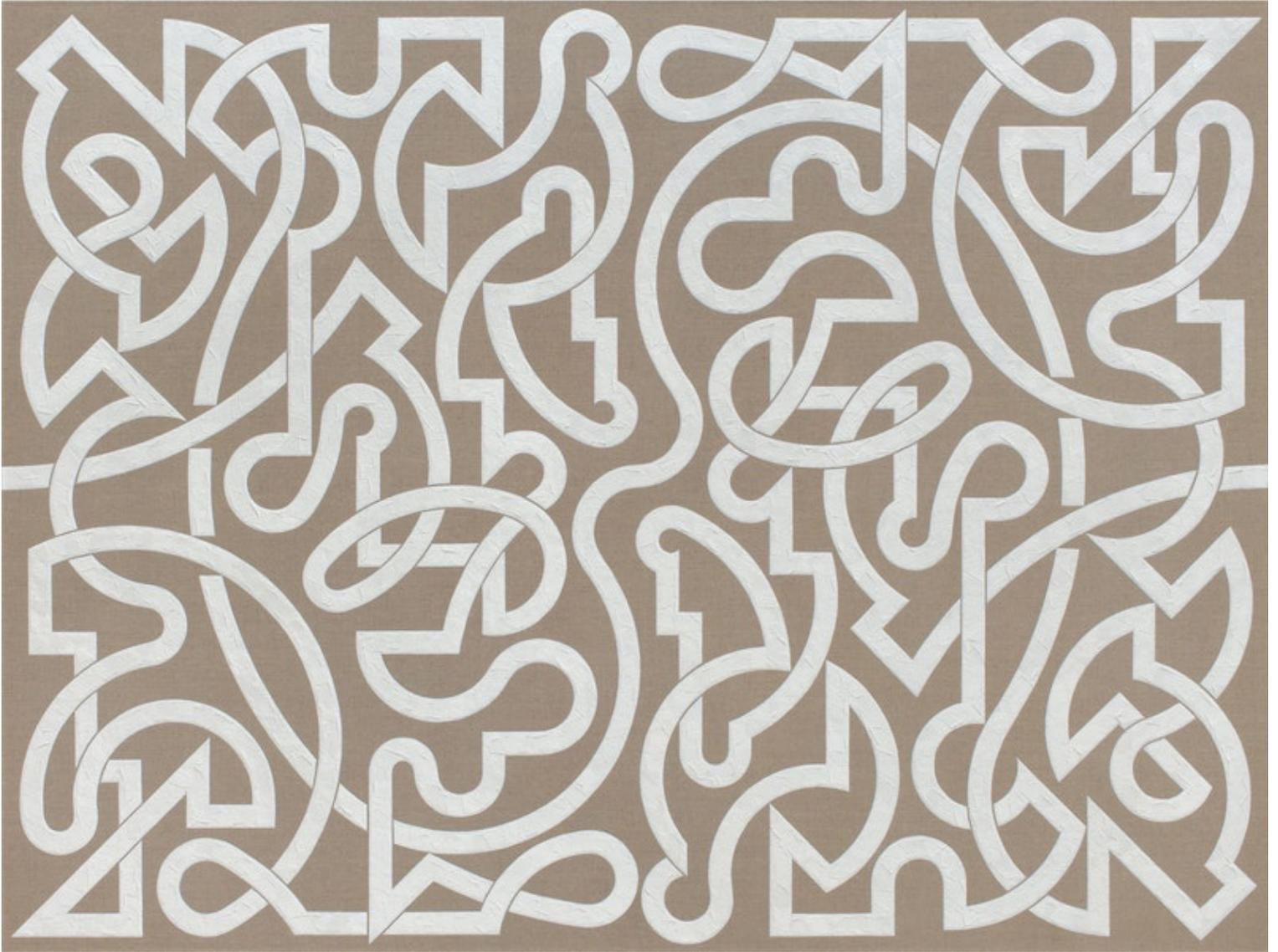


Valerie Jaudon, *Aeolian*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 54 x 54 inches. Courtesy DC Moore, New York.

Jaudon's title for her show provides the necessary link of her art to others: *Prepositions*. A seemingly incongruous grammatical term. But prepositions denote both spatial and temporal relationships, as in "*before* she paints, Jaudon prepares the canvas," or "*before* us we have the paintings." The same preposition indicates both time and place, modifying and giving direction to situations and objects. Prepositions mark exactly that *Anders-streben* Pater refers to, a reminder

that our perception of a visual object is charged with links to our other senses. Jaudon's concept of abstraction requires us to become aware of the fact that all our senses are involved in the perception of art.

Aeolian, the earliest and smallest (54 × 54 inches) work here is a stunning example of Jaudon's play with synesthesia. The Aeolian mode in music is a scale, so it can be represented visually using musical notation (a form of writing) and played on the white keys of a piano (turned into sound). In this way, Jaudon makes us "see" that her interplay of textured black and white squiggles corresponds to the keys on a piano. At the same time, we follow the lines on the canvas as we would follow the movements of a dancer responding, perhaps, to the sounds of an Aeolian harp, a stringed instrument dear to the Romantics, played by the wind, by nature itself.



Valerie Jaudon, *Lydian*, 2019. Oil on linen, 63 x 84 inches. Courtesy DC Moore, New York.

Lydian, a 63 by 84 inch oil on linen, refers to a different musical scale, and, like *Aeolian*, also evokes a culture of the ancient world—Aeolus is a Greek wind god; the Lydians wrote in a variation of the Greek alphabet. So here again, painting, writing, and music are interwoven in this bichromatic piece, “a mighty maze but not without a plan” as the poet terms it, alluding to the architectonic element in the painting. Just as music organizes sound and writing transforms random thought into structured graphic signs, this painting compresses Jaudon’s Dionysian passion into a comprehensible totality.

Each of these 11 paintings then constitutes a primordial act of control: she organizes the flood of perceptions that could overwhelm her in order to make her universe comprehensible. Jaudon’s work brilliantly reminds us that there is more here than meets the eye. She keeps the flame of abstraction burning brightly, music to our ears and our eyes.

Contributor

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Alfred Mac Adam is professor of Latin American literature at Barnard College-Columbia University. He has translated works by Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, Juan Carlos Onetti, José Donoso, and Jorge Volpi, among others. He recently published an essay on the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa included in *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography*.