

artspeak



Tess Jaray's first solo exhibition in New York, featuring paintings from 2001 to 2012, reflects the artist's quest to distill her compositions to a degree of geometric purity. Through mastery of line, color, and pattern, Jaray's work expresses intangible spaces that exist between forms, interiors, and exterior worlds, using repetition as means to artistic originality and personal discovery. Artspeak editor Yasemin Vargi interviewed Tess Jaray about her influential career and experience in the art world.

Yasemin Vargi: What aspects do you like about Middle Eastern Art and how has it influenced your work?

Vargi, Yasemin. "Tess Jaray," *artspeak*. April 25, 2017.

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Tess Jaray: When I was young I didn't know anything about it at all. It has been really the Islamic Architecture that interested me but we weren't aware of that at all when I was a young artist. Now the word Islam means something different. In my late twenties, the first drafts of the early Turkish architecture, Seljuk for instance, just touched my heart. I found it absolutely amazing and I still do, actually. Then later on, I went to Morocco; I had read that is where you get the most intense experience of Islam. It is a poor country and it hadn't developed so much. I completely fell in love with it. I think the Islamic view of art is very different from the Western view. What I

liked was that art was so much part of their surrounding, whereas for us in the West, art is something separated. You go somewhere to look at it. What I loved about Morocco and what I saw in photographs was the fact that art was something that was part of your land. So I don't know how that is affecting my work, but I know it has as well as the nature of repetition.



How Strange - Bright Red, Azure Blue, 2001 Oil on linen Courtesy of the artist and albertz benda. photo by Christopher Burke Studio

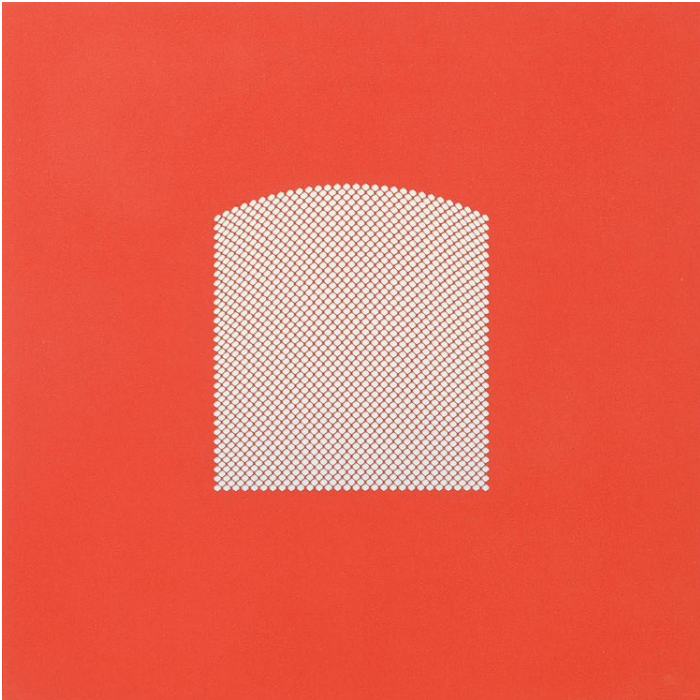
YV: In the 1960's you spent some time in Italy where you were exposed to the rich Renaissance history and culture. In a previous article, you stated how your attitude towards architecture changed there. Why was that trip a turning point for your art?

TJ: Yes, it was. You have to remember when I went to Italy, or up until then, there were not so many books around. Now you can buy a book for the same price as a bottle of water. A book was something rather special in those days, so I wasn't really aware of the world of architecture. We had a wonderful art historian teaching us Gombrich at Slade Art School but he talked about art, not about architecture, so that was a complete revelation and I think the impact it made on me was not so much architecture as a whole, but the impact it has on one as a human being. We carry a

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Red Window Link, 2008 Acrylic and paper on panel, Courtesy of the Artist and albertz benda

frame with us and we each have our own frame, we have only two eyes; we have no eyes on the back of our heads, and everything is so framed.

The greatest artists that ever lived were those from Renaissance: Brunelleschi, Bramante and so on. Up until then I have never heard of these people; I had never seen anything like that before, so I didn't even think in terms of my own work. But then when I went back to England and set up the studio, I had a kind of revelation. I made a line across the canvas and then I tipped in space as

if there were lines on either side and suddenly the space was altered! So

that's where it all came from, I thought that's what I wanted and that is actually moving towards the kind of experience that I had in Italy and perhaps I could do something with that. And in a way, that is what I have been doing for 50 years since that day, trying to create a space that draws you in and that touches your heart.

YV: Your work touches both the mind and the heart. Is it your intention that they also contain optical illusions?

TJ: I don't like the word optical. I have been trying to minimize it, so that it is not stated, but suggested. You are never quite sure. Ideally, I would like to involve the viewer. How do you involve the viewer? How should anybody bother to look at a painting? And one of the ways I think I accomplish that is to catch them and get a reaction of "You think it does it do this? Does it do that?" It is much less intellectual than it appears.

YV: So your works are less mathematical.

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TJ: No, it is not mathematical at all. It is mathematical only in the sense of everything has a mathematical relationship but I don't know much about math; I was never good at it but you see, we could both sit here with a piece of paper and do a mathematical diagram of our relationship. We both sit in seats we have a certain distance between us. If we didn't like each other, we would sit further away. If you were my daughter, I would sit closer and put arms around you. These are all physical and emotional demonstrations of mathematics and that does interest me.

YV: What was the creative process and the technique for the works in this exhibition?



any Moments - Acid Green and Galla Placidia - Pink, 2005 Oil on linen, Courtesy of the artist and albertz benda. photo by Christopher Burke Studio

TJ: It is a complicated process. I have the panel made, then I paint the panel with acrylic paint, then this surface is carved which is silk screened in a color. Then I have a drawing and the drawing is then laser cut onto the card. The card is put on and stacked out; I cut and paint the edge. In order to get something simple, you go through a very complicated process. Before laser cutting nobody could do this by hand. It would be impossible because the edges of each one is different, it is not cut out of a pattern, shapes very slowly change and you don't know where the moment of

change is. When you stand here you see differently when you move you see differently, in a way it is a reflection of what is around us.

Earlier works are oil paint and they took me a long time to do. What is very important to me in these paintings is the surface quality. It was very difficult to try to work the surface out. I put a sheet of vinyl down and these shapes were cut. I then I had to stick the shapes out, pull the vinyl away, paint over the top. That surface was very difficult. I eventually found a technique where I would paint acrylic and then build up oil paint on top. There is a lot of technique in it. Everyday I wrote on what I did during 2003–04 and I kept that book to remind myself how I did it. I found that book last year and couldn't understand a word, nothing.

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YV: You were the first female teacher at Slade Art School, London in 1968 and have taught for 31 years. Could you talk about that experience?

TJ: That is correct. The professor then was a wonderful man called Coldstream, and he had said, “While I am a professor, no women will cross the threshold of Slade” Eight years after I left school, I met one of the senior tutors and he said, “you must come in and talk to the students.” I thought I couldn’t do that because of what Coldstream had said, but the tutor insisted, so I went in to teach. I enjoyed it, the students enjoyed it, and they asked me back again. That was already 1968; they were just about starting to notice women artists.

I loved teaching young students. There is something about working with young artists when they are discovering what it means to be an artist that I like very much. I am still interested to see what they are doing now. It is more difficult for young artists today than it was in my generation; there are so many movements and the world moves on so fast.

YV: What is your take on the effects of technology in art today?

TJ: Artists have always welcomed new technology;. During the 15th century paint was a new technology. When I was a student, masking tape was incredibly high technology for us. So of course art reflects what is happening in society. What is difficult now is that it is moving so fast. I don’t know what I would do if I was 18, to some extent I am glad I am not 18. Incredible amount of information is available at the press of a button now. Back in my time I had to walk down a long lane, wait for a bus for half an hour, walk twenty minutes across town, go to the town library, order the book and wait three weeks until they got it in for me, Now you go home and press a button, it is amazing, isn’t it? I don’t know what it means; does one remember things more if you put more effort into it? On the other hand it is unbelievable how much the young generation knows and how articulate they are.

YV: Lastly, what is your stance on life? Do you have a personal philosophy as an artist?

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TJ: That is a very difficult question. I believe that you have to be lucky; don't be an artist unless you have no choice. You are an artist if that is the only thing you want to do. It is not a career choice, it is a calling. The rewards are in working, they are not material. Not many artists become rich, it is not an artist's business to become rich. It is an artist's business to do good work.

When the work doesn't go well and you don't know how to move on, how do you keep going? Get on with the next thing, that is the answer. Everybody has that to some extent in their lives, everybody has hard time in whatever it is that they do, but the world doesn't particularly want art, so you have to believe in it.

I was born in Central Europe a year and a half before the war; I have to be grateful that I have been allowed a pretty good life. Now we see everything that's happening in the world. I had the luck and one should be grateful for that.

On view through May 25, 2017

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