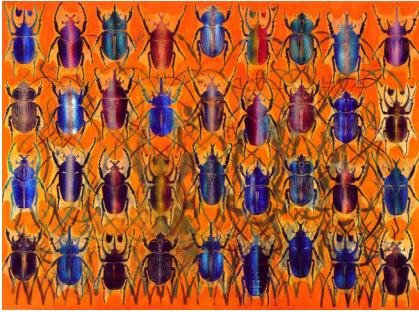


Brooks Adams

PHILIP TAAFFE'S IMAGINARY CITY



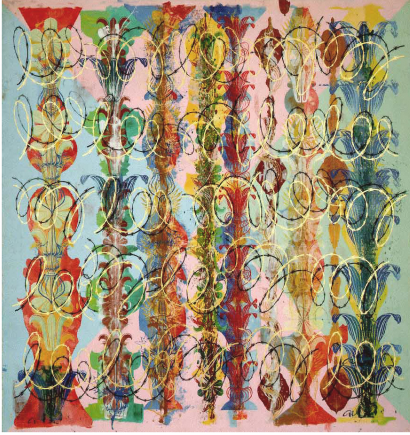
Scarabesque, 1993–94
Mixed media on canvas
76-1/4 x 104-1/2 inches (193.5 x 265.5 cm)

Nature entered Philip Taaffe's painted world roughly in 1993-4, when huge heraldic beetles suddenly appeared, deployed as if in military formation, across. *Scarabesque*. Butterflies, lizards, snakes, palm fronds and ferns have since appeared, along with all manner of tiny insects to complete the ecological fiction — as food, in some cases, for the larger plants and animals. In each painting, according to the artist, “there is an issue of what can be sustained.” In daily life he has gone as far as to add barnyard animals, a pair of live roosters called Fanny and Mabel, to the grand terraced precincts of his midtown Manhattan atelier.

The question of feeding and survival clearly applies to the artist as well as to his depicted forms: how to continue living off the shards of desiccated irony, postmodern-style; how to inject fresh life into one's own saturated, fin-de-siecle view — these are some of the issues for this present work.

Cycles of natural history — growth, predation and decay — have long been part of Taaffe's iconography. But increasingly the early modern linkages drawn between natural history and the history of ornament have become a consuming passion for the painter. Taaffe's library is full of books on both flora and fauna and the decorative arts, and the reproductions in these books are often appropriated by the artist and blown up into photo-silk-screens, cardboard stencils and relief prints. In his art we may sense something redolent of that early modernist zeal that saw the fields of zoology and painting, ethnology and architecture, psychiatry and textile design as being mutually complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

The three large paintings made expressly for this exhibition at the Vienna Secession are radically inclusive, and in fact propose a muralistic breadth that is determinedly public. For all their hieratic distance, they are purposefully open and all-embracing in their embodiment of animal and vegetable community. The exhibition at the Secession revolves around an idea Taaffe describes as “the city be it Abidjian, New York or Vienna as a container for culture and vitality that is simultaneously utopian and in a state of collapse.” The artist says that his ambition in the paintings “is to make a parenthesis around the century, in light of the fact that the Secession is almost a century old.”



Polis, 1996
Mixed media on canvas
158 x 151-1/2 inches (401 x 385 cm)

On a September visit to the artist’s studio, a former school building that is an agglomeration of neo-Romanesque and Bauhaus sections, I pore over the three large works in progress. Two unstretched canvases are in the main room: a painting that will have lizards in it, *Imaginary City*, is up on the wall, and an enormous work *Megapolis* is stretched out on the floor. A third brightly colored canvas, *Polis*, is on the floor in the back room.

Polis seemed the furthest along. Its graphic repeating imagery of lilies rises in vertical columns, its Pop-inflected, off register hues of light blue, orange and green suggesting some previously unknown Warhol wallpaper pattern, perhaps the cow crossed with the flower. Taaffe tells me that these strong vertical repeats are going to be mediated, but not softened, by swirling loops of barbed wire, to be rendered in gold leaf and black ink. The bizarre idea of rendering the lethally sharp razor ribbon in 24-karat gold is described as having “something to do with the coexistence of luxury and violence in shaping the visual environment.”

At this point Taaffe is already clear on the way the scrolling gold forms will echo the golden dome of the Secession. (On a subsequent visit, he told me that he wanted to reflect upon Gustav Klimt’s dining room mosaics, and their gold scrolls, in the Palais Stoclet in Brussels.)

But with *Polis*, of course, the implication is also of a Greek city-state. The reference to an ideal community of shared responsibility undercuts the

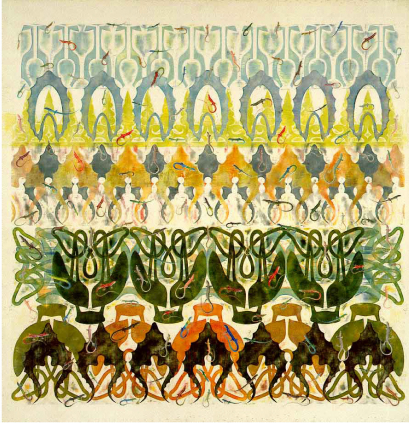
property divisions implied by the barbed wire. The artist was quick to point out that “the invention of barbed wire coincides with the realization of modern agricultural land divisions in the 19th century; the wire was devised to keep cattle grazing within prescribed limits. Later, during wartime, it was used as a medium of defense.” Razor ribbon, he added, is a more recent invention, only about 10 years old. But the whole idea of depicting barbed wire in the Viennese context inevitably brings up the imagery of concentration camps. When the painting is in Vienna, I wonder if the lilies will be seen as emblems of transfigured suffering. The symbolism of the Easter Lily would not be lost on the artist, who was raised Roman Catholic and whose works have been taking on increasingly iconic organizations. Indeed, even at an early stage of its development, Polis already looked like a highly abstracted vision of carnage and rebirth.



Megapolis, 1996
Mixed media on canvas
165-1/2 x 375-1/2 inches (420 x 954 cm)

Megapolis, the largest of the three paintings for Vienna, is a gargantuan work, 14 feet high by 30 feet long which, when I saw it, was lying on its back, covering almost all the floor space in the artist's huge, main studio. It looked like some sort of palace rug with jagged stripes (by that time Taaffe was already referring to them as “columns”) and a back-ground of silk-screened scroll forms. Back in September, in other words, he was more or less finished splicing together the cutout edges of discarded stencils with which he jerrybuilt the columns. In *Megapolis* those columns are based on several disparate sources that have been traced from recycled printing fragments; such is the biology of Taaffe's process. For this artist, process is, among other things, an elaborate dare to the imagination. At one point he

wanted to show me how easily a huge piece of paper — what he calls an “edge” — could be lifted off the canvas. In fact he manipulates these long strips of paper by means of attached cardboard handles. When he lifted one, however, the whole edge suddenly reared up like an Indonesian puppet. Such an edge would also be printed in reverse, so as to effect symmetry a notion that Taaffe suddenly lambasted as “a Pandora’s box of deathlike impossibility.” He went on to explain:



Imaginary City, 1996
Mixed media on canvas
153-3/4 x 154-1/2 inches (390.5 x 392.5 cm)

“Symmetry never exists in nature and is an imaginary construct.” (Yet clearly the artist is fascinated by the concept, and a flirtation with symmetry maybe what draws him to ferns. Taaffe has been using these plant forms, photographed from pressed specimen in the Bronx Botanical Garden and made into silkscreens, extensively in the past few months.)

In September Taaffe spoke at length of how he wanted to work in a completely improvised way when making *Megapolis*. The big canvas had only penciled annotations along the edges that determined the placement of each cutout edge of paper. But there were no sketches, except for one small diagram with lots of arithmetic on it. Therefore establishing the columns as poles was of paramount importance. “Otherwise there is no way to determine how to make the painting. It’s a series of actions, and this is a first, groping effort to find a location that can be built upon.”

Imaginary City is a horizontally banded composition. In its upper zones an Uzbekistani tile design has been aggrandized to over-scale mural effect. The lower zones include a whiplash repeat appropriated from a Josef Hoffmann bookplate a small decorative motif now blown up into a colossal graphic pattern. Writ large and grassy green, the bookplate motif alone has a snaky resonance. As of September, furthermore, lizards were about to enter the scene.

I visited Taaffe’s studio again in early October to see a group of paintings that were soon to leave for an exhibition at the Max Hetzler Gallery in Berlin. These were mostly tall, totemic works of a burnt, scorched, autumnal coloration with imprinted leaf forms that immediately made me think

of both Robert Rauschenberg and Walt Whitman. Taaffe's shadowy leaf forms suggest an affinity with Rauschenberg's late '40s body prints made with his wife Susan Weil: like Rauschenberg's early works, Taaffe's paintings have a scrappy immediacy and veiled figurative allusions. His new naturalistic elements also bring to mind Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, with their plainsong strength. *Leaves of Grass* was widely read and influential in the formulation of all sorts of vitalistic, "new man" creeds ca. 1900 and would have been known by the original members of the Berlin and Vienna Secessions. A century later, much in Taaffe's art embodies a similar sort of American manly address. Yet Taaffe's work is not afraid of speaking in tender, lush, even feminine tones.

Pursuing the American-ness of Taaffe's paintings a bit further on that second visit, I began to see how what might be called the controlled, aleatory experiment of the columns had something in common with Andy Warhol's mid-'80s "Rorschach" paintings, which were on view this fall in New York in a double show at Gagosian Gallery. Taaffe may have recently eschewed the post-Warholian dandyism that to some extent shaped his Neapolitan phase, yet he continues to build on a Warholian stance of pictorial ambiguity. (One night in the studio he mentioned that he had even contemplated walking his roosters down the sidewalk on a leash, much as Gérard de Nerval walked his pet lobster down the Blvd. St. Germain.) It was a double eureka to discover in Taaffe's bookshelves, next to the volumes pertaining to Vienna, an old copy of Herman Rorschach's *Psychodiagnostics* (Bern, 1921). (Within these loose-bound plates were not only the familiar black and white inkblots but also the chromatic versions that Warhol may have been referring to in his series of small, brightly colored "Rorschach" paintings.) Clearly, Taaffe's own enigmatic forms allude as well to that crucial early period of the 20th century when art and psychoanalysis were still symbiotically intertwined. If Warhol was hardly the first to combine the tools of diagnostic science and art, Taaffe is still exploring this suggestive and suggestible terrain.

On my second visit *Megapolis* was still on the floor in the main studio, but now its columns were entirely covered over with what the artist called

“gangplanks” or “catwalks.” These permitted printing and painting around the blanked-out areas. It was not yet possible to get a clear sense of what Megapolis would ultimately look like, but the other two Secession paintings were almost finished. In early October *Imaginary City* had battalions of cutout lizards stuck on the wall on either side of the unstretched painting, awaiting their marching orders. Nearby two assistants were patiently cutting out homemade rubber-stamped decals of insects from sheets of Japanese Gampi paper. These mosquitoes and cicadas might also be inserted in the painting.

Taaffe’s attraction to lizards was ignited one moonlit night on a terrace in Puerto Rico. This *coup de foudre* eventually led to an excursion to Queens, New York, and a visit to a pet shop called Reptilia. He sought a live iguana which he might photograph for use in the Vienna painting. Iguanas proved too hard to handle for a photo shoot. The outing ended instead with the purchase of a glossy color book on Australian lizards, from which he borrowed numerous images that he rephotographed, had made into silkscreens and introduced into *Imaginary City*. Now lizards graze in the curves and rhyme with the sinuous forms of the blown-up bookplate. Issues of relative scale, of organic vs. inorganic form are thoroughly confounded in the earthly precincts of Taaffe’s horizontally handed metropolis. Abstracted diadems float on high in the silvery, upper zones. Thus the stratospheres of *Imaginary City* are truly regal, celestial in the Byzantine manner.

Two weeks later, in mid October, *Megapolis*, still on the floor, reveals sepia columns, now more fully articulated. Although a few inches were soon added at the top, the painting’s organizing principles had become clarion clear. Even so, however, I wondered how it was going to look in the Secession. Would it seem like a Baroque stage set with serpentine columns? Or would it look more African, like a processional frieze of ancestor figures? Knowing that Taaffe had been to see the mammoth “Africa: Art of a Continent” show at the Guggenheim during the past summer, I was curious to find out if he saw connections between African masks and the horned mask forms that were cropping up in

smaller paintings around the studio. But Taaffe denied any explicit connection between those forms and African masks, claiming that one horned form in particular had been generated from a broken cardboard stencil. Nevertheless, my African clues were still compelling me, and no doubt joining a long line of Western moderns on a tribal trail, I found myself thinking of a procession of objects from Benin and Dogon on the Guggenheim ramp whenever I thought of Taaffe's lizard-inhabited city.

Spirals crop up continually in the artist's work. The ones in the background of *Megapolis* were appropriated from rubbings of ironwork that the artist made on Capri several years ago. The artist seems to see spirals, pinwheels — Taaffian forms — wherever he goes. For instance, a spiral informs the plan of the 1510 pulpit in St. Stephens Dom in Vienna, a work of flamboyant Late Gothic carving that Taaffe continually mentions with regard to *Imaginary City*. Intricately carved lizards or basilisks crawl up the pulpit's bannister, and it is but a leap from this Viennese lizard spiral to the reptiles that graze in the furrows of the spiraling lines of Taaffe's painting. Lizards are benign forms in both the pulpit and in Taaffe's art: they are the salamanders that can pass through hellfire, change colors and remain unscathed. While we were looking at *Imaginary City* in mid October, Taaffe nailed their crucial aspect — a quicksilver, 'now you see them, now you don't' quality, like apparitions, or even as the artist suggested, "an epiphany." Lizards were also beginning to suggest an alternate incarnation of the artist.

A third visit to the artist's studio in late October saw *Polis* all but finished, *Imaginary City* awaiting a few more mosquitoes for the lizards to eat, and *Megapolis* now almost fully emerged from its chrysalis. The only hitch was that an eight-foot high scaffolding was the one effective viewing vantage; even from on high, however, this 30-footer was a slow, demanding take. From my aerial view, this enormous mural had something of the syncopated beat of jungle paintings by the Cuban Wifredo Lam. Taaffe seemed to confirm this interpretation when out of the blue he said: "The columns look like Central African ancestral figures left in the woods." So there was African content in the Vienna paintings after all. Yet urbanism

was also everywhere apparent: the syncopation of city traffic, teeming marketplaces, jostling subway straphangers.

Whatever else it may ultimately be, *Megapolis* will be a eurhythmic vision, a late-century processional that addresses such early-century Secessionists as Hodler, Klinger, Khnopff and Klimt. This painting furthermore goes far beyond the conventions of Taaffe's single-totem pictures — backwards, in a sense, towards the emphatically lateral, “all-over” canvases of Abstract Expressionism. But this painting is considerably larger than anything Pollock or Newman ever attempted, more on the scale of scenography. In fact last year Taaffe designed his first theatrical backdrop, for choreographer Karole Armitage's *Scheherazade* which premiered in Florence in October 1995. Maybe the columns of *Megapolis* will seem to be waltzing in Vienna.

Some years back, after tracking a group of Taaffe's paintings through months of gestation, describing their evolution and then seeing them change utterly at the last minute, I vowed not to write about his unfinished work again. All too often their fully realized effect bears little relation to their in-process states. But perhaps this delayed gratification is intrinsic to Taaffe's method: the paintings are in the works for a long time, carefully plotted out and elaborately built up, but finally only finished, in a kind of ceremonial frenzy, at the eleventh hour.

Taaffe's late-century paintings are further proof of what Warhol, Rauschenberg and Johns have intimated since the '50s: that both explicit and subliminal imagery can be introduced to abstraction, without changing its gestalt — that representations, in other words, can be deployed abstractly. It's as if some long-held, self-imposed proscription against graven imagery had suddenly been lifted, and the artist's roiling arabesques were finally free to sprout flowers, leaves, heads and tails. The reptile has become Taaffe's arabesque, and the dance of multiple silkscreenings on the floor his shaman's way with drawing. Again a parable of survival and self-discovery is suggested a plunge into a Joseph Conradian heart of darkness, embodied here by the jungle of appropri-

ated forms followed by a reemergence once again into an urbane atmosphere, into *civitas*, hearing the millenarian message of chaos and loss as well as of hard-won order and chimerical beauty.