

Michel Bulteau

COMPLEXITY AND GRACE

Thaddaeus Ropac, PARIS

Philip Taaffe has looked, read, and traveled much. All of these benefits have been unpredictably employed in his paintings, in new ways that we as viewers are often unaccustomed to recognizing as “subject matter” Like a necromancer-electrician, Taaffe throws himself into new connections among the elements of Islamic architecture, Pompeiian mural paintings, the torpors of Op Art, natural history engravings, Etruscan frescoes, and the rose windows of Gothic cathedrals. He is immersed in a continual visual meditation, perfectly aware of his point of departure, while keeping his destination always in view. He consistently manages to focus his direction without restricting the material results.

Louis Aragon clearly perceived the necromantic side of artists. He spoke of it brilliantly after a visit to Matisse in a bright room “amid realized images of the unrealizable,” at his refuge at Cimiez. He revealed: “And suddenly, in this room I find myself inside a cave. Inside another cave. Insuperably, the drawing made me think of the pictorial languages of distant eras, when man drew the buffaloes of early Europe on cave walls. Naturally, that led me to an Italian grotto near Vespignano, where around 1290, a shepherd boy drew in charcoal or chalk what he saw ‘but was not satisfied to merely see.’ By such lost drawings did a passerby, Cimabue, discover young Giotto. From them originated the work that disrupted painting. From their hearkening back to the primitive writing of those who initiated written signs, marks the start of modern times.” This trajectory, like a stone hurled from the night of art, is endlessly explored in Philip Taaffe’s new works.

In *Terpsichore* (2000-01), there is no point in looking for the muse's lyre. The idea of a ballet mécanique maybe found in this wild representation. Jaws of heavy animals like horses, cows, and hippopotamuses have little to do with the birds Leopardi praised as "careless of distance, rising up in the air at one stretch with stupefying ease, from ground level to the highest regions." Yet in a surrealist ploy, the painter tied the open-and-shut jaws with eighteenth-century lace in order to show a bit of lightness! Can a more adamant frenzy be imagined than this gymnopédie in black and white?



Terpsichore, (2000-01)
Mixed media on canvas.
101 x 80-3/4 inches (256 x 206 cm)

From visible references, Taaffe knows how to make new meanings spring forth. In some ways, *Avicenna* (2000-01) recalls the vertiginous vision Taaffe explored in his earliest works. In its blue, red, and yellow optical dance, *Avicenna* is linked to the doctor-philosopher Avicenna's "Illuminative Philosophy," as well as Louis de Broglie's wave mechanics. Taaffe organizes form and movement in order to assume Rimbaud's unutterable "derangement of the senses." Yet the painting's syntax has little relation to writing: no story occupies the spectator's eye, but instead a real colored curve, a touch of red in a green estuary. These marks channel the meaning within the canvas. As gestural clues, they indicate space in an effort to find the expressive connection between matter and form; they are the needle's eye through which a glance passes, before fixing upon the wider view.

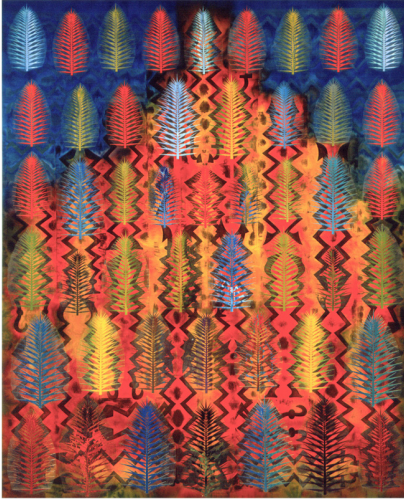


Avicenna, (2000-01)
Mixed media on canvas.
35-1/2 x 67-3/4 inches (90 x 173 cm)

A singular obstacle for the present-day critic is the role of the "decorative" in painting. Here we must not forget Matisse's 1945 statement that "the decorative in artworks is extremely precious. It is an essential quality. It isn't pejorative to say that an artist's paintings are decorative. All of the early French masters were decorative." Taaffe's "decorative" elements are in fact fragments indicative of "cultural reality," of civilizations present or extinct. Through the painter's vision, these elements turn into a newly illuminated reality. They participate in the complexity and grace of his painting.

Philip Taaffe is a gatherer. His pictorial stance may be called shamanistic. The painter's travels through the history of art (painting, architecture, craft and the decorative arts), and natural history, are comparable to a shaman's

ecstatic flights. Each art historical manifestation “visited” by the artist may be ranked alongside cosmic zones, shamanistic operating grounds. This exercise is always about healing, with mastery and balance. (In the case of painting, a uniting of genres should be mentioned.) Taaffe himself has commented upon this fundamental operation in his aesthetic: “My attitude towards repetition has to do with the cumulative effect of continuous applications of line and color. If we focus on that, and see them as crystallized into patterns or marks, what do they add up to? They become some kind of actively structured field. I see that as being an entrance to a trance-like state. I’m interested in inviting the possibility for ecstatic experience, for getting outside of stasis.” And before we leave the cave that Aragon wrote of, in a famous Lascaux painting, we perceive within a bird-headed man a bird perched on a post. In this image, Horst Kirchner observed the representation of a shamanistic trance, a definition that may well be applied to certain of Taaffe’s key works.



Façade, (2000–01)
Mixed media on canvas.
111-1/2 x 90-1/2 inches (284 x 230 cm)

Floating above the palm trees in *Façade* (2000-01), we feel the warm light flowing underneath like blood. For the Assyrians, the palm tree was a symbol of generative nature, or better yet, the world’s womb. When the curtain of fluorescent palms blurs, we find an amber-glowing world of active forms (Taaffe often speaks of “vorticist energy”), with the theme in the forefront always visible, yet now seen differently. The viewer is struck by nature’s immateriality, and the flexibility of ideas of surface and depth. *Façade* is also concerned with this force of repetition as another ingredient in the rhythmic play. In this sense there is some accordance in principle with Roger de Piles’ definition in *Cours de peinture par principes avec une balance des peintres* (1708): “Arrangement in a painting is nothing but the assemblage of several parts whose harmony and precision must be planned in order to produce a fine effect.”



Damascus, (2001)
Mixed media on canvas.
90 x 117-1/2 inches (228.5 x 298.5 cm)

Damascus (2001) may be best described in terms of harmony and precision. This inexhaustible painting is an homage to the Grand Mosque of Damascus, the most important religious building left by the Umayyad dynasty. Taaffe is intrigued by the Byzantine-period eighth-century mosaics in the mosque, made of small squares of gilded and colored-glass com-

pound, with scattered mother-of-pearl fragments. Moreover, the technique and inspiration of this setting owes much to Hellenistic tradition. Philip Taaffe was necessarily seduced by such magnificent continuity. As the art historian Eustache de Lorey wrote, “Arab civilization, brilliant under the first Caliphs, shone with borrowed light, and its art was only a variation on local art that followed the commands of the Koranic religion... By magnificently decorating the Mosque at Damascus, Caliph Al-Walid labored for the glory of his enemies as much as for his own glory.”



Lunapark, (2001)
Mixed media on canvas.
167 x 115 inches (424 x 292 cm)

As always with Philip Taaffe’s paintings, one is struck by the interdependent balance of theme and form. Looking at the fire-colored dancing forms of the bell-shaped capitals in *Damascus*, one may call to mind the nostalgia for the desert that the Umayyad princes retained. The rivers tending to impassability and the black trees seem to have triumphed over time. Cruciform plants and a garland of fruits cut into halves effectively mark the painting’s limits and reinforce the importance of the center — what Aristotle called the “motionless motor” — a place where opposites are resolved.

Lunapark (2001) is partly an homage to an early Giacomo Balla painting that also bears this title (visible today at the Milan Pinacoteca). The Balla painting has long been one of Taaffe’s favorite works from the history of art, and described by the artist as “one of the first scenes of electricity at night, a very beautiful scene of a carnival that is electrified.” The painting’s repeated background motif, both Egyptian and art nouveau, is a useful springboard for what is imaginary. The colors green, blue, and red are sparing. They cover precisely the fire beneath the ash. The forms in the paintings — ominous and poised — are derived from early twentieth century German stylized renderings of seeds and seed casings, which are falling to earth in a process of rebirth.

In *Lunapark*, the “wheels,” whose appearance recalls the Rosicrucians’ Carta Mundi, turn in both directions. It is a way for the painter to neutralize time. We are plunged into an “eternal present” in the artist’s own words. When contemplating spirals, one experiences a feeling of time melting away. The notion of infinity is also present. The theme of spirals often

recurr in Philip Taaffe's paintings. We may point to *Passionale per circumulum anni* (1993-94), *Eros and Psyche* (1993-94), and more recently *Spiraling Totem (Yellow)* (2000) and *Spiraling Totem (Red)* (2000). The spiral's circular motion, a defining subject indeed, had to attract Taaffe as a disciple of organized precision in constant transformation.



Pharos, 2001
Mixed media on canvas. 111-1/2 x 40-1/2
inches (283 x 103 cm)

In an age of electricity, there is all the more to say about fire. Max Friedrich Muller wrote in *Origin and Development of Religion* (1879): "And when primitive man thought of fire and named it, what must have happened to him? He named it only after what he did as consummator and illuminator." "Consummation" and "illumination" are two words that belong to the vocabulary of ceremonial rites. Of a distinctly ceremonial nature is *Pharos* (2001), a companion work to *Lunapark*. A vertical canvas, it is one of the "totems" that the artist has sometimes raised: *Skeletal Totem* (1996-97), *Flowering Totem* (1998-99), and *Ornamental Totem* (2000). *Pharos* also fits within another genre of painting Taaffe has frequently explored: the nocturne. The artist has spoken of the work as reminiscent of scenes experienced in India at night, evoking the same lushness of foliage, richness of colors, and intensity of light. Taaffe is partial to the accumulation of signs, symbols, and pathways. This allows him to achieve an unexpected clarity of expression. His formidable power comes from maintaining himself within both historical and mythic truths. He knows how to draw from night's majesty a world that confronts the viewer with beginnings and their highly unexpected interpretations.

The painting *Composition with Gemstones* (2001) is an attempt to revive the primordial. The mineral forms are captured in growth, like embryos within the earth. In *Composition with Gemstones* we approach meteorites, those other stones of light. Here, we are in the chthonic domain. The painter's idea is to show that precious stones are born in subterranean solitude and darkness (hence the black border of the canvas) and that nature perfects its products, transforming them into vessels of light. One might also mention the link that exists between hidden treasure (or precious stones) and the pathway of purification (the spiral or labyrinth) that leads to the immortal regions (the netherworld). The same allusion to the netherworld recurs in

a famous alchemical saying, an acrostic of the word “Vitriolum” (or vitriol): “Visita Inferiora [or sometimes Interiora] Terrae, Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem, Veram Medicinam.” (“Visit the earth’s interior, through purification you shall find the hidden stone.”)

To lose oneself in *Toccata* (2001) is to enter into the canvas’s sizable sonic zone. As in Rimbaud’s sonnet “Voyelles,” colors are associated in unprecedented ways with graphic signs that may appear to be broken letters. *Toccata* makes us understand that our state of consciousness is tied to the balance and flux of contradictory currents of energy. A painting’s beauty exists in the echo of its every part, one to another. The artist has painted almost purely idealized figures against a supernal background. One feels that the surface of the canvas is animated in a celestial manner. The golden thread that William Blake adored unrolls, leading to Heaven’s gate.

For the painter Philip Taaffe, the world’s antiquity is not a maze in which to get lost, but a labyrinth in which to discover a deeper identity. In his Manhattan studio, he explained to me that he often thinks of his paintings as giant illuminated manuscripts. Looking at his paintings is like turning the pages of a richly illuminated psalter, one that inherently embodies the enigma and influence of the Middle Ages. This sense of continuity, whether of historical amplitude or geological stratum (which one has already observed in the context of Damascus), needs to be mentioned once again. Indeed, in the lyrical embellishment of letters, foliated scrolls, and interlacings of Merovingian and Visigothic manuscripts, there are strong ties to the Celtic imagination. Of course, Taaffe doesn’t deny the “theatrical” dimension of his works. He likewise admits his debt to the Abstract Expressionists. But it is an altogether unusual idea to build upon the ground of Abstract Expressionism a monument to the Middle Ages! The author of *Avicenna* understands that the truth of myth always involves some distinct reinvention of reality. Philip Taaffe, in the words Cocteau used to describe Picasso, is “a painter who only gets involved with what looks at him.” But his area of investigation is vast. If it is said that faith moves mountains, then Philip Taaffe’s faith in the possibilities for painting makes indifference vanish. He knows how to enlarge the eye.



Composition with Gemstones, (2001)
Mixed media on canvas.
85 x 61-1/4 inches (216 x 156 cm)



Toccata, (2001)
Mixed media on canvas.
125-3/4 x 117-1/8 inches
(319.5 x 297.5 cm)

—Michel Bulteau

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MICHEL BULTEAU is a French poet, essayist, occasional musician and experimental filmmaker, born on 8 October 1949 in Arcueil. He has written more than sixty books including poetry, art criticism, biographies (Allen Ginsberg, James Dean, Andy Warhol) as well as journals and essays. He has been an editor of the *Nouvelle Revue de Paris*.