

---

---

# The Print Collector's Newsletter

Vol. XXIV No. 6 January-February 1994

© Print Collector's Newsletter, Inc., 1994. All rights reserved.

---

---



# The Print Collector's Newsletter

Vol. XXIV, No. 6 January–February 1994

Editor: Jacqueline Brody  
Associate Editor: Faye Hirsch  
Assistant Editor: Tim Griffin  
Contributing Editor: Cathy Peck

## Contents:

<i>The Tabernacle of Philip Taaffe</i> by Brooks Adams .....	205
<i>The Critic &amp; the Art Market:</i> <i>A Quorum</i> by Faye Hirsch .....	211
<i>Readings: The Prints of</i> <i>Frances Whitehead</i> by Kristen Brooke Schleifer .....	216
<i>News of the Print World</i> .....	218
<i>Prints &amp; Photographs Published</i> .....	224
<i>Multiples &amp; Objects &amp; Books</i> .....	227
<i>Museum &amp; Dealer Catalogues</i> .....	228
<i>Artist's Book Beat</i> by Nancy Princenthal .....	230
<i>Books in Review</i> .....	232
Les XX and the Belgian Avant-Garde: Prints, Drawings, and Books ca. 1890 reviewed by Richard S. Field; Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism reviewed by David Rimanelli.	
<i>International Auction Review</i> .....	238
<i>PCN Directory</i> .....	243
Cover: Philip Taaffe, <i>Snake Eyes</i> , mixed media on linen (73x88 in.), 1993. Cour- tesy Gagosian Gallery, New York.	

The Print Collector's Newsletter  
119 East 79th Street  
New York, NY 10021  
(212) 988-5959

The Print Collector's Newsletter (ISSN 0032-8537) is published bimonthly by Print Collector's Newsletter, Inc., 119 East 79th Street, New York, NY 10021. Second-class postage paid at New York, NY. Postmaster: send address changes to The Print Collector's Newsletter, 119 East 79th Street, New York, NY 10021. No part of this periodical may be published without the written permission of the publisher. Subscription rates: one year, \$60.00; one year, international airmail, \$78.00; three years, \$162.00; three years, international airmail, \$216.00. Back issues: \$7.00 each. PCN ring binder: \$9.00. Indexed by Art Index, Artbibliographies, LOMA, and BHA.

## THE TABERNACLE OF PHILIP TAAFFE by Brooks Adams

One of the best abstract painting shows of 1993 took place not in New York, Paris, London, Cologne, or Los Angeles but in Miami, Florida—that revived center of Art Deco historicism and Latin American chutzpah. There from April 2 to June 20, at the Center for the Fine Arts, was an exhibition of new work by Philip Taaffe that museums and galleries around the world would have killed for. Under the aegis of an enterprising young curator named Louis Grachos (currently acting director of the museum), the show was modest in size, comprising only 11 paintings, hung mostly in a single gallery and spilling out into the front hall. It was accompanied by a glossy pamphlet that, to this reader's surprise, turned out to be full of detailed revelations about the paintings, many of them taken from an interview between Grachos and the artist.

Strange affinities existed between the Miami setting and Taaffe's architectonic abstractions. It was as if the Miami Beach architects who designed the modernist synagogues of the '50s and '60s were looking for inspiration at the same kinds of Moroccan and Middle Eastern architectural ornament that inspire Taaffe in his profoundly Orientalist art. Conversely, many of his paintings, for example *North African Strip* (1993), might be taken as the ultimate form of postmodernist temple decoration. With its rich accretions of stenciled patterning derived from actual templates used by Moroccan craftsmen to embellish tables and shelving, the painting has a literal relationship to the buildings of Fez and Marrakesh. In a more general sense, the pointedly Hispanic conceit of Philip Johnson's bland '80s design for the center, complete with wrought-iron grillwork and curved tile roofs, found an ideal complement, and a higher realization, in Taaffe's odes to ecclesiastical ironwork. In particular, his gigantic tondo *Rosette* (1987), with its complicated black latticework and psychedelic color progressions, presided over the entrance to the museum and seemed to bring that empty shell up to par with the resonances of Islamic architecture.

Not every painting in the show attained this high level of realization. One large diptych, *St. John's Gate* (1993), based on a rubbing that Taaffe made of an iron gate from a church in his neighborhood in Manhattan, seemed to stop short at a relatively elementary cloisonism that the artist himself, in a gallery lecture, likened to a theater set. Great effects were sometimes achieved in smaller works, though. A medium-size canvas, *Snake Eyes* (1993), was remarkably successful in conveying the illusion of a multivalent optics. The brilliantly colored collaged elements—squiggly shapes derived from the '30s *Polygons* of the American abstractionist and disciple of Jean Arp, Charles Shaw—provide clandestine glimpses into different painting fields; many eyes, and viewpoints, are thus suggested.

The Miami show was impressive as a whole

for its lucid demonstration of Taaffe's various relationships to the arts of painting and printmaking, especially his bold annexation of printing techniques, including silkscreens, stencils, cardboard relief plates, and glass monotypes made with lithographic inks. This plethora of experimental printing helps the artist concretize his attempts to make abstract paintings, each of which he intends to evoke "a specific physical, geographical, historical, cultural place."

The tropical *genius loci* of Taaffe's work, as redolent of late Matisse in Nice as of Jane and Paul Bowles in Tangier, was maximized in Miami. But the show also gave us a fresh sense of the artist's lapsed-Catholic, New Jersey beginnings, such as might not have been quite noticed or emphasized in New York or Europe, when Taaffe rose to prominence in the mid-1980s. This revisionist glance helped to dispel the clichés that have already accumulated around Taaffe's early work, namely, that he was first and foremost a glib appropriationist. I remember being much impressed, during the heyday of the East Village scene, by Taaffe's insouciant restagings of Barnett Newman's "zip" paintings in which the young artist replaced the Abstract Expressionist's abstract stripe with a subtly imagistic collaged strip that suggested at once a braid (shades of Matisse's famous *Back* sculptures) or even more humorously, a cocktail-lounge variety of swizzle stick. (These 1985 works were not in the Miami show.) Instead, there was an opportunity to see a more unusual painting with an explicitly figurative reference, *Martyr Group* (1983), composed of rows of totemic police targets collaged with circular targets behind them, like the halos around saints' heads in Trecento art and Byzantine and Russian icons. This monumental, grisaille collage painting, so unlike the brilliant color abstractions we have come to expect from Taaffe, immediately gave rise to intense speculation on my part. Kenneth Silver has suggested in the *Hand-Painted Pop* catalogue that Jasper Johns' target paintings might be read as homoerotic self-portraits recalling the iconography of Saint Sebastian pierced with arrows. Now *Martyr Group* can be annexed to this tradition. Composed by a youthful artist, born in 1955 and living with the continual threat of a modern-day plague that has also found in Saint Sebastian a patron saint, this signally ambitious, early collage painting reveals a vision of Taaffe and his contemporaries as somehow "targeted" that is darker and more poetic, as well as more personal and programmatic, than I had ever imagined.

The Miami show also provided ample opportunity to observe how Taaffe recycles material, often returning to prints that he has been stockpiling for several years. A new painting, *Inner City* (1993), was literally made from the linocuts that Taaffe had used in such works as *Brest* (1985); both paintings were in the show and

could be closely compared. Taaffe left these linocuts behind in New York when he moved to Naples, Italy, from 1988 to 1992. There he evolved a whole new way of living and working on a grandiose scale in the Villa Pierce, which he rented in Posilipo. Returning to New York, he labored for a year to find and renovate a new studio, situated in a former school that is a strange amalgam of Beaux-Arts and 1930s Bauhaus space, on a scale commensurate with what he had become accustomed to in Naples. Unpacking his old possessions in the suite of rooms on West 30th Street that he converted into a palatial atelier, Taaffe took up these linocuts again and used them, not for a sinuous Neo-Op Art allusion as he had before, but in a bumptious composition of waving lines with a distinctly retrospective, Italianate landscape feeling. In his Miami gallery talk, Taaffe spoke of “coming back from Italy and looking at old material, and doing a painting he had wanted to do earlier—an exploded version of the earlier work.” He also referred to the truncated arcs in *Inner City* as “jazz fragments” and in the pamphlet described them as “surrealist figures inside a haunted ‘Scuola Metafisica.’” In *Brest* he had used the same wavy linocuts to more unbroken, flowing effect in direct emulation of Bridget Riley’s ‘60s Op Art abstractions.

Taaffe’s early revival of Op, like his friend Ross Bleckner’s, was a strategy that provoked much hilarity and consternation at the time, just as the Neo-Geo movement of the mid-’80s was gaining ground. Now, almost a decade later, Taaffe’s appropriations strike me as more precious and more subtly feminist than those of his former Neo-Geo cohorts, Peter Halley and Peter Schuyff. Given the macho histrionics of so many ‘80s painters, Taaffe’s espousal of Riley, as well as his championship of almost forgotten American abstractionists like Paul Feeley, Charles Shaw, and Myron Stout, seems to have paved the way for the ‘90s archaeological exhumations of these artists, such as we witnessed in the exhibition *The Sixties Art Scene in London* at the Barbican Center in London last spring, in which Riley’s work was treated with fully as much respect as that of Sir Anthony Caro. In Miami, Taaffe stressed the fact that, while Riley’s work was originally painted by assistants, his was a more craft-oriented re-creation—what he called “an obsessive, piecing together of elements.” He also stressed the fact that he had tried to emulate Riley’s subtle use of primaries, which he claims are just barely visible beneath her Op Art arabesques and, in turn, under the black and white ripples of his *Brest*. (This title may be a subtly androgynous allusion to Jean Genet’s novel *Querelle de Brest*, not to mention Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s great homoerotic film *Querelle*.)

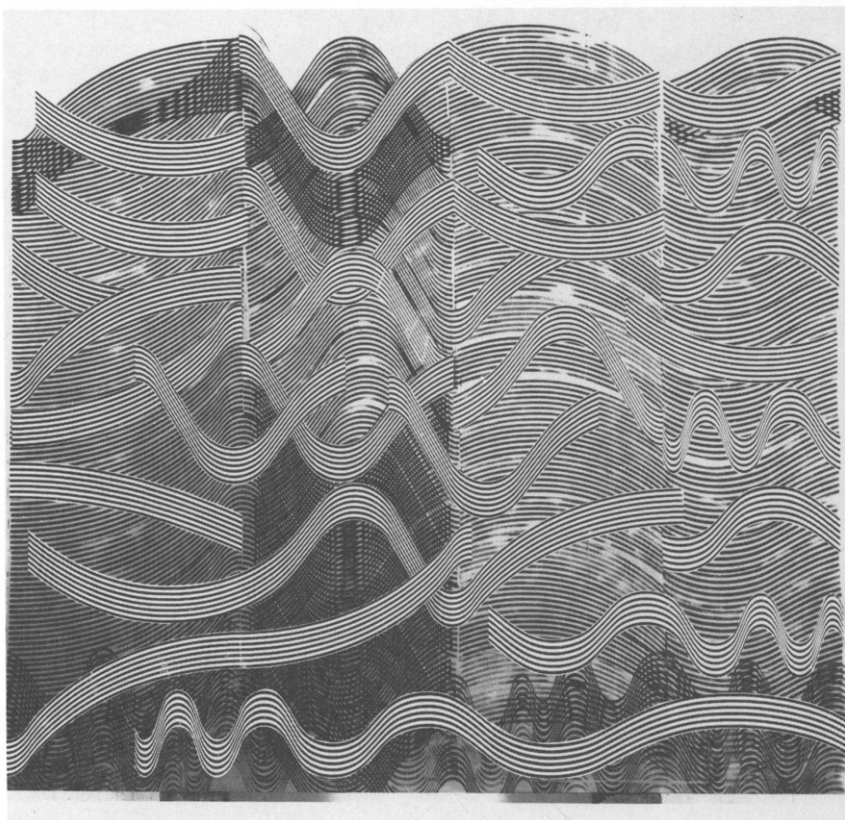
The most impressive example of Taaffe’s syncretic technique in the Miami show was a recent dreadnought of epic proportions, the large field painting *Lapidarium* (1993). This work brought the whole Abstract Expressionist tenor

of Taaffe’s ambition to the fore and inflected it with strangely medievalist overtones. This vein was of special interest to me, since I had recently spent an entire autumn piecing together evidence of ‘60s medievalism for an essay called “The 1960s: Notes on Camelot.” (This appeared in the catalogue *American Art in the 20th Century* for the show at the Royal Academy in London.) In Taaffe’s gallery talk, he compared *Lapidarium* to a rarified, illuminated manuscript on the subject of precious stones; the collaged sheets that comprised the ground of the painting would be the pages of the manuscript. Taaffe also claimed that he wanted the painting to be “very filmic, as if shot in Cinemascope, like an early color movie about a jewel heist.” (He didn’t mention *Topkapi*, but my thoughts turned immediately to that ‘60s Orientalist classic.) Taaffe admitted that he had invented the word “lapidarium” to denote a specific locale; this painting was to be “the place of the lapidary.” With its collaged ground of 12 “wipe sheets” applied in a grid pattern to canvas and its interposed imagery of hard, cutout floral and snowflake shapes, the painting has a messy, visceral quality, reminiscent of Pollock and, even more particularly, of the Canadian artist Jean-Paul Riopelle, best known for his richly veined, lapidary abstractions. Taaffe noted that he was “very aware of the gestural speed of these wipe sheets,” which he describes in the pamphlet as “part of a collection of large (folio) sheets which are impressions of lithographic ink scraped across glass.”

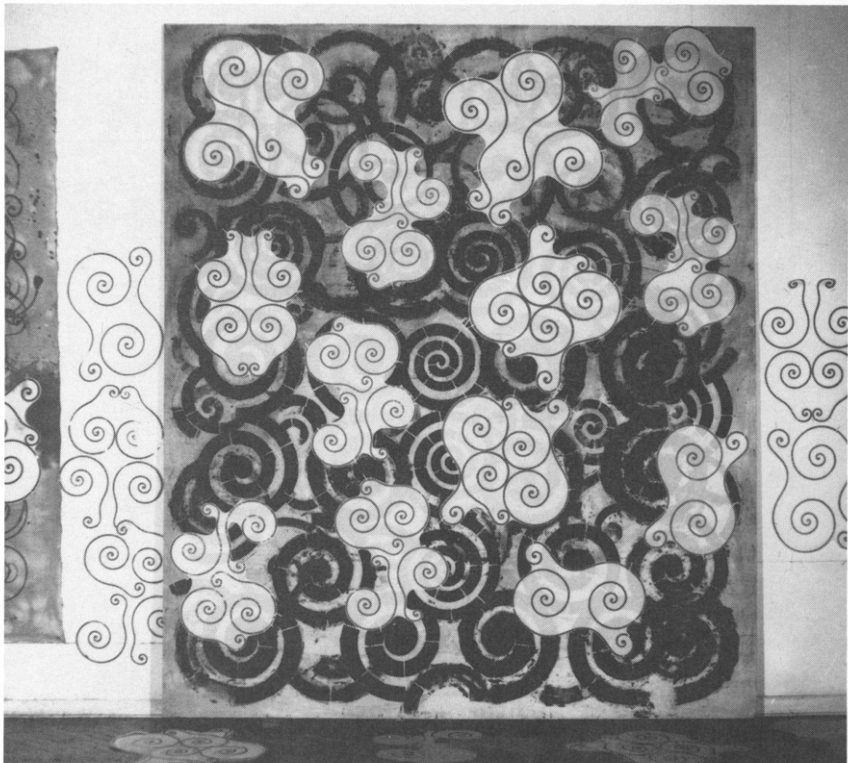
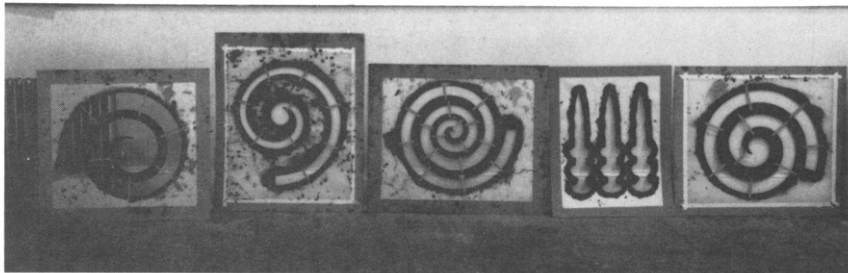
He spoke of “wanting to follow those sheets with something very different, with a superimposed imagery that cuts the speed and introduces new levels of violence and interruption.”

Here Taaffe somewhat ambiguously alluded to the example of Robert Ryman, the master of whiteness who would seem to be at the opposite pole of reductivism from the more-is-more, all-inclusive attitude of our epicurean monastic. But perhaps Ryman’s search for what he calls “The Paradoxical Absolute” and his adherence to a strict heraldic emblem, the white square, is more closely aligned with Taaffe’s pleasure-driven trajectory than we might think. Robert Storr, in his Ryman catalogue for MOMA, certainly made the case for Ryman as devoted follower of Matisse; so, of course, is Taaffe, who was invited to submit his comments on the French master to a Matisse colloquium in the October ‘92 issue of *Artforum*. Standing in front of *Lapidarium*, I found myself thinking that this was a worthy heir to Matisse’s late cutouts. I also remember running into the dealer and longtime Taaffe supporter, Jeffrey Deitch, who had just flown to Miami especially to see the show. Shaking his head in disbelief before *Lapidarium*, Deitch murmured, “This is a masterpiece,” before excusing himself to catch a plane for Los Angeles.

Subsequent visits to Taaffe’s studio in New York during the summer and autumn of 1993 revealed an artist in the throes of trying to finish one set of paintings for a show at Max Hetzler in Cologne in the fall and begin a second



Philip Taaffe, *Inner City*, mixed media on canvas (99x105 in.), 1993. Courtesy Gagolian Gallery, New York.



set of large canvases to be shown at Gagolian in April '94. The role of printmaking in this process, though seminal to Taaffe's activity, remains ambiguous. On the one hand, prints can be seen as mere fodder for the artist's painting; the linocuts and screenprints are, after all, ruthlessly cut up, discarded, and used only as fragmentary elements in larger compositions. On the other hand, prints could be said to be elevated, even apotheosized, in Taaffe's monumental abstractions. By fabricating his own readymades, the artist uses prints to achieve that special feeling of remoteness and immediacy we sense in his art. The graspability of choreographed forms in these large compositions is heightened and made more precise by the crisp line of cutout prints affixed to canvas. Prints seem to produce that sensation of one-step-removedness that gives Taaffe's paintings a special authority. The graphic media lend an air of Platonic distance, setting the emblems as if in stone and making the gestalts ever more various, precise, and tangible.

Taaffe can claim, with some justification, that he has only made a real print edition on one occasion. This was the screenprinted calendar cover he did in 1987 for the Lower East Side Printshop where he dabbled intermittently from 1985 to 1987. There he invented what he calls "a new process within the parameters of the workshop, employing a very hard, shiny silkscreen ink, usually used for glass and metal," for works on paper. The artist is quick to point out that most of the prints he makes are never used; they have what he characterizes as a "programmatically utility" and usually remain clipped together and filed by genus either in drawers, or when the supply overflows, as it often does, in piles on the floor of the 1930s classrooms. Taaffe admits that "it's a big editing process" to decide which prints he'll use in a given painting. A large work like *Herculaneum* (1991), which he made in Naples, contains 364 figures in all, and Taaffe estimates that he generated 500 prints for this project alone. Given the enormous size of his new studio, roughly 10,000 sq. ft., the artist seems to experience an even greater exhilaration now that he can have so many works in progress at the same time. "Before, I used to work on only one or two things at a time. Now the hardest thing in the studio is deciding what to work on in a given day."

One innovation that Taaffe discovered in Naples and brought home to New York is the practice of mapping some of his larger compositions on a grid laid out on the floor of his studio. In New York, he has devoted an entire classroom to this Cartesian conceit, and on occasion, you might find some of the cardboard relief plates (another technique he invented in Naples) lying around on the coor-

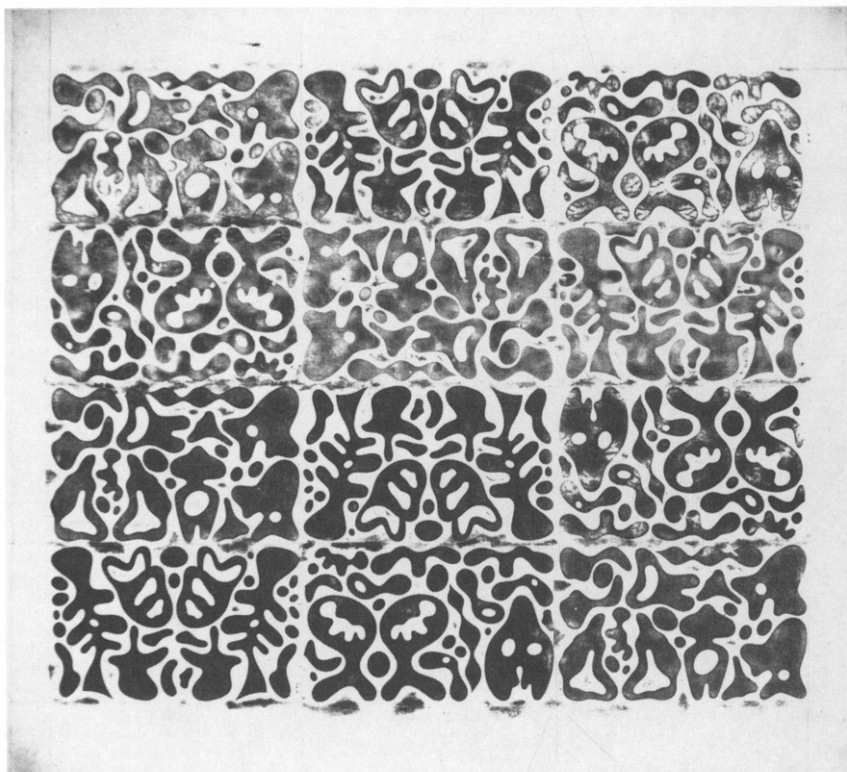
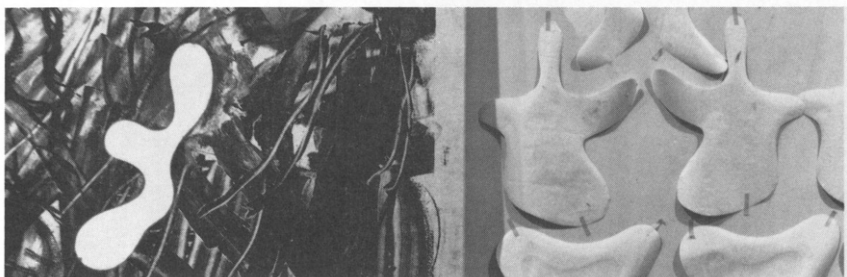
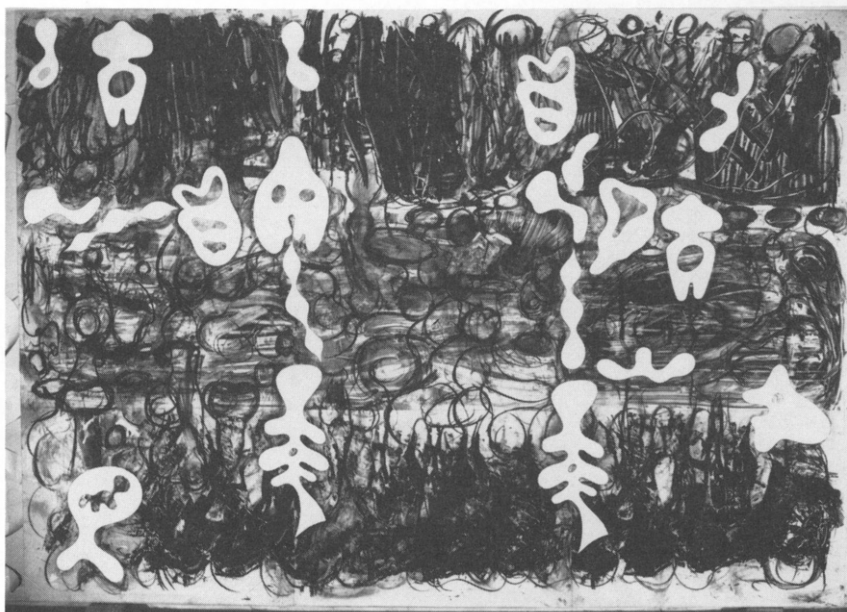
(Top) Taaffe's frame room with frames and canvases stacked against the wall and piles of prints on the floor, including "Chinese clouds," sword guards, and Shaw forms. (Center) Stencils (c. 28x34 ea.) lined against the back wall of the grid room. (Below) Work in progress, with stenciled scrolls and "Chinese clouds" taped onto two paintings and the wall.

dinates of this most rational floorplan, as if waiting to be cast in some larger, bacchanalian drama.

Among the printing techniques Taaffe has used in the last year, stenciling and screen-printing seem particularly prominent. Often the processes themselves involve liberal amounts of postmodernist archaeology and ecology, analogous to his affection for the little-known master Charles Shaw. Taaffe recounts how he bought "these 1920s stencils from a guy in New Jersey. The whole set was used and ripped." For *North African Strip*, Taaffe had used similar stencils. He employed them anyway, mounting them on cardboard so they became relief printing surfaces and often printing directly on canvas. The New Jersey stencils gradually fell apart, but from these Taaffe picked up fragments, little arbitrary forms, that were glued onto white cards, grouped according to size, redrawn with tracing paper, projected, and blown up to make a new vocabulary of hieroglyphs. These in turn will be collaged back into the stenciled composition from whence they derived (a black and white painting currently in progress), only now with a pronounced scale change.

Taaffe has returned to silkscreen after a long hiatus, using it for some of the bold, black and white armatures of the compositions. When first glimpsed in early September, one big vertical canvas had dynamic, black scroll forms printed all over it. Two months later, in mid-November, the same painting had advanced a stage and now had delicate papers with smaller printed scrolls on them affixed temporarily to the canvas, fluttering in place like Chinese clouds and fanning out on either side to the wall. This state of affairs is only provisional: the papers may be shifted, shaved down to their constituent shapes, removed, or further tinted. Taaffe has the prints taped up on the unstretched canvas as yet another mapping device whereby he locates correspondences between different orders within the painting. Like the Cartesian room, the Gampi paper prints serve as one more contemplative phase—one is tempted to say a kind of Nietzschean veil of *maya*—in Taaffe's ruminative and labor-intensive process.

The artist also pointed out that he shares a love of the Japanese Gampi paper with Kiki Smith (whom he saw at Skowhegan in Maine last summer), because of its long fibers and because it holds up so well under water. Smith, on the other hand, told me that she never really understood Taaffe's art before visiting his studio on the night of my marriage to Lisa Liebmann. Choosing to eat dinner alone in a classroom festooned exclusively with the artist's messy wipe sheets, Smith saw a visceral, almost menstrual installation that many people mistook for Taaffe's finished paintings at the time and



(Top) Arpian painting in progress (84x120 in.) in the back room of Taaffe's studio. (Center) Detail of upper right-hand corner with Arpian cutouts taped to the wall. (Below) Another Arpian painting in progress (120x128-1/2 in.) in the grid room. The same shapes have been painted on both works, but in different colors. Photos by Nathan Rabin.

