

Diego Cortez

A CONVERSATION WITH PHILIP TAAFFE



Amur Field (2009)
Mixed media on canvas.
79 x 117-1/2 inches (201 x 299 cm)

NEW YORK CITY 2009

CORTEZ: We haven't spoken together on a kind of theoretical level for ten or so years, the way we used to do regularly. I think it's a good opportunity to update what we're thinking about lately. I want to talk about the ideas that go into your paintings, because that's basically what interests me in anything. In the early days, I felt that the primary misconception about your work was that it was decorative. I would argue with people about the ramifications of diversity in your work: the cross-cultural concerns. It's such a beautiful opportunity in modern times to be able to access all the different world cultures, and I feel that's the essence of your work, to make these comparison studies of different cultures.

TAAFFE: Well, it's an opportunity and a curse. The materials are taken from the investigated remains of lost cultures. The difficulty is in recovering them in such a way as to speak to our present circumstances.

CORTEZ: When people say for example, that David Byrne is a world musician, they are really saying that artists are musicologists or anthropologists. I think what brought us together, aside from all the personal feelings, was that we were both interested in a post-modern way of looking at the world. We shared an aesthetic deeply embedded in music and world cultures....

TAAFFE: An artist makes something to be physically experienced by another person. It's a raw, freely chosen, interpersonal relationship between the maker and the viewer, so it's close to what a musical composer does, or a poet or a dancer. It is something that is coming out of one's inner being.

CORTEZ: Even if your work is very design oriented, it isn't design. Do you worry about the issue of decoration, these kinds of issues?

TAAFFE: No. I think the important distinction is that art has to do with expression, with summoning an inner state. Mine is a deeply personal approach. I want to draw connections between those things I love. I have a fairly unwieldy set of concerns that go into determining what I do in the paintings, such as the history of the decorative, patterns of cultural migration, Islamic art and design, Byzantine architecture, the annals of natural history, as well as contemporary painting. All of these things are filtered through my own sense of cultural urgency. How I proceed with the work has to do with how I respond to this instinctively chosen mass of materials. I'm weighing many things and making many decisions before I even get started on a painting. There's a grand editorial motivation behind the work.

CORTEZ: I see the main issue in your work within the realm of aesthetics, and in dialogue with the history of art. This brings up the question of the rejection of the 'new', or what people perceive to be 'new'.

TAAFFE: It's not a rejection of the new. It's a rejection of the expectations surrounding the new.

CORTEZ: Your gravitation towards the prototypes of art seems to be the main issue: you've gone historical as opposed to futurist. Most art is concerned with the 'new'—a new production of new things in new times—contemporary terms in which we swim or drown. I feel you largely reject these notions of the 'new'. I feel it and I like it, that's why I've always appreciated your work.

TAAFFE: Essentially, I'm trying to make a primitive painting. I'm trying to summon the archaic. I want to enter into a primitive situation. This is my protest against the sensory deprivation that we experience, which is due to this tendency towards globalization, towards homogenization, towards the generic: a technological standard rather than an aesthetic standard. I'm mining history, trying to regenerate a pictorial situation that is more

humanistic. It's not about commodification, it's not about fitting into some sort of corporate structure. It's opposed to that direction.

CORTEZ: When I came away recently from three days of workshops at the Benetton Fabbrica in Italy with the design students, all of whom are about three times younger than me and three times smarter, I was a bit exasperated by the chorus of the word 'new' being thrown at me. I tried to convince them that there seems today to be a mania to create something new just for the sake of making something new.

TAAFFE: Well, that's design. Design is meant to grab you and win you over. It is meant to function in a way so as to make life easier. Obviously painting has to do with something quite beyond that. It's not about communication per se. It doesn't necessarily telegraph anything. It's more about understanding who we are and where we come from.

CORTEZ: But are you trying to make something new as a contemporary artist? Because when I first met you, I felt like your rejection of the 'new' was the new thing about your work.

TAAFFE: That's an interesting way of putting it. For me, the whole idea of the radically new is tied to a close reconsideration of older sources. I like to give myself over to those sources, as points of origin, in order to bring things forward. My approach requires me to internalize my sources as much as possible, in the hope that new themes might emerge. The material has to be internalized in order for it to live again. Ultimately paintings reveal themselves on the basis of what they are. They are inseparable from the physical process that goes into their making.

CORTEZ: Within your work there is a kind of industry—it's basically all done by you. It's very work intensive....

TAAFFE: I'm intimately involved with the craft-related side of what I do. I enjoy that very much. I'm very industrious. I have a lot of fun doing what I do.

CORTEZ: Brian Eno once said that the artist of today is first and foremost a curator. If there's any artist that I know who is a curator at heart, it's you. What does it mean to be a curator?

TAAFFE: To look after things, to take care of things.



Exploded Portal (2008)
Mixed media on linen.
77 x 55 inches (195.6 x 139.7 cm)

CORTEZ: You're right, museums traditionally have been places that protected the art object. But in the last forty years a new type of museum has emerged—the kunsthalle or alternative space which only presents temporary contemporary shows. Yet art is not just about the future. Of course it is about the future, and the present, but it can't forget the past. I think a lot of young people today don't really care about the past.

TAAFFE: I don't want to fetishize the past. I want there to be a natural sequence coming out of a synthesis of the ideas and information that I gather together as a result of the research I do, as a result of looking at things that are in the world. I'm trying to bring forward signs or signals based on what I see, and my responses to these things. I'm trying to leave a trail that will be useful to other people in the future. It has to do with making something that contains a synthesis of the information, and then consequently to make one's deliberations visible, to allow other people to follow them. That's how I see my role. It's not pure scholarship.

CORTEZ: When you said you don't fetishize the past, I would agree. But you do pick and choose things from the past. And, and I think the picking and the choosing—

TAAFFE: —is a form of fetishization?

CORTEZ: No, it's not. It's a form of making art. It's a decision making process. It's a form of criticism.

TAAFFE: That's right.

CORTEZ: Look at our recent pop music icons, even the most radical ones

like Bjork or Caetano Veloso. These mass media artists often have to find themselves always being happy and making positive work because they have such a large young fan base to which they feel responsible. They can't be too negative. Now, criticism is basically a negative act. As you know, critics and are not particularly pop stars, nor popular. They are the gripers. But someone has to speak up and say 'no' to this and 'yes' to that.



Polygon (Interpenetration), 2008
Mixed media on canvas.
50 x 38-1/4 inches (127 x 97 cm)

TAAFFE: I think that very often the role of the artist has been to define something in a circumscribed way, by stating what it is not. For example, Ad Reinhardt does this with his method of describing how a painting should operate. He would say, "it's not this, it's not that." He recited a whole list of what a painting wasn't.

CORTEZ: That's because he lived at a precise moment in the continuum of philosophy, the existential moment, largely involved with the game of A and B: A being set in the context of B, where B is or the kind of 'scape' where you locate the object – everything always relative to what it is not. Or you can call it the void. Our existential self remains 'us' versus the 'vastness of things'. It's a model which frightens most people.

TAAFFE: That's the sublime dimension of history. When you're faced with this terrifying gigantic monolith and you have to try to navigate a course artistically—this requires a certain kind of focus, a certain level of self-understanding, an inner resolve. It's how I see my role as an artist. I mean, there are many artists doing many different things, and one has to choose an area that is most compelling. What excites me and what I find most compelling is clearly not what excites other artists, and so it's a personal decision. It comes from my own idiosyncratic background and what I'm drawn to. Maybe this is a result of having lived in Naples during a formative period of time, being exposed to that kind of an archeological situation. I am discovering things that I've never known about before.

CORTEZ: The optics that you use in your work allude to a kind of hallucinogenic, 'electric' state of mind. If you have a high fever, for example, and you have a 'black-out' or a 'white-out', your whole vision disappears and

diminishes only to raw pixels, upon which the brain projects visual information for perception. Your paintings are closely related to luminosity. A kind of light that reverberates.

TAAFFE: Yes. Light is the key.

CORTEZ: I've always hated the word spirituality, but not really. I accept the word and I think it's a useful term. It just means so many things. And actually, most of the things it does connote are beautiful things.

TAAFFE: It depends how it's used. Usually such things are better left unstated.

CORTEZ: I'm not putting down the beauty itself that the word spiritual is trying to connote. I'm just looking for a better word, more like electricity. How would you define spirit?

TAAFFE: These are truly ecstatic concerns—wanting to be in touch with and to bring outside of ourselves in some way our inner God. It's about having an awareness of the possibility, and the perception to know what to do with it.

CORTEZ: Well isn't spirit just life?

TAAFFE: Certainly. It's the life force

CORTEZ: I just walked to your studio for the first time in ten years, down Sixth Avenue, and it's disgusting. All this new lousy architecture that you have to walk through now. And of course I thought immediately...

TAAFFE: "...This is what he's going to want to talk about." [LAUGHS]

CORTEZ: But this is the kind of thing that upsets you the most. Before there were nice old buildings—period buildings from the '40s or the '30s. Now they're surrounding your studio with crappy architecture – it's atro-

cious. The glut of modernity, let's call it.

TAAFFE: It's visually depraved. These contemporary architects who are building these non-descript buildings are using modernist ideas, such as Mies van der Rohe and the Bauhaus, but they're leaving out the sensibility. They're using it as an excuse to get away with doing things on the cheap. It's a debasement of these modernist ideas, and an emptying out of modernist architectural thought.



Cape Siren (2008)

Mixed media on canvas.

116-3/4 x 95-3/4 inches (295.3 x 243.2 cm)

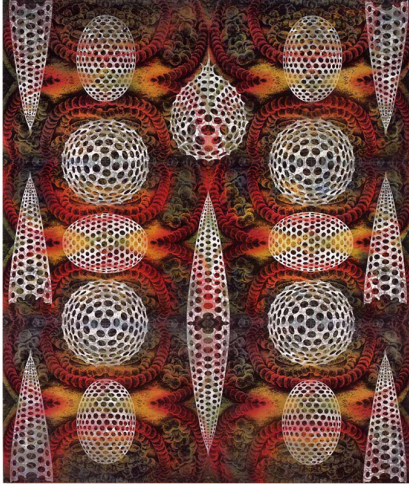
CORTEZ: It's like a root system that is overly strangled, to a suicidal point. It is a metaphor for contemporary life: these systems are over-crowded, out of control and strangling themselves. Things have grown together in a bad way.

TAAFFE: It doesn't have to be that way. Cities could be spectacular. I'm a great believer in the urban environment.

CORTEZ: I think it's interesting that in your work there's still a sense of complexity. You don't run to the minimal, you haven't become a Zen Buddhist as a rejection of this world. You still embrace the complicated nature of things, like the Baroque. Your work keeps a certain complexity which is surprising for a person who I think possesses a basic premise to reject this glut...

TAAFFE: But there is a tendency in my work towards minimalism, in terms of the stripping away of the unnecessary. I am seeking a tightly ordered gestalt, usually. I've always felt a strong affinity towards Mondrian's work. I understand the importance of those subtle planar and linear modulations he made in the course of building up the incredible visual tension in his work. If you ask what the cultural ramifications of a painting might be, I would say we have an extremely good paradigm in Mondrian. I have also been very influenced by the Japanese concept of space—the preciousness of space and how one's environment can be shaped to make the most out of limited resources. That's the kind of thing we need to look at again—how momentous the results can be from very subtle changes.

CORTEZ: The great achievement of Zen Buddhism, and all of the cultural expressions in its wake, whether in painting or the tea ceremony or rock gardens—they are all a rejection of earlier Buddhist ideas which were more dependent upon narrative—all the mythological creatures that populate the Buddhist galaxy. Zen tried to insist on the ‘real’ located in ‘nature.’ Then it was an abstraction and aesthetization of nature as well, as opposed to other fundamentalist doctrines which cling to the sober rational mind as the optimal state of consciousness.



Large Viking Filigree Painting (2008)
Mixed media on canvas.
129 x 109-1/4 inches (327.5 x 277.5 cm)

TAAFFE: It became more about celebrating the beauty of the transitory, the unique shape of each moment and how surprising this is.

CORTEZ: They tried to rid themselves of the narrative of mythology—humans as supermen. It then got down to how human beings can better relate to nature, both in terms of coexistence, co-survival, but also an ‘aesthetic’ integration, whatever that means. [LAUGHS]

TAAFFE: Do you believe that painting can give us clues as to how this might come about? To deepen our relationship with nature, and enable us to think better about this important problem?

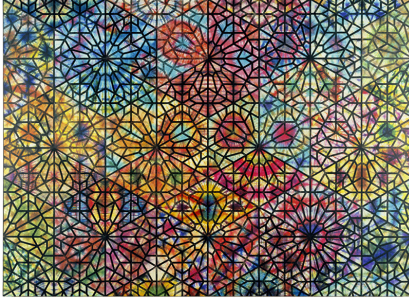
CORTEZ: Yes, I still think that art can take us there. Even after seeing so much bad art in the last few years, it still seems possible that one can be led to the right places—

TAAFFE: So you haven’t given up hope.

CORTEZ: No, I haven’t given up hope because there are always great artists, great minds and great ideas. I put ideas into the first category. Second are the artworks, then the artist, and finally the viewer and the society and those factors. New ideas are what give you hope. You have to base your opinions on the quality of the ideas in the art works. If you are mostly interested in the politics of the art world, the artist’s persona or the art market, you will find yourself distracted from the essentials. These things mean little to me. But they obviously mean a lot to other people. There’s again the

glut, this time—a glut of bad priorities.

TAAFFE: Ideas in art may be quite evident, and sometimes they're hidden. Sometimes they're simple and sometimes they're quite complex. Great works of art can be based on very simple ideas, but it's all in the making isn't it? It's in the facture. Art exists through the act of making. It has to somehow be made manifest to another person. It has to do with what one wants to see manifest, what one wants to bring into the world, what one desires to have exist.



Cairene Window, II (2008)
Mixed media on canvas.
60-1/2 x 84 inches (153.7 x 213.4 cm)

CORTEZ: But that's like the joy of handling things and touching things. It's like having sex. It's the joy of physicality. Yet you still start out with ideas or designs.

TAAFFE: Although all of it is completely intuitive.

CORTEZ: I would say that most serious artists have a pretty complete idea of what they're going to do before they do it, whether done in sketches or whether they're following a series over a period of time.

TAAFFE: Sometimes those formative ideas can be put into words, but then they're somehow less interesting than when they're actually being worked out in the process of making the painting. Usually I make a fair amount of studio notes—procedural notes: do this, do that. I come up with a set of operations I've determined I will execute, and that's what I do. But at a certain point the painting takes on such a strong identity of its own that I am merely coaxing it into its final state.

CORTEZ: I look at your early work as being more about the unique event. Each painting had a very strong singularity. You could walk into an exhibition of ten paintings by you, and you would see ten completely different ideas. Each one was contained in a cell, a unique thing—a closure. Now in your later work, things have become more intermixed, more open. It's like an open sea, everything is now floating in space. I wouldn't say that your work has become serial, it's not that. But there's some new sense of expanse,

like seeing a starry galaxy or an open sea.

TAAFFE: The ambiguities of the spaces have become more complex, more faceted. I have more to take into consideration now than ever before. Consequently, I would say there is a greater degree of compression in the work.

[The following day...]

TAAFFE: There's critical moment in post-Second World War culture in the United States, when the abstract expressionist painters were trying to shape an unprecedented visual culture that was coming out of European history. They were interested in bringing archaic forces into present day existence— inventing a new mythology.

CORTEZ: How do you define archaic?

TAAFFE: Something that is just beyond our reach in terms of perceiving the circumstances of an earlier civilization. I think Robert Smithson was another artist who wanted to explore these archaic forces, but from a biological standpoint. He saw industrial architecture as related to the dinosaurs on some level.

CORTEZ: I wouldn't call it a gimmick, but I would say that what the New York School basically did was to blow up or enlarge the shapes of the surrealists. Like when you look at a Calder it seems like a blown up shape of Miro. You can say that Pollock is a sort of enlargement of Dubuffet or Masson. Part of what makes it radical then is the scale. Perhaps one can attribute this in part to its competitiveness with cinema. This came at a very powerful moment in cinematic history, and in order for painting to continue to be relevant, it had to 'up' its scale. Robert Frank might also be understood to be relevant to these new issues of scale: his jumping in a car and driving across a huge flat plain in order to document it. Frank's enlarged canvas was America. The painters with their large-scale paintings did exactly that as well.

TAAFFE: It's true that there seems in retrospect to be a certain inevitability to the scale of those New York School works. But the interesting point is that they were made in New York, not in Nebraska. So I think you are quite right in emphasizing the importance of cinematic scale around that time. But the vast scale of the American West—the Monument Valley experience let's call it, is there as well. Max Ernst certainly experienced that.

CORTEZ: The modern artists who gathered here in New York before and after the Second World War were refugees in a diaspora. You can compare that new feeling of freedom to the origins of jazz in New Orleans. The migration of European artists was also an important part of the Jewish diaspora. The recent plan to close the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, and sell its art collection, has become such a crucial issue to me. In spite of numerous articles written, I haven't seen journalists address the seriousness of it. To disband this collection is really to destroy the most important visual document of American-Jewish history in the post war period—a moment when many great Jewish artists and intellectuals made New York the center of the art world. They had wrested it away from Paris and shifted the power to the 'new' world.

TAAFFE: Disbanding the Rose Museum means the destruction of an important piece of American cultural history.

CORTEZ: It's no small matter. It was a precise moment in history when American art went on the map internationally, largely due to Jewish intellectuals, and the collectors who supported them. To possess such an intact collection and then have the president of this university think it's appropriate to sell these works to pay for teacher's salaries, or whatever he wants to use the money for which has nothing to do with art...

TAAFFE: It's absolutely unconscionable. We really need to protest that. I'm happy to be a part of that collection. When I first saw the signs of that possibility happening, that was depressing news, in a rather depressing period. But we are moving beyond that, we're finding our bearings again.

CORTEZ: I find myself interested in cross-cultural things, and I think that's always been my description of your work. So again, I think we have that parallel, between the two of us. We've traveled a lot together.

TAAFFE: Yeah, that trip to Peru was a doozy, wasn't it?

CORTEZ: [LAUGHS] I know.

TAAFFE: I was also thinking about the times we spent together in Seville during Holy Week—Semana Santa, and the idea of spectacle in art and religion. This choreography surrounding the Passion of Christ.

CORTEZ: And where does that history fit into today?

TAAFFE: Exactly. What do we do with this tradition now? That's an exemplary situation as far as I'm concerned, what goes on in Seville during Semana Santa. It's profoundly sensual—the colors and the sound and the light. The smell of incense, the burning candles in the evening. It's all this sensuality coming from a solemn religious tradition. It's the conflation of the two that truly gives it the magic. One feels the Muslim presence there as well...

CORTEZ: ...Especially in the vocalization of the saeta. Flamenco voices overlap with Catholicism. Then you have the Bacchanalian aspect of it—a massive rave, people assembling in street masses, then spinning off from a particular procession to hang-out, eat and drink or flirt. One focuses 'in and out of reality and spectacle as you segue in and out of this network of street theater. I was also impressed by the cultural blend of different social classes. Throughout the Mediterranean, there's a tradition of street festivals to bring together people across hierarchies of class, to unite people, whether on religious terms or sociological. Holy week in Seville is a romantic, nostalgic look at the past and its traditions, but it also has a secular dimension. This is partly due to the blend or blurring of religions and their pagan past—not only Catholicism, its sponsor. I also recall the wood or polychrome sculptures of the Virgin or Christ and his Apostles,



After Migration (2007)
Mixed media on canvas.
54-1/2 x 80-3/8 inches (138 x 204 cm)

and their fragility. When carried in the slow left-right-left-right cadence by young Sevillians—a kind of shiver and shake of the male or female body is witnessed—the candles shivering too. This light would create a flickering sensation, as in cinema, a kind of hallucinogenic... The sculptures were brought to life through this ritual enactment...



Untitled (2007)
Mixed media on paper.
19-3/4 x 27-1/2 inches (50.2 x 69.9 cm)

TAAFFE: That's the feeling of it, yes. The power of the Baroque!

CORTEZ: The church was always very adept at incorporating all the different artistic disciplines. What we call the church is actually an assemblage of different artistic forms, whether in its Biblical literature, or sculpture, painting, music.... As Semana Santa proves, it is a performance art. You see the roots of religion, in its fragmented proto-components.

TAAFFE: I can remember accompanying that elderly woman whose husband had recovered from this terrible illness and giving thanks to la Macarena—the virgin that she had prayed to on behalf of her husband. She decided that she would walk the entirety of this procession in her bare feet, and there were people surrounding her, helping her do this. It was an act of gratitude and penitence, and it was very moving. And you witness its vulnerability—its fragility. It's very dignified, but it's also very awkward at the same time.

CORTEZ: More than awkward. It's more akin to a punk concert, where the lead singer dives into the mosh pit. In this case the embodiment of Christ or the Madonna is forced into the throngs of people on the street, including hundreds drag queens... who are ever so fond of the la Macarena.

TAAFFE: The la Macarena is the favorite of the drag queens.

CORTEZ: The drag queens in Seville model themselves on La Macarena.

TAAFFE: It's those pearlescent tears, perhaps as you see trickling down her, her tender, anguished cheeks. [LAUGHS] We visited the chapel in Seville, the Hospital de la Caridad, with murals by Valdés Leal. In a context such

as that, one does feel the healing power of art. These are paintings I can venerate as I would an icon—not necessarily as religious paintings but as an act of veneration where I want to go back to see this work over and over again, not only to learn from them but simply to re-experience them. It's this experiential component that fills the mind and the heart with this lived action that had taken place in order to make this thing. One can feel that and appreciate it over and over again in new ways. This is really the function of art, this is what we aspire to.



Untitled (2007)
Mixed media on paper.
19-3/4 x 27-1/2 inches (50.2 x 69.9 cm)

CORTEZ: Yes.

TAAFFE: And we spoke about how that artist functioned in a shamanistic capacity, as a healer—especially in that context. I think that is the role of the artist in society—the cultural role of the artist is to perform a healing function.

CORTEZ: We haven't talked at all about the art market. I'm tired of hearing about it as you probably are, but is there anything you want to say about the art market? Do you think much about it?

TAAFFE: As far as I'm concerned it's like worrying about the weather. I'm not so interested in the effort that it takes to have self-promotional outlook. I believe in being quiet and making my work and just trying to make discoveries, and let the painting evolve. I've been at this for quite some time. I'm just going to continue doing what I do

CORTEZ: So you don't want your work to be connected with the ups and downs of political or social upheavals?

TAAFFE: Well of course it's connected, that's somehow unavoidable. But it's not something I dwell on very much. Although I don't understand why a Mark Rothko painting—as much as I love Mark Rothko—why a Rothko painting has to cost 84 million dollars. I mean, I think 14 million dollars is pretty reasonable sum of money for a good Rothko painting. What's disturbing about this present moment is that these prices were so out of

control. It's like an oil spill, or a kind of nuclear plant meltdown. It's what happens when something goes wrong.

CORTEZ: That has little to do with the painting itself, but more to do with the person who buys it—that they would want to spend that kind of money. It's much more a description of the buyer than the artwork.

TAAFFE: There's probably an obscene dimension to a lot of art that tries to draw attention to itself by, by any means necessary.

CORTEZ: I think what happened in the last ten or fifteen years in the art market, is that all the players, and that includes artists, dealers, art advisors, museum people—everyone, all these traditional roles became blurred. All the players basically became dealers. Speculators. We've had old-school collectors morph into speculators, flipping works and dealing. Also we've seen auction houses buying works directly from artists or from sleazy middlemen who then immediately sell for profit. The last step before the crash was the artist themselves supplying the auction houses. Dealing themselves, you know? The art world is as unregulated as any financial market there is. I mean, when you do a real estate deal you have to go through all kinds of checks and balances. You have to be governmentally approved on every level. But to do an art deal for 15 million dollars, you just send a one-page invoice and wire the money and that's it. Basta.

TAAFFE: It's hard to fathom the psychology of the economics of art. I think it's probably been harmful to younger artists. I don't quite understand it, and I don't necessarily want to understand it. (Pause) I'm interested in telling a very unique story, in a very intense way. I will do a lot of research, and create a lot of material for use in one painting. And then I go on discovering and working with a whole other range of material in another painting. I'm interested in a fairly comprehensive and orchestrated synthesis that might bring about a new situation, consisting of this hidden material. I'm interested in hidden source material, let's say. You can't find these things on the internet or in the street. They are things that I have deliberately gathered around me, to bring them close enough to examine.

I investigate the plastic connections I'm capable of making, that have to do with visual art making.

CORTEZ: It's funny you say 'plastic' because I think actually...

TAAFFE: The plastic arts.

CORTEZ: Of course, I knew what you meant but it's funny because...

TAAFFE: There's no plastic. I don't have any plastic in my life [LAUGHS].

CORTEZ: No, I see that your work is actually the antithesis of plastic.

TAAFFE: Yes.

CORTEZ: And that much of the work of, the work of other contemporary masters is the embrace of plastic, in a kitschy sort of comical way. This world of plastic in which we are drowning in.

TAAFFE: I'm tired of that. I think that's a tired approach to art making. It's like pandering to some kind of perceived audience that...

CORTEZ: That's why I'm bringing it up. That's why I'm trying to dig into this a little bit, perhaps because I feel that way too. Maybe this isn't the appropriate place in the to talk about this.

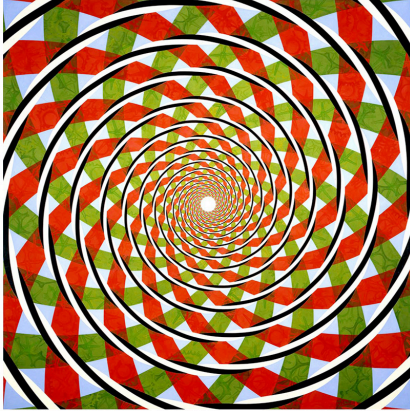
TAAFFE: I don't really know... I'm very tolerant of other art and other artists. But what I truly appreciate, what I truly admire in contemporary art, is work that takes on more than it can sometimes handle, art that gets in over its head.

CORTEZ: Somehow I feel like so many of the artists have gotten away with mere joking.

TAAFFE: With doing too little. Yeah.

CORTEZ: With joking. By using humor and comedy to point out what's wrong with our society but, but they haven't done anything to show us the way out of the joke's situation which is suffocating us

TAAFFE: It's a normative sort of reaction. It's saying "Here: This is what we're like." It's a brand of social realism in a sense, which doesn't interest me.



Unit of Direction with Jurassic Flint
Sponges (2008) Mixed media on canvas.
96 x 96 inches (244 x 244 cm)

CORTEZ: I've always been leery of comical artists because I think often times they're hiding the fact that they're not that talented, for example with Martin Kippenberger. I always thought, he was a kind of poor man's Sigmar Polke, also a humorist, but instead used humor to get away with things he couldn't master. His recent MoMA show vindicates my thoughts. In spite of it being a well-selected and beautifully-installed show, the work itself rings flat, thin and hollow.

TAAFFE: I think he used to say things like that about himself, didn't he? He would say "I may be a third rate artist, but I'm the best third rate artist ever!"

CORTEZ: That's probably correct. I guess there are some really good comedians in art and some mediocre ones as well.

TAAFFE: I believe that a good painting should be venerated. Art should stretch our understanding of our humanity. It should be about dignity and grace and beauty. Humility is involved, and understatement. We should want to see complexity and emotional range.

CORTEZ: It seems then you are interested in an educational component, as you talk about investigation and research.

TAAFFE: I think it should be paradigmatic in a sense. I like to reveal the expeditionary journey I've been on.

CORTEZ: Then you undermine the didactic by the playfulness of it.

TAAFFE: Play is important and desire is important, and the pleasure is important. Rhythm considerations are important. A passionate and serious painting that we can return to over time is a more traditional way at looking at art, but it's how I feel. This is the kind of work I want to see, and this is what I hope for in my own work.

CORTEZ: A lot of these irascibles, the kind of artists I just mentioned, come from an initial take on the art world that it is a stuffy or elitist world, so they see themselves as being somehow radical in undermining that. That's why their work or attitude has to be somewhat comical or adolescent.

TAAFFE: Well it's also fixating on the idea that pop art somehow was a way of defeating abstract expressionism. You know, I'm not so interested in this series of ruptures, where minimalism took over pop art, and then neo-expressionism was a triumph over that. I'm not interested in rupture, I'm interested in healing, bringing things together, building bridges. Not dismissing what has come before, as a kind of modernist precedent where one thing has to be broken in order to achieve something else. I don't believe in that kind of attitude. I think we're beyond that at this stage.

END