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Philip Taaffe

Shirley Kaneda

Philip Taaffe is one of the most significant young painters to have emerged from the “Postmodernism” of the '80s. His unorthodox approach to painting employs linocuts, paint and canvas to produce exotic and compelling images calling to mind Matisse's cutouts and synthetic Cubist collage. His paintings combine cultural synthesis and art historical references, addressing such marginalized issues as pattern and decoration and opticality of painting with thoroughly fresh, yet critical and thoughtful eyes. Our conversation began while he was passing through New York on his way back to Naples where he lives and works and continued, in true contemporary epistolary fashion, layering text upon conversation, via fax between here and there.

Shirley Kaneda: Do you have any interest in Matisse, Klee, and Delacroix, and the nineteenth-century Romantic artists?

Philip Taaffe: So you're going from Matisse, who's a world onto himself, to Klee, who is really the key Bauhaus spokesman, reading back to Delacroix, the most vital heroic Romantic painter. I agree it's interesting to consider how their intentions may tie in to one another. For Delacroix, his handling of the heroic frequently involved exotic subject matter. But one gets the sense, from the way he painted these themes, less of a frozen moment than of a scene of ongoing participation, less demonstrative and more highly egalitarian. Something of an eclipse that has marked its passing and will inevitably occur again.

SK: The notion of the romantic and the heroic carried on through to the Abstract Expressionists. But in this day and age, heroicism is definitely not part of romanticism.

PT: (*Silence*) It's as though the two words have become deflated. Both concerns, the issue of heroicism and the issue of romanticism are questionable in practice. From the point of view of a contemporary philosophy of art, I suppose it has to do with the impossibility of these. It is merely necessary to look for ways of continuing within traditions that can be made workable on some level, to develop and re-explore themes that have been understood perhaps in too limited a way. In any case, the idea of finding an exemplary method or approach for defining a romantic subject is something well worth looking into.

SK: Many artists are working out of the postmodern concept of anti-romanticism, a somewhat cynical point of view. Your work is very optimistic and you utilize what's available to you from art history without becoming reductive or purely formal. It's more of a cumulative approach.

PT: Mine is more of an inclusive idea. Although it's hard to be optimistic, my feeling is that in the end one *must* believe in the infinite perfectibility of every human being and in the perfectibility

of the culture that we are shaping. If one cannot accept this fundamental hope or desire, it seems to me that things get seriously lost and paralyzed. And this hope has nothing to do with some kind of step by step refinement, but with the chance to have the insights that may lead to a freer development of world culture. And investigating themes within diverse cultural situations, seeing what they do to one another—in terms of ideas, appearances and motifs that have never been related—making those kinds of juxtapositions and associations is something that artists are more capable of doing. One must always try to look for possibilities within an impossibly closed framework, there is already too much closure within our cultural situation. That sense of closure, of impossibility, needs to be constantly, vigilantly reobserved to understand how we can make progress in our own thinking towards other cultural realities, and how we can make connections with ways of looking at life distinct from our own. That's part of the responsibility, from my point of view, of art: to see how these very specific and diverse cultural realities can be described or redefined, assimilated or reconciled, from our highly individualized way of thinking about artistic involvement.

SK: You find that the authority is in the personal, rather than in what is given.

PT: It's important to find the most open way of looking at the world and at one's life and trying to make a valid exploration, a valid research, that has something to say about where we want to go, and that indicates what we can personally do about getting us there.

SK: Do you think abstract painting is still viable and possible in attaining this?

PT: When I was visiting Puerto Rico, I was introduced as a painter and people would ask, “What kind of paintings do you do?” Well, how does one go about identifying one's work? If you say, “I make abstract paintings,” then people say, “Oh, yes. I know what that stuff is like. . . .” [*laughter*] Obviously, my problem with abstract painting lies in not wanting it to be more of *that* stuff. There are essential distinctions to be made. Of course, all art is abstract. References are always drawn from external sources, no matter what degree of intrinsic formal specialization is adhered to. Also, for example, in thinking about the distinction between abstract painting and representational painting, in my case, there have been many works *about* abstract painting, which look like abstract paintings, but which are more clearly, to my mind, representations of abstract painting; or else they share equally the identity of abstraction and representation. This ambivalence I have towards the nature of the term “abstract” also applies to my use of certain architectural elements, sometimes on a very large scale, in an effort to compress fragments of real architectural space onto a relatively frontal idea, vis à vis Mark Rothko for instance. It's one way of pushing the dimensions of what an abstract image can contain. Within the framework of the way twentieth century art has developed, the language of abstraction—as a basis for synthetic ordering—comes closest to the process of musical composition, or the possibility to make a pictorial parallel to the work of let's say symphonic. . . .

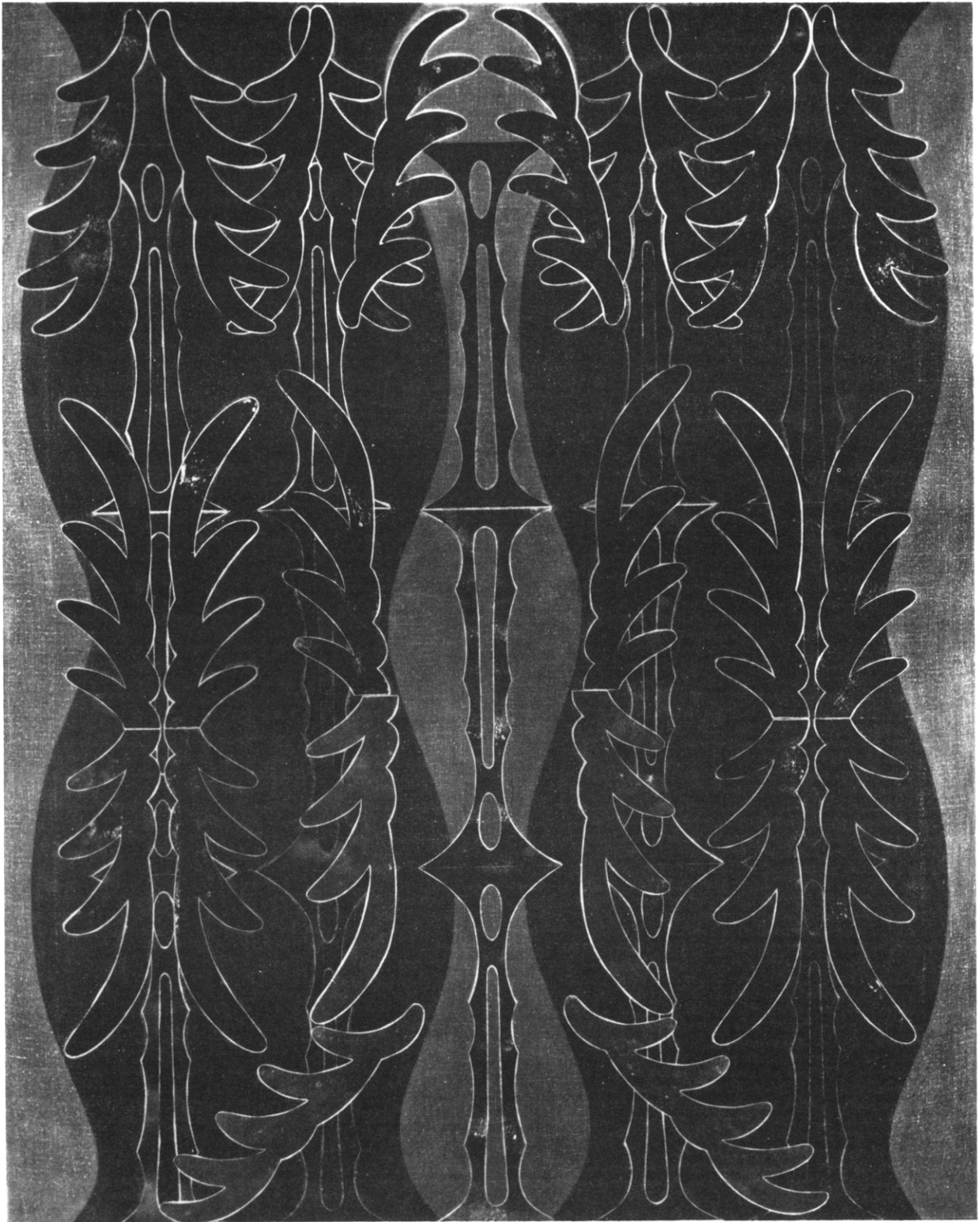
SK: . . . Orchestration. . . .

PT: Yes, something that allows for this kind of freedom. It also allows so much more historical material to enter gesturally into the structure of the work.

SK: Would you say this is your relationship to history in your work? That you can utilize whatever has been and pick and choose from all the available elements?

PT: After a great deal of deliberation, yes. One goes back and forth

Shirley Kaneda is a painter living and working in New York.



Philip Taaffe, "Nefta," 1990, Mixed media on linen, 60 x 48."
Right, "Necromancer," 1990, Mixed media on linen, 89 x 69".

the petals distinct or free.

|| **Apophasis** (ἄποφᾶσις). 1657. [Late L. *apophasis* – Gr. ἀπόφασις denial.] *Rhet.* A figure in which we feign to deny or pass over what we really say or advise.

between bathing in the insight of the past, trying to feel these insights, to bring them forward to make them visible in a new way.

SK: Do your paintings relate to Matisse's formalism?

PT: I have a hard time with that expression. If we're going to refer to "Matisse's formalism," we may as well put Picasso in that category, too.

SK: Clement Greenberg always asserted that Matisse was superior to Picasso. An article about your work by Jeff Perrone in *Arts* magazine refers to the Clement Greenberg's extraordinary idea that the "decorative" is analogous to the Marxist Revolution. He thought the decorative haunted Modernism in the same way Communist threat haunted Capitalism.

PT: I wonder how Greenberg felt about the decorative in his earlier, Marxist influenced writing? Maybe he found it threatening then, too. I find this statement to be perfectly consistent with his other opinions from the same period. And I would be perfectly happy to think that he was correct in his judgement. Anyway, getting back to Matisse, here was someone capable of assembling a great deal of pictorial information in his paintings. They are laden, bursting. But they're also quite breezy in a certain sense, inspired like the wind. He always tried to put his paintings in full bloom. Matisse is the painter of this century that I am most impressed with, actually. In looking at everything he accomplished, so much complexity and grace is just astonishing.

SK: The type of images that you use then, are they an indexing of 20th-century culture, and or painting, for you?

PT: Collage is the big artistic invention of the 20th century, one might say, but what do you mean by indexing?

SK: That you are accumulating images available to you but you are not compartmentalizing them.

PT: I like that word. It has a strange bibliographic connotation, doesn't it? Like trying to imagine a card catalogue for the library at ancient Alexandria. But there does exist a common archive, so to speak, which can be delved into and reflected upon as a matter of course. It's part of a continuous process of inquiry: discovering how things have been stated and, based upon an awareness of new circumstances, understanding what needs to be stated further.

SK: What about the process in which you work, how did you arrive at this process?

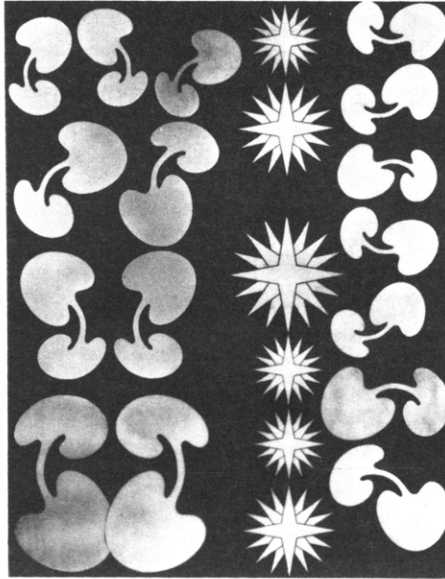
PT: It was necessary to find a means whereby the edges of these elements and lines could be applied in a way that gave an immediate visual acuity and believability to them as they entered the paintings. My feeling was that if, after I'd worked on it for a while, a painting could be filled with sharply defined lines and elements that had arrived there in an alternate way—through printing and collage—that this would reveal something other than the idea of my having directly painted those same lines and elements. Also, I find it helpful to be able to move them around and take them away until I know exactly when and where they need to be in a given work. It's a process of indirection, really. Most of the time, all of these elements are predrawn and printed without knowing how they will eventually interrelate. This liberates the vocabulary and extends the range of possibilities somewhat. I like the fact that a gesture or a line can be confined within and multiplied onto individual pieces of paper. And can then be tentatively applied to a painting, marking the surface with a sharply delineated texture that is present before it is actually...

SK: ... Assembled ...

PT: Yes. So it can be structured more freely and with a greater degree of intensification. An intensified line or an intensified graphic area is important for me to have in order to know how they might converse with other concerns that are waiting to find their way into the various paintings. This process gives me a greater opportunity to be more deliberative in terms of what enters a work; for example, making a jarring, unexpected transition from the stage of having these raw elements to the idea of wanting to put them together in a way that has another meaning which could never have been predetermined. So the images and lines are graphically predefined, but the field of possibilities for orchestrating these elements is completely open and I think it becomes possible to achieve a greater assimilated space.

SK: Why did you choose canvas as the site of assemblage?

PT: My earliest large scale collages were on paper. Even though I



liked the paper's unwieldy character, the canvas was just a more practical support.

SK: How does your work relate to cubist collage?

PT: Cubist collage was a piecemeal introduction of found fragments. I like to pretend that I find collage elements even though I make them. I prefer the illusionistic quality of flat pieces of paper with these edges because if you put a found object onto a painting it becomes the key ingredient of the work, whereas what I do has a more generalized effect. It allows the thing to be constructed in a more abstract sense—getting back to that word again. It's more plastic for me, more malleable. An object has its own implications as a determinate physical reality, whereas the paper comes closer to pigment, to being just a graphic gesture or mark.

SK: You mentioned that you like the way the edge of the paper functions, you like the way it looks.

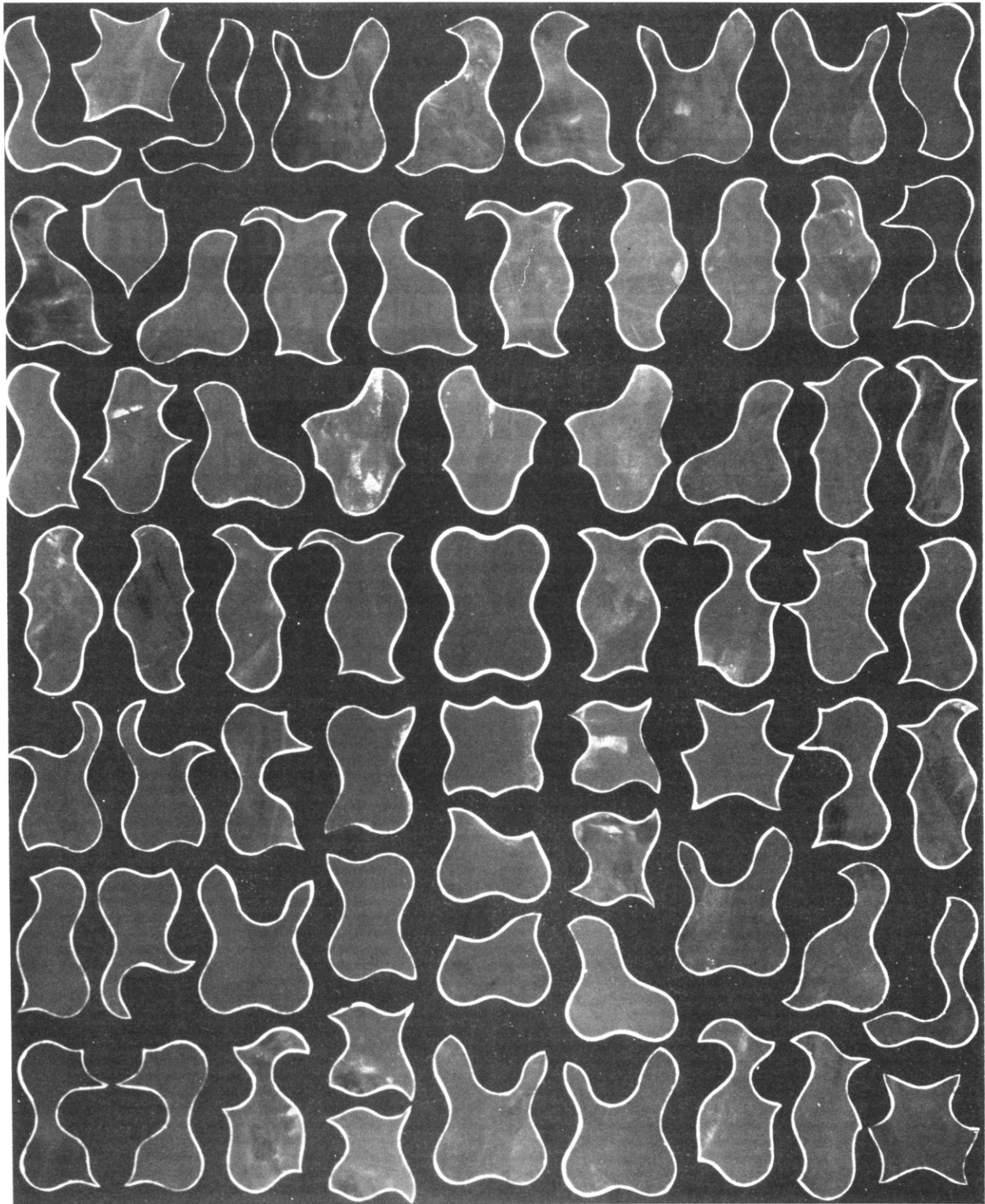
PT: It's simply a response to physical reality and how we all perceive edges and surfaces, identifying one object next to another in physical space. It has to do with focusing in on the visual sharpness of perceived reality and transferring that to a pictorial situation.

SK: What do you look for in your work and other peoples' work? What do you see? It seems that you have a very precise way of looking.

PT: Essentially, what I try to see in other peoples' work are the central motivations, the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual forces that allowed the things to exist. I'm always curious about what something meant at an earlier point in time, as opposed to its present significance; and I like to see how people deal with that issue in their work. Where something is produced, the cultural or geographical origin, is obviously of great importance as well.

SK: Which leads us into the question, why you chose to live in Naples and what your fascination is with North Africa? You were speaking earlier of the events in the Middle East in terms of how you feel personally involved.

PT: I like syncretist cultural situations, the kind of situation where incursions from many different geographical sources have a layering effect of cultural and historical density. Naples is certainly one of the foremost cities in the world where this sort of evidence is amply felt. And from the standpoint of other parts of Italy, Naples is considered pretty much an African city. Although this perspective may be changing as Naples begins to lose some of its traditional qualities, becoming wealthier and more like other



Philip Taaffe, "Syncopation, (Semara)," 1990, Mixed media on linen, 60 x 48." Right, "Abstraction Painting," 1990, Mixed media on wood, 34½ x 27⅞." All photos courtesy, Gagolian Gallery.

bourgeois European cities. It promises to be a relatively slow process, however, given the perversity and defiance of the Neapolitan race.

SK: It's the gateway to Africa, with the influence of North Africa and other cultures. There's a strong decorative element in your work. What do you think of decoration and pattern?

PT: This is an important issue for me and I haven't talked very much about it before, partly because I'm not sure how to enter into a discussion that reflects what is going on in the paintings. Very often the paintings contain elements from decorative sources, and yet the paintings themselves never assume a decorative character. I love to look at decorative art. I have a collection of books and other materials concerning the decorative arts. I always enjoy going to museums of decorative art wherever I visit. I look very closely at architectural decoration and the design of public spaces, gardens... But from another artistic point of view, in Bela Bartok's music, for example, the uses of folk art or what one might call local melodies in his compositions are put through his own psychic filter, so that they become deeply expressive and meditative. Of course, it's not a question of applying decoration or applying a folk melody in a certain pattern. It's a matter of researching the melody, of repeating it to oneself, and trying to understand the lived reality out of which this imagery came. And then to form a statement that allows these melodies to speak for themselves, in all of their vitality and beauty, but using at the same time another voice that says something that the decorative, in the ordinary sense, just could never say. Decoration is usually derived from a local natural situation; it can epitomize the lush quality of, let's say, palms or lotus flowers or jungle overgrowth. Decoration in this folk sense is a kind of culturalized representation of nature. It's closest to the raw elements that reflect a very specific geographical location in historical time. The importance of it for me is that I can have these circumstances of time and place in crystalline form, and I can feel those realities, feel the history that they inevitably speak about in this natural cultural sense. It would be presumptuous to say that I go beyond that or transcend them, because I really don't consider that it's *just* decoration and that I am merely interested in transcending its meaning as decoration. I primarily want to feel the living reality of these elements, and to respond to them in a personal way by making a composition that allows these other voices to speak again in a way that I've understood and responded to. These voices are part of this lived experience represented by decoration, and I would like those voices to share a dialogue with the formulations that I produce. The fact that one can repeat something in order to achieve a dynamic synthesis, a sort of crescendo of decoration—having this possibility of tempo, change and restructuring—means that these voices can be amplified and joined together in a way that I couldn't have anticipated. And I want to see, I want to hear, I want to experience this. I make decisions on the basis of what I want to experience, and how I feel this relates to my own life, and what I have imagined is the lived experience that generated these images and decorative fragments. I don't use them only because they're interesting or exotic forms, or because they can be used in a certain way structurally or formally. It's always a matter of feeling that the intention or desire behind them, and shaping something out of that enthusiasm, that passion.

SK: What I like and admire in your work is how you synthesize culture and history, ours and other peoples, that somehow we can have a phenomenological experience here and now looking at your work. Do you see your paintings as masculine/feminine, as opposed to the gender of the maker?

PT: Yes, I like the paintings to participate in this sexual ambiguity and to have an erotic tone to them. I like to cultivate the presence of both the masculine and the feminine in the work.

SK: Sort of hermaphroditic?

PT: [Laughter] Yes, in the Duchampian tradition! Certainly they're not completely masculine. Collage helps me with this kind of indirection. Actually, the work that I've done that I've liked the most has a strong erotic current. I think this often has to do with



the tenderness of proximity within a painting—how elements interrelate, their positioning, the internal play.

SK: Would you see something sensual as feminine, as opposed to something logical as masculine?

PT: Then maybe the paintings are completely feminine?!

[Laughter] I suppose the architectonic condition of the work is masculine, and my fascination with structure and sharp edges, maybe that's masculine as well. But I've tried to place them in a way that undermines that masculinity.

SK: I think so, too. A lot of people would be very happy to hear that.

PT: Well, I'm very happy to say it.

SK: Is it a conscious effort on your part, to undermine the masculine?

PT: I think so. But it would be very difficult and somewhat pretentious for me to discuss the cultural implications of my paintings in any ideological way. I mean, I know they do have cultural implications, but *how* they do is almost impossible to answer. I wouldn't want to set up an agenda for the paintings in a programmatic sense, because then they wouldn't have to be made. I do try, however, to show a position that is first of all more pluralistic, completely nonauthoritarian, and which doesn't overtly exalt the heroic or the masculine. It's a genuinely deliberative research that is, I hope, as open, embracing and nurturing as I can make it. I like to think that I am lending my voice to themes and melodies that are not often heard or stated.

SK: Does your work have anything to do with theory?

PT: It would be much closer to my thinking to state what theories my paintings don't participate in. I prefer the apophatic or negatively rendered position, something along the lines of how Ad Reinhardt handled the question of art theory: painting is not this, it's not that, it's not another thing, nor is it anything unstateable—one can only recite a mantra of facts surrounding an activity. Reinhardt's method, incidentally, seems similar to the approach of medieval theology, wherein they sought to define a concept of the divine by elaborately stating how exactly this could *not* be adequately characterized.