

# Vincent Katz

## PHILIP TAAFFE'S GOLDEN DAYS



*Votive Painting, 2003*  
Mixed media on canvas.  
61-1/2 x 84-3/8 inches (156 x 214 cm)

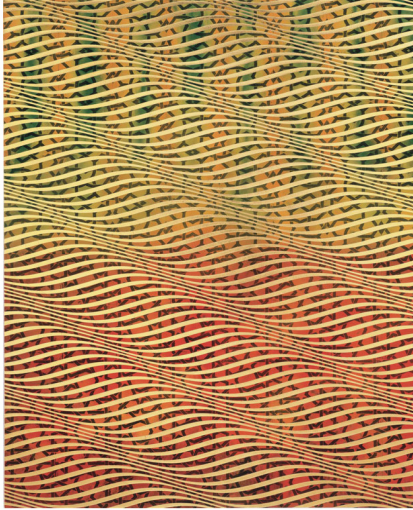
When one walks into Philip Taaffe's world, one enters a forest. It is a dense, richly layered environment—a formulation in the present, based on past evolutions. Each contemporary artist must deal with the present/past crux. Some are so intent on appearing modern they neglect study of past masters. Others, intensely aware of the need to adapt lessons of the past, become trapped in repetition of formulas. It is the rare artist who can be completely contemporary while incorporating rules and rhythms of former times. Rarer still is the artist who can cull those rhythms from a wide variety of cultures and periods—an artist of great sophistication. Philip Taaffe is such an artist.

His paintings exert a pull, a physical force. The viewer is drawn to them, to contemplate the richness of their depths and textures. The freshness of Taaffe's imagination holds continual surprises. Over the past twenty years, he has amassed a rich vocabulary of forms, from which he continues to draw, enriching it with new images that make his paintings always subtly different. The environment his paintings create is welcoming. The good feeling his paintings engender derives from the insight of the visual experience, and the knowledge that others have felt this way too.

Taaffe's paintings are built in complex layers, both technical and historical. The more one knows about his process, the more stupefying are the final results. Each painting is an amalgam of different techniques and media—oil paint transferred from cardboard forms, acrylic stains, oil-based prints from linoleum blocks, scraping, scouring, photo-based silkscreen prints, collaged paper elements, and most recently, spooned acrylic swirls, and intricately cut and applied sheets of gold leaf. It is particularly in the use of gold that Taaffe feels his most recent paintings evince an affinity for Byzantine art.

The artist is open and forthright about his sources. The search, or more aptly, the living with, or in, the cultures from which his sources arise, is

a life-giving passion for Taaffe, and he communicates that passion adeptly. While he has seen in person some of the artwork he references, the images themselves usually come from books. The library is an essential component of Taaffe's working environment, located significantly at his studio. It is divided into two rooms, one for modern and contemporary art, which he studies assiduously but does not use in his own work, the other filled with tomes on a bewildering array of arts and cultures such as one might find in the rare books room of a well-stocked library. It is to these books that Taaffe frequently turns for a pictorial element for one of his paintings. His use of these elements is transformative. Often, the image he chooses is a small reproduction and its definition is not high. Taaffe takes the shape and refines it, re-draws it, enlarging it. Frequently, too, he is taking a fragment, a part from a larger image, or group of images. By his treatment of it, he gives the element a different pictorial function, though it retains a semantic seed of its original function.



*Manises, 2003*  
Mixed media on canvas.  
67-1/8 x 54 inches (170 x 137 cm)

The paths leading back through time in Taaffe's paintings are alluring, but the desire to understand and appreciate Taaffe's work in the present tense is equally compelling. The paintings do not present themselves as accumulations of sources but rather as discrete, complex, visual and psychological experiences that resonate directly with the time in which they were created. Putting aside temporarily the paintings' back stories, we are driven to understand more about how Taaffe actually makes his paintings. Here, we enter another forest.

While the stages and techniques vary from painting to painting, there are continuities. There are different levels in the paintings, and considerable amounts of time may elapse between them. The first step, usually, is the laying down of basic shapes on raw canvas. This stage takes mental preparation and forethought, but its application is the most spontaneous of any of the actions Taaffe takes. He seems to want to access the irrational in a process he describes as "shamanistic":

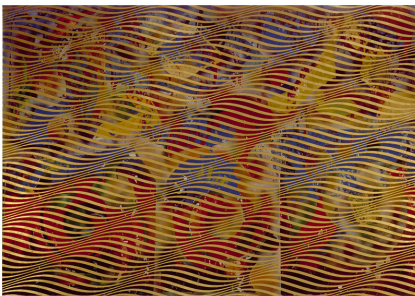
I use cut cardboard fragments. I go through them, selecting the ones I'd like to coat with paint, and start to throw them around, to start generating the imagery. That action is a very shamanistic, ritualistic action. I like the fact that there's that phase of the painting that is extremely violent and atavistic, a searching for ancestral spirits, or searching for the pictorial ancestry, and getting it there, getting it in the painting.(1)

After this initial accessing session, the canvas may stay in Taaffe's studio for a year or more before he does anything else to it; in some cases, initial efforts do not make it to the next stage. To hear Taaffe describe these canvases, it is as though he is speaking of living beings. "Sometimes they get abandoned or they languish," he comments. "I have a lot of canvases languishing around here, and I dig them up." Most times, after the appropriate gestation period, the artist does find the appropriate way to proceed. One standard procedure is the printing of decorative motifs. These can come from a variety of sources. Two of the paintings in the current exhibition (2), *Theodora* and *Manises*, use Islamic tile patterns, which Taaffe transfers to linoleum blocks and prints in series on the canvas. After printing such motifs, he will often stain the canvas with various shades of acrylic paint. The oil-based paints he has previously laid down for the prints will show through the acrylic stain, once it has dried. Other images may then be silkscreened on. Collage elements are frequently laid on top of the lower grounds—these are silkscreened on Japanese Gampi paper, which has a long fiber, enabling it to survive contact with water and other liquids, unlike most handmade paper, which disintegrates.



*Theodora*, 2003  
Mixed media on canvas  
78-1/4 x 65-3/8 inches (199 x 166 cm)

Each painting takes its own path. *Theodora* had to be literally put in the washing machine, which diluted the stained colors and softened the diamond pattern that had been printed, creating a subtle feathered effect and pushing those patterns back into a slightly distant plane. On top were printed large shapes derived from tiny spurs on the arms of Ophiurans from the waters around the Philippines, an animal Taaffe describes as half starfish, half sea urchin. The fragments he uses in *Theodora* may be arm spines, spines on the dorsal surface of the arms, spines transformed into hooks in the terminal part of the arms, club spines on the dorsal surface of the disk. He has taken a tiny, evocative, detail from an animal entity, and made it part of a series of motifs central to his painting. By taking these small elements and drastically enlarging them, he gives them a dynamic graphic function. As usual, he has taken the image from a reproduction, in this case a tiny one without much detail. His laying them out in sequence reflects the layout of these detached items in a text book (3), but they also take on different guises. They can seem plantlike rather than animal.



*Flag*, 2003  
Mixed media on canvas.  
58-3/8 x 83-3/4 inches (148 x 213 cm)

The final element of the painting—and the one that signaled to Taaffe the *Theodora* connection—is the series of eye-like globes Taaffe affixed to the central position of each diamond and also within the lattice-work of the



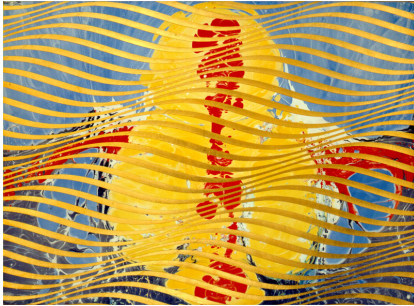
*Vasco da Gama*, 2003  
Mixed media on linen.  
27 x 37 inches (69 x 96 cm)

tile pattern below. These collaged disks were created by dripping paint over a grid of silkscreened holes. The screen was then printed on Gampi, with Taaffe selecting those discs he deemed successful and excluding the rest. He then backed the chosen discs with white gesso, so that they would stand out from the murky grounds beneath them. They do sit on the surface of the painting, while simultaneously giving the impression of holes through which one catches glimpses of a larger drip painting. Taaffe points out the decorative quality of the circular mother of pearl elements in the stunning mosaic of the Empress Theodora at San Vitale in Ravenna (before 547 CE): “See how they fit and how they are distributed in lines, in a pictorial figuration? Look inside each one, they’re all distinctive. The way the painting Theodora is structured, it is linked to the mosaic.”

Manises, Votive Painting, and Flag make use of gold leaf, as do the smaller paintings *Vasco da Gama* and *Flare*. Taaffe had used gold leaf once before, in the painting *Polis* (1996), but in the new paintings, he became more systematic in his application of it. The leaf comes in rolls about five inches wide. As it is 24-karat gold, Taaffe developed a technique that minimizes waste; he also needed to a way to lay down the precise and complicated curves of the waves in the two large paintings, *Manises* and *Flag*. His technical achievement is particularly impressive in those paintings, whose illusionistic waves roll in different directions precisely because each one uses the gold from the negative spaces of the other. The gold is laid down in a silkscreen process, with a size(4) to attach the gold to the canvas. Then another silkscreen is used to pick up the gold that is in the space between the wave lines. Taaffe and his crew had to invent this procedure, and they had to develop the particular formula for the size, which needs to set neither too wet nor too dry, providing just the right tack, for the gold leaf to adhere and transfer completely and effectively. Not only the technical feat of laying down the gold but the aesthetic one of the gold’s maintaining the appropriate tonality occupies Taaffe. As he explains, “It’s the result of being able to get the gold to look right: not to be flat but also not too shiny. To achieve the right subtlety was in a sense an alchemical process, because it’s hard to get it right there in the middle; to achieve this subtlety is in a sense an alchemical process.”

Votive Painting uses fabric designs for two of its gold patterns. One comes from a reproduction of a chasuble of blue velvet from Florence, the other from a velvet wall hanging. The latter piece is Venetian; both are from the

end of the 15th century. The word “votive” brings to mind candles flickering in a church, and the effect that the gold produces in low light situations is remarkable. Not only does the gold become luminous, but the shapes Taaffe has painted beneath the gold become more dimensional.



*Flare*, 2003  
Mixed media on linen.  
27-1/2 x 37-3/4 inches (70 x 96 cm)

Gold leaf is an element that plays a central role in Byzantine art. The gold was used for its native decorative qualities and also to suggest divinity and to engender human veneration of that divinity. Byzantine art covers a long period, beginning around the time the Roman emperor Constantine adopted Christianity and moved his capital in 330 CE to Byzantium, thenceforth Constantinople, and ending perhaps with the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 CE, after which the city was Muslim. A critical period for Byzantine art was the controversy over the use of icons. In the 8th century, Iconoclasm became the dominant orthodoxy, forcing artists to abandon imagery of human and divine beings, in a manner not dissimilar from Islamic art. Ultimately, figurative imagery was re-introduced into Byzantine art, and that became known as the Orthodoxy. Taaffe has always felt a strong connection to Byzantine art, which, as he says, gives us the “first full depiction of Paradise and the idea of the Celestial,” and his current work shows him delving more deeply into this rich source. As with his treatments of Islamic material and other images that come from specific religious or spiritual contexts, so with Byzantine sources Taaffe is adept at tapping into the spiritual while evading the literalness of specific religious and political contexts.

The stars in Votive Painting were created with silkscreens, using a technique similar to that of the circular elements in *Theodora*, with the difference that Taaffe dripped the paint onto the screens for *Theodora*, while in those for *Votive Painting* he deposited oil colors around the edge of the screen, creating variegated striations and swirling effects with a squeegee. As the stars are larger than the circles, more of the movement of the paint can be seen, lending an added level of painterliness to this aspect of *Votive Painting*.

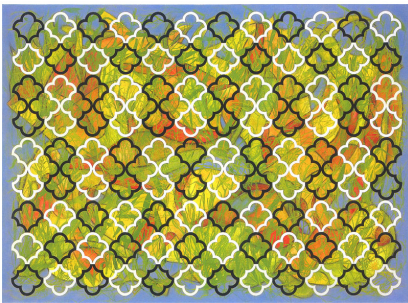
In his survey on Byzantine art, Robin Cormack compares an early and a late example of Byzantine, both of which make use of gold leaf. The early work is the mosaic of the dome of the Rotunda (Church of St. George) in Thessaloniki, from the 5th or 6th century. As in many later Byzantine mosaics, here gold leaf was built into the glass tesserae, giving an overall

shimmering effect to the large-scale work. In one decorative band are depicted architectural elements with frontally facing saints. Cormack writes, “Heaven would seem to be palatial architecture in golden light.”(5) The late work is an icon depicting the Triumph of the Orthodoxy, possibly made in Constantinople in the second half of the 14th century. It is a small painting in which the artist laid down gold leaf onto top of of gesso painted on a wood panel. The panel celebrates the triumph of the image, which returned to Byzantine art after the period of Iconoclast (c. 730-842 CE), as noted above.



*Glyphic Frieze, 2003*  
Mixed media on canvas.  
49-1/2 x 116-3/4 inches (126 x 296 cm)

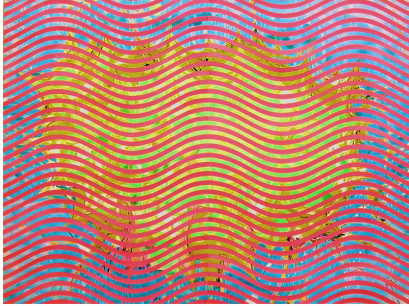
Glyphic Frieze is intriguing for its diversity of source material and for the clarity with which the entire piece presents itself, the source elements plainly visible but non-didactic. As a counterpart to the Peruvian petroglyph imagery of birds and other figures, Taaffe has taken forms from a Mexican book on pastry-making. Cannily, he has combined works from the same general region, from vastly different social contexts. In the background, Taaffe printed enlarged irregular pastry forms, which seem like distorted shark jaws. Then, after the glyphwork, he was considering other imagery, including Celtic sacrificial hooks. It was, he said, a “process of weighing, testing the density of the situation.” Ultimately, a lighter balance was decided upon. The hooks did not make it, but another element from the pastry book was included in black and white versions—a simple shape with two bumps in it, that, in Taaffe’s rendition has an animist energy. It is interesting to read the description in the pastry book of what that piece actually is. (6) Taaffe chose the piece for its formal value but intuitively was in tune with its inherent musical potentials. The bumpy piece is used to make the back of a harp, which will be played by an angel as part of an elaborate Christmas cake. The harp will be painted gold. The instructions for making the cake indicate that the body of the angel must lean slightly forward on her bench, so that the harp may rest on her shoulder. She wears a white tunic, with ample monastic sleeves. Her wings are made separately; when dry, they are painted gold and then attached. Even in a pastry cookbook, Taaffe has somehow found spirituality in daily life, and he has struck gold.



*Field Station, 2003*  
Mixed media on canvas.  
41 x 57 inches (104 x 145 cm)

Field Station began with an elaborate biomorphic abstraction, based on cardboard fragment shapes, which Taaffe outlined in charcoal and then painted in. It had the definite look of a painted composition, as opposed to other pieces, which began with sequences of unconnected shapes. He knew that he wanted to overlay this abstraction with images of grass plants and

then to put as the top layer black and white forms derived from Islamic tiles. For Taaffe, the layers are “specific states of consciousness,” coming from different strata of experience. In the finished painting, the three layers, and the pale dark blue ground that peeks through at spots and creates a border for the image, combine so harmoniously that it seems they must have always been together or the artist must have known from the beginning exactly how they would blend. The grasses are Indian fodder grasses; they come from a book of nature-printed specimens, so they are life-size, and the printing, while accurate as to the grasses’ forms, gives little information as to their surface textures. The prints in the book from which Taaffe took them(7) have the look of photocopy. When Taaffe takes one of these prints to work from, his manner of translation is specific and technically sophisticated. It becomes part of his *modus operandi* in the present moment, an element in a painting, much the same as any brushstroke, scrape, or pull.



*Thera*, 2003  
Mixed media on linen.  
30 x 40 inches (76 x 101.5 cm)

His painting *Thera* is one of four small paintings in the exhibition that make use of a “floating pigment” technique.(8) Taaffe sets up a vat of carra-gen moss, onto which is carefully poured acrylic paint. The moss provides a gummy, viscous medium, which can be manipulated with a stylus, to flow in a controlled manner. A canvas is then laid on the paint, which transfers to it. The canvas is removed, left to dry, and mounted on a frame. With *Thera* and *Fiume*, Taaffe printed a two-dimensional wave pattern on top, which he varied with different tones of blue; *Flare* and *Vasco da Gama* received the illusionistic gold-leaf waves, traveling in opposite directions, as their finishing touches. Taaffe refers to *Thera*’s eruption as an “island of pigment, with lava flow covering it” and expressed a desire to emulate this flow with his own process of floating pigment. The Cycladic island of *Thera* (also known as Santorini) has a rich history that has impacted several times on the history of art. Among the earliest Greek wall paintings are those from *Thera* (c. 17th century BCE). These diverse paintings, that include figures, naval flotillas, plant motifs and landscapes, were preserved to a large extent because of the eruption of a volcano on the island at the end of the 17th century BCE. As in Pompeii and Herculaneum, artworks were covered in protective pumice. The island’s beaches also took on a striking dark tint at that time from bits of the same falling stone. Another eruption at *Thera*, in 757 CE, was taken by Pope Leo III as a sign that God was displeased with religious iconography, and he used it as an excuse to promote the doctrine of Iconoclasm, which forebade the depiction of mortals or

God in human form. Taaffe is fascinated both by the early paintings and by the movement away from human imagery.

There are a number of works on paper in the exhibition, which also make use of the floating pigment technique, some with acrylic ink, others with oil paint. Taaffe studied marbelizing—the technique once commonly used to design endpapers for books—and has adapted this practice for his own work. In his pieces using marbling and the application of gold leaf, Taaffe has taken techniques from the worlds of illuminated manuscripts and gilding and brought them into contemporary fine art making. The works on paper can have different effects—the acrylic ones seem more pure, closer to classic marbling, while the oil drawings tend to have more extremes of scale, bringing to mind aerial views of islands or microscopic views of tissues. Many of the drawings are double impressions—superimpositions of two distinct floating pigment applications.



*Fiume*, 2003  
Mixed media on linen.  
37-1/4 x 27-1/2 inches (95 x 70 cm)

One site that Taaffe has visited, whose mosaics made a lasting impression on him is the Mosque of the Ommayyads in Damascus. It is a site about which little has been written, though Taaffe characteristically has in his library one article in French from the 1930s.<sup>(9)</sup> The mosaics date from the late 7th or early 8th century CE and therefore show the effects of nascent Iconoclasm. As Eustache de Lorey points out, Iconoclasm and Islam (and Judaism as well) shared the prohibition on representing human forms. Landscape, in the Ommayyad mosaics, takes on a primary role, something it had not done in Byzantine art before. Cross-sections of marble are also used in the mosque as abstract decoration. De Lorey felt that the artists of this mosque, sensing the new pressure to make images devoid of the human figure, returned to models from the Roman era, in particular second and fourth style Pompeian wall painting. This emphasis on architectural forms brings to mind as well the mosaics from the Rotunda in Thessaloniki. In a statement that has relevance to Taaffe's use of previous artists' imagery, de Lorey writes that "Hellenistic models exerted a vital influence... they were not models so revered that nothing could be changed: they inspired ever new inventions..."<sup>(10)</sup> The writer is perceptive as well in his discussion of the Damascene artists' motivations:

Let's examine again how they order their diverse motifs. What is striking is the importance, the predominance, of rhythm. Realism does not have that nonchalant freedom, that grace which strips the rigor from a perfectly



defined composition. The structure of the ensemble is so taut, the secondary motifs are held in an order so precise that the descriptive character of the work gives way to a character practically purely decorative: the artist has not only wanted to imitate nature, he has tried to reproduce it in an order that borrows more from art than from reality... Realism of buildings in landscape was not a goal of the Damascene artist... he affirmed a different vision in which landscape does not offer a setting to the motifs, within which they are situated and organized, but constitutes another motif of the same quality as the others, disposed in a single ground, the foreground, according to the oriental rule of frontality.” (11)

Taaffe’s concerns and predilections have drawn him intensively to Islamic art, to Mayan art, to Byzantine art. One could say that Taaffe’s concerns are pre-Humanist, or conversely, that his work is post-Humanist, in the technical sense. His work consistently and importantly shows that man is not the measure of all things. While many plant and animal forms have entered his work, and while many man-made designs have also entered, the human form has rarely presented itself. It is almost as if everything that makes up the world, everything that gives the human its context, that makes human life possible, is present, but the human being itself, which has been given such precedence in much of the world’s art, and in particular in Western art since the Renaissance, has been removed, and yet removed in such a subtle way that it does not feel slighted, simply temporarily put to the side. Taaffe is aware that the human will complete the life of his painting, in the form of the viewer, necessary for any work to have a life.

Taaffe’s work is human in a different sense, not in privileging the human experience over the experience of other life forms, but in his reaching out to many diverse cultures, a coming together in his corpus as a whole that effects a remarkable joining of hands of peoples diverse in religious and philosophical outlook. This has been Taaffe’s concern since the beginning, and it is a perennially salutary and useful outlook, one that in the currently intensely polarized world situation—the “us against them” mentality that drives many in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths to unconscionable extremes of savage insensitivity—takes on ever greater significance.

Taaffe’s work is ever in flux. He works daily, and he is constantly looking for new inspirations and new solutions. As he says, In my own artistic development, I see myself as moving forward but constantly looking at material

I have visited in the past, and coming to terms with that, or finding new ways to allow that to come around again, to enter the works in unanticipated ways. It's this circular thinking, always moving forward, but as a wheel moves forward, as it rotates, it comes back around again.

As we come out of the forest, we are thankful for being able to see better, in a past and present that are suddenly one.

#### Notes

1. All quotes of Philip Taaffe are from an interview with the author on 29 October 2003.
2. All paintings in the exhibition were completed in 2003.
3. *Ophiurans of the Philippine Seas and Adjacent Waters* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institute, 1922). Taaffe used Ophiuran imagery before in his painting *Ophiuran Station* (1998).
4. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines "size" as "A glutinous or viscid wash applied to paper, parchment, etc., to provide a suitable ground for gilding, painting, or other work."
5. Robin Cormack, *Byzantine Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
6. Marithé de Alvarado, *Arte Mexicano del Azúcar* (Ciudad de Mexico: La Edición Pedagógica y Encyclopedica Mexicana, 1959)
7. *Indigenous Fodder Grasses of the Plains of North-Western India* (Roorkee: Nature-printed at the Thomason Civil Engineering College Press, 1886).
8. The other paintings that use this technique are *Fiume, Flare, and Vasco de Gama*.
9. Eustache de Lorey, "L'Hellénisme et L'Orient dans les Mosaïques de la Mosquée de Omayyades" in *Ars Islamica*, University of Michigan and Detroit Institute of the Arts, 1934.
10. Translation by the author. De Lorey uses the term "Hellenistic" when referring to Pompeian paintings.
11. De Lorey, *ibid.*, translation by the author.

VINCENT KATZ is a poet, translator, art critic, editor, and curator. He is the author of eleven books of poetry, two books of translation, and his art criticism has been published in numerous books, catalogues, and journals. He was the editor of *Black Mountain College: Experiment In Art*, published by MIT Press in 2002. Katz writes frequently on contemporary art and has published essays or articles on the work of Francesco Clemente, Robert Rauschenberg, Kiki Smith, Cy Twombly, and others. His criticism has been published in *Apollo*, *Art in America*, *ARTnews*, *Art on Paper*, *art press*, *Parkett*, *World of Interiors*, and *Tate Etc*. He is the publisher of the poetry and arts journal VANITAS and of Libellum books.