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PHILIP TAAFFE: ROMANCING THE FIGURE

[Essay published on the occasion of the exhibition Philip Taaffe, June 8 - September 30, 1998, at Thomas Ammann Fine Art, A.G., Zurich. Reprinted with permission.]



Interzonal Leaves, 1998
Mixed media on linen.
80 x 91 inches (203 x 231 cm)

The avant garde of botanical forms on the surface of one of Philip Taaffe's most charismatic new paintings, *Interzonal Leaves* (1998), presents the viewer with, among other things, a multiple play on the concept, action and verb "to press." In their hieratic flatness, for example, and their translucency and filigreed detail, these fifty-two life-size "leaves" immediately evoke those traditionally found pressed between the pages of bibles, books, diaries, or letters. Yet this instinctive romantic interpretation packs a vaguely disturbing, existential punch. It tends to raise the question of some absent or otherwise invisible force-whatever weight it was that exerted the flattening pressure. Is it the weight of history?

More precisely, in the case of *Interzonal Leaves*, Taaffe hunted down botany books, foraged for resonant leaf images within, produced hundreds of silkscreened prints of them (hand-painted on both sides), cut each one out, and, after countless provisional positionings and repositionings-adding, omitting, rejecting, reserving-affixed them to the already marshaled field of the awaiting painting. As for the expectant ground beneath this screen of collaged leaves, it too underwent an ordeal of selection, regimentation, transference, and invited accident.

In reality, of course, the artist himself pressed the "leaves" into service on the surface of his canvas. This sounds simple, however, and Taaffe is decidedly not. He is very, very intense, guards it, saves it, taps it, and pursues

each work through a paradoxically controlled process. That process involves something like inner fission, wherein a host of divergent Taaffian energies are compressed and released to enact the necessary tasks, motives, maneuvers, and ineffable rituals of his campaign, before molecular unity—a group of works realized, Philip for a moment sated—may once again be assumed. These energies seem by turn to be retentive and profligate, intellectual and animalistic, rigorous and abandoned, ascetic and sexual, solitary and organizational, logical and geomantic, warriorlike and priestly.

A loose grid of quasi-heraldic red, black, and blue-black graphic motifs against bright white comprises the middle ranks and *arriere garde* of the painting. These more boldly defined rows are in fact populated by veterans of previous campaigns: forms printed directly onto the white linen field, that were generated by recycled stencil fragments, or the leftovers from cut-outs first deployed on other paintings. A few of the characters inhabit patchy auras of inky color-paint that was itself offset from the underside of previously stenciled fragments, now reversed.

Among these regenerate characters are dense black forms like axe blades; slender forms like stringless bows; an alluring shape, rendered in two sizes, that suggests a gothic griffin (and is perhaps the abstracted, ornamental descendent of Taaffe's recent lizard and snake images); and several, more or less organic forms and bits of abstract, Matissean regalia. In pictorial terms, this stentorian rank and file seems to press the leaves forward to the utmost surface of the painting where, like foliage fallen onto the clear surface of some pool or pond, they seem to float, at last free of pressure, as passive elements in the seasonal drama. Here and there, however, there is evidence of some interzonal meddling with the brush.

The interzonal of the painting's title and composition alludes to William Burroughs, and to the hallucinatory, Tangier-inspired, spy-infested, Cold War environment—the Interzone-of Burroughs' Naked Lunch. What Taaffe seems most pointedly to share with his key mentor is a powerful sense of, and ability to convey a galvanic, no doubt primordial nexus of martial, sexual and intellectual energies. In Taaffe's work, as in Burroughs' (whether the master's writings or, indeed, his bullet-hole paintings), those forces are inextricably intertwined.



Eros and Psyche, 1994
Mixed media on canvas.
132 x 100-1/2 inches (335 x 255 cm)

This complex of connections was made explicit a few years ago in Taaffe's high-voltage *Eros and Psyche* (1993-94), with its Uccello-esque arrow-vectors. But calmer-looking paintings, including Taaffe's epochal, mid-eighties explorations of high- and late-Modernist achievements by figures such as Barnett Newman and Ellsworth Kelly, also carry a veiled sexual charge. *We Are Not Afraid* (1985), for instance, which was seen in Zurich last year in the influential "Birth of the Cool" exhibition, is a Newman-based composition with a red field and three vertical "zip" surrogates: a realistically rendered section of twisting wrought iron, at center-field and painted blue, flanked by two yellow caduceus snakes, heraldic predecessors of the artist's recent, explicit reptilian images. The mythic caduceus-Mercury's winged, serpentine staff, as well as the modern emblem of the medical profession-is a sexualized symbol, indeed a confluence of carnality and the sublime. But even some of Taaffe's most abstracted, most rhythmically ornamental paintings can evoke both Eros and Mars.



Composition with Egyptian Vessels, 1998
Mixed media on board.
32 x 24 inches (81 x 61 cm)

Taaffe has been stockpiling ornamental imagery for well over a decade. Many of his late eighties and early nineties paintings, for instance, incorporate designs generated by rubbings he made of ornamental grillwork that had caught his eye in Italy during the three-year period (1988-91) when he lived in Naples, and on his various trips to North Africa. In addition to the botany and zoology books he has more recently acquired and mined, Taaffe has long collected material on the decorative arts, such as books of old European textile and embroidery patterns, of antique Japanese sword guard designs, and so forth. More anomalously, some nine years ago on the streets of Tangier he bought a large, loose sheaf of embroidery tracings on sheer, cheap paper, whose original purpose had been to serve as templates for the decorative needlework on women's blouses or djellabas. These delicate drawings, obliquely figurative in their quite directly human scale, have at last been brought to life in a series of small paintings begun around a year ago, in which architectonic, screen- or lambrequin-like foregrounds of bold, black-and-white graphic forms are set against intricately modulated, multi-hued fields.

The Moroccan blouse patterns-cut up and syntactically scrambled, re-configured, transferred and overpainted by hand-have been subsumed in *Composition with Egyptian Vessels* (1998), for example, with its all-black, jar-and-scimitar "balustrade," and in *Still Life with Lattice* (1998), whose black-and-white foreground pattern even more clearly suggests a screened

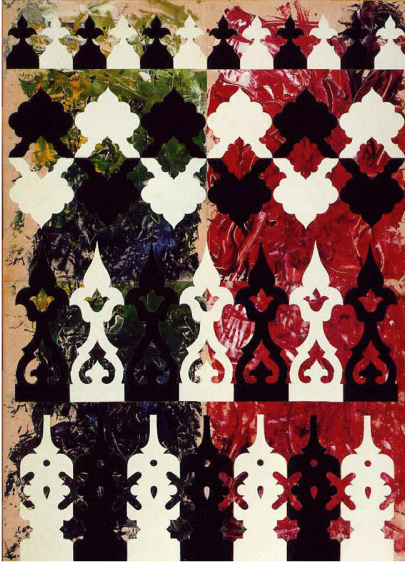
window. In each of these paintings, the found floral and foliate needlework pattern has been transformed into an abstracted garden-at once an Islamic Garden of Paradise, glimpsed as if through the protective grillwork of a harem window, and the preciously guarded hortus conclusus of Christian iconography, the enclosed garden that is itself a symbol for the Virgin.

In these works, in other words, we may not only intuit a nexus of otherwise divergent cultural systems, but a kind of double metaphor for some implicit figural presence: the woman in purdah, say, who might be looking out to the paradisaical garden, and the woman who is represented as that garden. This kind of synthesis seems somehow characteristic of the artist: Taaffe's career in general suggests the progress of a metaphysical, as well as a worldly traveler.

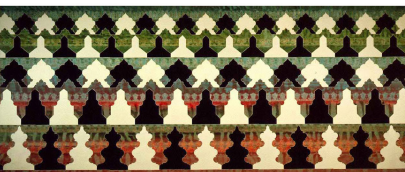
In yet another painting, *Painting with Row Ornament* (1998), that is related to the series but does not include the Moroccan patterns, the background "garden" is wholly abstract, made only of impure, impressed, offset paint-the miscegenated result of the artist's period of wild experimentation with printing techniques and their alternative uses during the early nineties.

In its overall composition, *Painting with Row Ornament* clearly refers to a much bigger, earlier painting, Taaffe's *Arcade* (1991), whose epic scale and fearsome rhetoric evokes nothing so much as great urban ramparts. Might these two like-minded works be metaphors, conscious or not, for the artist's own garden of chaos, the unnatural and dangerous paradise of the citta aperta?

The romance of danger is in any case a persistent issue with Taaffe. He is attracted to cities with dangerous reputations-New York, Naples, Tangier-and he believes in the latent powers of ecstatic and shamanistic practices such as incantation. In *The Red Desert* (1996-97), the largest and compositionally most complex of the paintings on view here, these two types of potential danger have been subliminally conflated. The painting's title is also that of Michelangelo Antonioni's great film from 1964, a definitive modern allegory of urban angst and environmental toxicity. The film's narrative unfolds within a phantasmagorically threatening landscape on the industrial fringes of some unspecified Italian city that must have nevertheless reminded the artist of the vast, petrochemicals-belching corridors of industrial northern New Jersey, near where he grew up, and barely a fifteen-minute drive from downtown Manhattan.



Still Life with Lattice, 1998
Mixed media on board.
19-7/8 x 16 inches (50.5 x 40.5 cm)



Arcade, 1991
Mixed media on canvas.
76 x 185 inches (193 x 470 cm)



The Red Desert, 1996–97
Mixed media on canvas. 82-1/2 x 112-1/4
inches (209.5 x 285 cm)

Taaffe's big red canvas is utterly abstract—no pictorial motifs, no animals or leaves, just an expanse of lighter and darker areas of red broken up by irregular “cracks,” through which we see slivers of a sickly rainbow spectrum, dominated by poisonous greens. These illusionist fissures are actually made of stenciled passages of litho ink offset from glass and collaged onto the red ground, and might make one think of the so-called affichistes (including Mimmo Rotella and Raymond Hains, among others) of the early sixties, whose Pop-sensibility paintings intentionally evoke the layers of torn posters found on city kiosks and building exteriors.

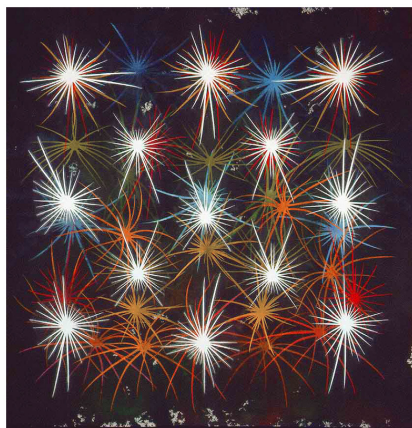
Yet Taaffe's distressed red wall seems most pointedly to refer to a cinematic interior: the slapdash red wall that is the backdrop for one of the most memorable scenes in Antonioni's film, in which a mysteriously ailing Monica Vitti and several of her friends have retreated to a jerry-built wasteland shack for an evening of communal malaise and failed revelry. As Taaffe tells it in a long published conversation with another of his mentors, the underground filmmaker Stan Brakhage, he first saw the movie shortly after leaving art school, in the summer of 1977, when he was living in a theological seminary in New York's Chelsea district.

After returning from the screening to his room, he began to draw intensely with oil sticks while simultaneously focusing on his immediate memory of the film and talking into a tape recorder. The idea, as he stated it, “was to see how long the vocal narrative and the linear or gestural narrative could coexist, keep generating one another, before language fell away...one thing I want to reiterate about this process...is that it was some form of incantation. And I believe there is a connection between this previous exercise and my present incantatory use of silkscreen.”

Last autumn in New York, Taaffe invited a group of friends and colleagues to his studio for an evening of short films by Brakhage, and to meet the filmmaker. (Brakhage was visiting from Colorado, where he is now Distinguished Professor of Film Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder.) The experience was a revelation to those present. Not only did it illuminate a kindred sensibility between these two ostensibly different temperaments, working through different mediums—namely a shared desire to make the very act of looking a principal subject of their art, along with an extreme poetic intensity—but it underscored surprising parallels in their respective processes, as well.



Snake Totem, 1998
Mixed media on canvas.
74-5/8 x 36 inches (189.5 x 91.5 cm)

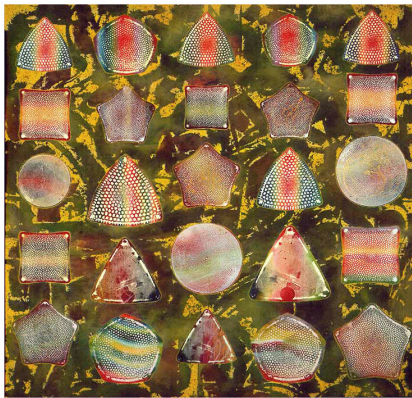


Illuminations, 1998
Mixed media on canvas.
77-1/2 x 77-1/2 inches (197 x 197 cm)

Among the several films shown, two seemed especially relevant to Taaffe's recent endeavor. In the first, Brakhage's *Night Cats* (1956), the nocturnal doings of a group of alley cats—hunting, fighting, coupling—are revealed on infrared film, as if from another feline's point of view. The film, at once expressionist and naturalistic, conjures up a heightened, if penumbrous reality in which contexts and incidents, forms and shadows, movements and their reverberations have equal pictorial value, and seem to take place simultaneously within both temporal and spatial perspectives. It is a description that also suits a painting such as *Snake Totem* (1998), with its agitated serpentine nexus and sensitized ground.

The second film, *Mothlight* (1963), did not involve any camerawork at all but was even more viscerally dependent on the participation of its animal cast. Moths, attracted to the heat and light of Brakhage's projector, and thereby to their deaths, were subsequently collaged directly onto film-strip—much as Taaffe generally applies his cut-outs to canvas. Even apart from its obvious allegorical implications, *Mothlight* suggests analogies to a painting such as Taaffe's *Illuminations* (1998), whose composition suggests an unusually well-organized display of fireworks. In that painting, starburst forms made of collaged images of cactus needles—blazing white in the extreme foreground, multicolored beneath—seem to press forward far more dramatically than the botanical elements on the placid surface of *Interzonal Leaves*. Here, it is indeed as if they were hurtling towards a light source where, in all their glory, they were caught—freeze-frame—in the act of self-immolation.

To browse around the grand-scale complex of workspaces, reading rooms and studies that comprise Taaffe's extraordinary studio in New York is to glean a sense of the enormous and ever-increasing variety of materials and sources he draws upon, or at least chooses to look at closely. Sometimes, those sources can seem quite unlikely. On a recent visit, for example, propped up on an easel near the entrance to one of the auxiliary workrooms, was a smallish still-life painting he had just acquired by the minor Italian metaphysical painter Filippo de Pisis—a contemporary of Giorgio de Chirico and Alberto Savinio—once fashionable but largely forgotten in Europe, and altogether unknown in the United States. What interest could this mildly evocative, rather conventional-looking little work hold for an artist as heroically ambitious as Taaffe?



Yellow Painting with Diatoms, 1997-98
Mixed media on canvas.
75 x 78 inches (190.5 x 198 cm)



Red Flower Columns, 1998
Mixed media on linen.
76 x 78 inches (193 x 198 cm)



Missa Caput, 1985
Linoprint collage on canvas.
91 x 68 inches (231 x 173 cm)

The quick perusal of an old de Pisis catalogue confirmed an intriguing loucheness, as well as fashionability-appealing qualities to any truly worldly or metaphysical traveler. Taaffe's attention, furthermore, had been directed towards de Pisis by the multi-talented and mysterious Mario Diacono, whose small Boston gallery currently serves as a unique outpost of European-style intellectualism and urbanity in the States, and whose erudition, trained on virtually any subject, would likely send up a flare to anyone who knows him. But it was ultimately something within the painting itself that Taaffe found compelling. An unassuming, even neurotically uncertain integrity of surface and incident might be one way of putting it. The painting's murky, scumbled and scraped ground seems actually to give rise to the flowers and objects whose depictions emanate from it.

This kind of incontrovertible unity of surface, on however amplified a scale, is what Taaffe is after in a work such as *Yellow Painting with Diatoms* (1997-98), with its unprepossessing yet somehow fertile-looking ground of blotted paint, with infinitesimal drips. The arresting, rainbow-hued shapes arrayed in grid formation in the foreground-the plankton organisms known as diatoms-were generated by the beautifully produced, black-and-white plates in a pair of marine biology studies (one published in Geneva in 1891, the other in Berlin in 1959) lying on a work table in Taaffe's main studio space. What is arresting, however, about these exquisitely precise, pointilistically detailed forms is that they do not appear to be organic at all, but rather suggest some species of industrial design. The diatoms indeed recall Sol LeWitt's *Photogrids* of circa 1980, an informal taxonomy of grids found in daily life, and in particular the pages devoted to the variously shaped and gridded surfaces of manhole covers on the streets of New York.

Taaffe seems in general to be fascinated by the late 1940s foment of construction and abstraction, naturalism and design that animated the young Ellsworth Kelly-a period during which the teachings of the great, turn-of-the-century American architect Louis Sullivan were being reexamined and reapplied. Taaffe may be considered a latter-day disciple of Sullivan's-more consistently so, perhaps, than any of his contemporaries. At many points throughout his career-1985, for instance, with *Missa Caput*, or in 1989, with *Botanical Veil*, and again in recent years with his "ornamental fragment" series-he has made paintings whose surface fusion of architectonic, organic and ornamental elements are in keeping with Sullivan's teachings. A painting such as Taaffe's *Red Flower Columns* (1998), with its integrated "facade"

of ornamental red shapes resembling stone masonry, indeed suggests nothing less than a contemporary interpretation of Sullivan's holistic teachings, as expressed in "Ornament in Architecture" (1892).



Overtone, 1983
Mixed media on canvas.
89 x 89 inches (227 x 227 cm)

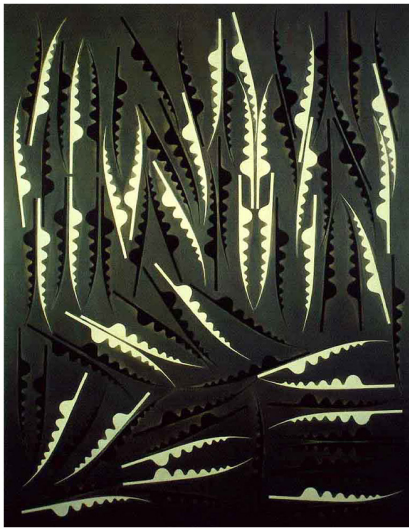


Martyr Group, 1983
Mixed media on canvas.
104 x 104 inches (264 x 264 cm)

Lessons, however, are sometimes absorbed through the agency and more finite practices of lesser masters. Taaffe's periodic involvement with the highly refined "Op Art" works of Bridget Riley, as evidenced in a painting such as *Overtone* (1983), is one case in point. His appropriations of Paul Feeley's biomorphic motifs are another. Also to be seen in Taaffe's studio in recent months-strewn casually amidst books, catalogues and flyers on a huge, circular table in his library were a couple of tiny, intimist collages in roughly the manner of Kurt Schwitters, by the poet-artist Ann Ryan.

The fragile beauty of Ryan's collages belies an almost excruciatingly rigorous opticality. In looking at them, one is reminded of Ruskin's encomium to artists, to view the world as if without the protective benefit of eyelids. (This, if you will, is the flip side of the "hypnagogic visual experiences" discussed by Taaffe and Brakhage, and exemplified by the kaleidoscope effect, universally familiar to children, that is produced by light refracted through closed lids.) Indeed, the relationship between surface and support in Ryan's collages parallels that between the lens or film of an eye and the orb itself. Much the same could be said of many works by Taaffe, including *Illuminations* and *Interzonal Leaves*. In the case of Ryan, as with de Pisis, the appeal for Taaffe seems to have involved an element of high-bohemian social geography, coupled with the more crucial catalyst of aesthetic gestalt. Ryan, known primarily as a poet, was a friend of Ezra Pound, whose meta-historical, time-travelers flow of consciousness make him a natural hero for Taaffe. Ryan indeed only took to making visual art during the last six years of her life, in passionate response to the 1948 Schwitters retrospective at MOMA-the same show that proved to be seminal for the young Rauschenberg, Twombly and Johns.

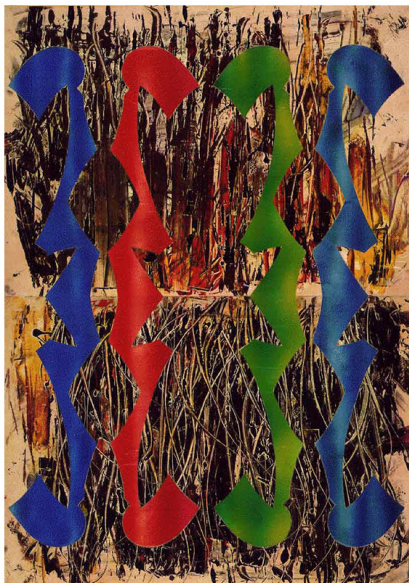
Ryan had occasion, during the 1930s, to introduce Pound to the young Tony Smith, who at the time was not yet an artist but studying to be an architect at the short-lived Chicago Bauhaus, and later under the aegis of Sullivan's most illustrious disciple, Frank Lloyd Wright. Taaffe has never spoken much about Smith, nor has he consciously addressed him through any particular work. Yet the Smith retrospective this summer at MOMA, in shedding light on its well-known but not so well understood subject,



Untitled, 1985
Linoprint collage on canvas.
87-1/2 x 68-1/2 inches (222 x 174 cm)



Megapolis, 1996
Mixed media on canvas.
165-1/2 x 375-1/2 inches (420 x 954 cm)



Painting with Carved Figures, 1998
Mixed media on canvas.
55-3/4 x 39-3/8 inches (141.5 x 100 cm)

served to posit a number of striking similarities, even profound affinities, between these two artists—both New Jersey natives, as it happens, as well as Irish-Catholics with a strong sense of their atavistic, Celtic roots.

Smith is primarily associated with his monumental public sculpture, but it is through his work in architecture (in 1950-51, for instance, he collaborated with Jackson Pollock on the design for a modular church on stilts), as well as in painting, that his spirit is perhaps most clearly revealed. Smith, in his own words, was seeking “The Pattern of Organic Life in America.” Taaffe’s architectonic organicism—so evident in *Yellow Painting with Diatoms*, or in the earlier *Misa Caput*—not only recalls Smith’s little-known Louisenbergs series of 1953-54 and its circles-within-grids, but suggests a like-minded and continuing quest.

There is reason to think that ethnography and the figure have been playing an increasingly palpable, if still circumspect role in that quest. Not that Taaffe hasn’t already depicted human figures: *Martyr Group* (1983) involves an unmistakable brace of them, represented as target-practice dummies. But the figure, nevertheless, has been too freighted a subject—perhaps too taboo within the abstract canon—for Taaffe to address head-on. Yet over a decade ago, the jazzy jousting shards in *Untitled* (1985) suggested nothing if not a tribal dance, and Taaffe’s interest in Dogon figures has informed a number of other works since. The totemic columns, furthermore, in Taaffe’s colossal *Megapolis* (1996), suggest human surrogates of a sort.

In the last year, these figurative implications have become yet more insistent. They are perfectly obvious, for instance, in the staccato, quasi-hermaphroditic, vaguely Picassoid cut-outs that constitute the foreground and dramatic locus of *Painting with Carved Figures* (1998). And they are only somewhat less obvious, and perhaps even more alluringly ambiguous, in the wondrously jagged new forms that make up his most recent biomorphic avant garde: the collaged ophiurans of Taaffe’s *Ophiuran Station* (1998). Like the diatoms, the ophiurans are an organic species (a type of coral) whose images were generated by the illustration plates in an old scientific study: “Ophiurans of the Philippine Seas and Adjacent Waters,” published in 1922 by the Smithsonian Institution. Taaffe’s great *Ophiuran Station* is the painting-antipode, within this group of new works, to the deciduous *Interzonal Leaves*.



Ophiuran Station, 1998
Mixed media on canvas.
84 x 79 inches (213 x 200.5 cm)

If the luminous and plainspoken leaves are sentinels, these oddly expressionistic, almost arthritically twisted forms—each suggests an arm or hand, while somehow evoking an entire figure—tends to make one think of theater. They bring to mind a group of self-absorbed mimes or character actors, singing or declaiming in an operatic style and striking extreme poses. Fifteen years ago, it seemed that Taaffe's work was all about the awakening of abstraction. Now, it would seem, the artist is not only finding new ways to romance the figure, but is working on some kind of new species of being.

LISA LIEBMANN is an author and art critic based in New York City. Her books include *David Salle 1979-1994* (Rizzoli), *Brice Marden Paintings on Marble* (Steidl, 2005), and *Ross Bleckner* (Harry N. Abrams/Guggenheim Museum, 1995).