



IN GENERAL, abstraction in modern painting draws form away (ab-stracts) from objects of visual perception to establish independent morphological realms. Abstractionism thus tends to abjure concrete reference to history, nature, and culture. But for Taaffe the very power of abstraction to reveal forms common to diverse objects allows it to serve as a metaphoric center: an abstract image may bring together in a poetic field diverse historical, geographic, cultural, natural, and psycho-spiritual domains.

In spite of this openness to reference, Taaffe's work registers emphatic bodily actions which are as pertinent to its composition as the grand gestures of the Abstract Expressionists whom he so admires.

Each picture is a destination of several morphological itineraries, journeys of images from sources whose traces contribute to the total effect in several ways. The images refer to nature, but also to the period books that deliver them to the artist; to representations of natural forms from various cultures; to cultural artifacts. The images are applied in discrete series of operations, sometimes separated by extended intervals of time: days, weeks, or occasionally even months. These intervals are significant in that the accumulation of reflection between the applications of the various layers is the mysterious site, as it were, where the intuited relations between images and layers are allowed to accumulate and suggest the details of their final form. The picture becomes a receptacle not only of the images and their sources, but of the invisible spiritual activities performed during these periods of reflective waiting. Finally, the energy, velocity, and bodily emphasis of the physical acts of applying the



images to the canvas—stamping, stenciling, rolling, dragging, scraping—are themselves legible in the finished work, enacted with a ceremonial intensity of focus and with what Taaffe thinks of as ritual intent.

Snakes, ferns, crustaceans; masks, glyphs, totems. Taaffe's archaic images compensate for that which contemporary experience suppresses, forgets, ignores, or simply, through their absence, remains ignorant of and yet perhaps deeply longs for: connection to primal or archaic being.

Though the archaic material can deliver an atmosphere of psychic menace, the overall intent of the aesthetic arrangement is inviting and represents a certain recrudescence of the beautiful, a canny balance between entropic and symmetric distributions of images. The eye feels within the "overall" composition a studied disordering of various symmetric arrangements, involving music-like inversions, displacements, reversals.

The intentional, not to say willful, management of images suggests "ornamentality"; yet, because the images ordinarily connect back to cultural contexts where ornament as such has been used or natural contexts where symmetry as such is pertinent, Taaffe's aesthetic is never simply "ornamental," but part of an accumulation of reference and conceptual/poetic content.

Baudelaire once said that the beautiful is never other than a promise of happiness. Taaffe's reinvention of the beautiful seems to me a kind of valiant inquiry, a conscientious refusal of the suppression of human possibility.

— CHARLES STEIN, NEW YORK, 2013



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