

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Master of Many

by [John Yau](#) on February 8, 2015

There used to be a time when curators could slap a label on a group of artists, claiming the work to be central, progressive, and an important part of their narrative of art history. This was when aesthetic and ideological positions were bedfellows. Thankfully, that oppressive age has passed. The problem now is that curators still believe they can nail it all down, possessing neither the courage nor honesty to admit that the best they can do is offer a partial view of what's going on. Rather, all too often they are content to prop up artists who mirror their own disbelief in creativity and imagination, and claim this is the only truth. If this is what it means to have a finger on the pulse, then the only ones they are registering is their own, and the beat is pretty damned weak. Meanwhile, artists of all stripes, colors and persuasions are furiously spinning their own webs in very different parts of the woods.

Unable to acknowledge how intense and diverse painting is right now, many of New York's institutionally based curators don't seem the least bit curious about what can be seen in Manhattan and the outer boroughs, not to mention the small and large scenes spread throughout the world. With one eye on the marketplace and the other on their trustees' shopping lists, all they appear interested in is coming up with a hip, one-term-fits-all, such as those found in the press release for the exhibition that Laura Hoptman curated at the Museum of Modern Art: [The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World](#), where "atemporality," "timelessness," and "all eras co-exist" sound like ad copy for Disneyworld. Meanwhile, time does not stop, even if you are free, white and under thirty.

Given the extensiveness of his images, which he has derived from a multitude of sources and branches of knowledge, all of which he can readily identify, Philip Taaffe recognizes that "all eras [might] coexist," but it is equally clear that he does not buy into painting being an "a-historical free-for-all." That attitude is too cavalier and imperious, just another quick and familiar way to disavow responsibility and belief.

In his first exhibition at [Luhring Augustine](#) (May 3–June 15, 2013), I was struck by the lack of repetition; he never used the same palette or included the same signs or images. While seriality and repetition are the bread and butter of the art world, Taaffe has eschewed the tried and true. He continues down this unlikely path in his current show of five large paintings in the spacious gallery of [Luhring Augustine Bushwick](#) (January 17–April 26, 2015), with the largest one, "Glyphic Field" (2014), measuring more than nine feet by twenty feet.



Philip Taaffe, "Choir" (2014-2015), mixed media on canvas, 141 1/4 x 110 3/4 inches (all images courtesy Luhring Augustine)



Philip Taaffe, "Glyphic Field" (2014), mixed media on canvas, 110 3/8 x 249 3/8 inches

Taaffe often brings a lot of processes into play in a single work: collage, linocut, woodblock, rubber stamp, silkscreen, marbling, chine-collé and decalomania. Each of these processes enables him to preserve and transfer an image, pattern or mark from one medium to another. More recently, he has used a mop and other devices to apply paint in ways that further underscore his awareness of time passing and the fluent muteness of history.

Taaffe is not one of the many artists trying to revive or parody gesture, which is a sign of being direct; rather, he is committed to a process of discrete actions. Although many separate steps go into making one of his layered paintings, the artist has never been interested in showing his labor, because it is beside the point. Moreover, through his imaginative repurposing of what have been considered minor art forms – collage, printmaking, and marbling – he has dissolved the barriers separating artisanship from painting, effectively redefining the latter.

Speaking with the poet, musician, and classicist, Charles Stein, in the [Brooklyn Rail](#) (December 2014/January 2015), Taaffe stated:

The numinous cannot be arrived at through nominal means—it's something beyond description. Art is in that realm because it is not a linguistic exercise. It's a visual language, but it's not naming something. I'm not seeking to describe a situation. The painting *is* the situation.

If you believe that painting can achieve a numinous state, becoming an embodiment of divine presence, it is unlikely that you are a cynic, a literalist, or an ironist. Taaffe's interest in the otherworldly sets him apart from his contemporaries. He is as deeply committed to the possibility of spiritual presence as Ad Reinhardt was to *via negativa*, which is to say that his densely packed, layered compositions exist on the opposite end of spectrum from the tensile optical paradoxes that Reinhardt rigorously pursued. And yet, the plenitude the viewer encounters in Taaffe's work is as thought over and parsed as Reinhardt's non-relational abstractions. Nothing is arbitrary in their work.



Philip Taaffe, "Imaginary Fountain" (2014), mixed media on canvas, 156 x 111 inches

This clarity of placement is apparent in all of the paintings in the exhibition, but, in “Imaginary Fountain” (2014), Taaffe takes this possibility to a new and dazzling level. The painting’s situation is an architectural façade with four scalloped niches emptying water into a stylized river flowing along the bottom edge of the painting. The complex interplay between image and sign, representation and abstraction, mirrors the different sources Taaffe has fitted together in the painting.

The architectural sources of “Imaginary Fountain” include carved fragments found in English monasteries and abbeys; Mozarabic windows from a Sicilian church; carved windows from the Coptic museum in Cairo, Egypt. England, Sicily and Egypt — these three geographical locations are synonymous with the Crusades and the ongoing war between certain branches of Christianity and Islam.

Is Taaffe’s use of dusky red evocative of sunset or bloodshed? What about the changing surface of the wall and the patina of history it conveys? What about the water flowing down the facade into the river below? What about the fact that the artist has made a painting, which is portable? Might this be a comment on the need to preserve fragments of history before they are destroyed? Is it just an architectural possibility that Taaffe is imagining or is he thinking about something larger? Might the blue abstract signs of water also be about painting’s liquidity and constant, relentless change? Might not the continuously pouring water of Taaffe’s “Imaginary Fountain” be related to the waterfalls of Classical Chinese artists, and their understanding of reality as a cycle of destruction and rebirth?

By bringing these disparate sources together, and depicting four fountains in the bottom two-thirds of the painting, with abstract signs (representing water) flowing down the façade, Taaffe invites viewers to consider the possibilities of reconciliation. I think it is important to point out that there is nothing ahistorical about “Imaginary Fountain,” and that ignoring history dooms you to repeating it, as the old adage goes.

I have only touched on some of what “Imaginary Fountain” conveyed to me. At times, the painting seemed mournful and elegiac, flooded with feelings of irretrievable loss. Other times, a quiet joy seemed to creep into the work, a tenuous sense of hope.



Philip Taaffe, "Spiral Painting II" (2015), mixed media on canvas, 135 1/2 x 187 1/4 inches

My encounters with the other four paintings in the exhibition were equally challenging and complex. Taaffe doesn't see history as something to raid and cite, but as a network of interconnected, overlaid, and independent languages. In "Glyphic Field" (2014), Taaffe redrew ancient Peruvian glyphs, which he turned into silkscreens, shifting attention away from the artist's hand to the primal anonymity of the original glyphs. The unevenly colored ground suggests a weathered surface, possibly rock face, while the layers of glyphs form a palimpsest, suggesting they exist in present time rather than the inaccessible past. And here and there in "Glyphic Field," as when a bird seems about to pounce on a fish or a figure holding a knife-like instrument is about to stab a turtle, looking is slowed down, focused. You cannot look at, and reflect upon, "Glyphic Field" the same way that you scrutinize "Imaginary Fountain."

Taaffe isn't interested in achieving something as low-grade as a one-size-fits-all experience. Rather, he is interested in achieving a corporeal opticality, a flickering that is bodily in each painting. It is uncanny and, frankly, magnetic. One doesn't look at Taaffe's paintings. One looks into each one, and the myriad possibilities it holds. For all their visual immediacy, there is something very slow about the way they offer themselves up. You would have to have a heart of stone not to think the experience is erotic.

Philip Taaffe continues at *Luhring Augustine* (25 Knickerbocker Avenue, Bushwick, Brooklyn) through April 26.