

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Painting as an Occult Practice: Philip Taaffe's Recent Work

by [John Yau](#) on June 2, 2013



Philip Taaffe, "Earth Star I" (2013), mixed media on canvas, 73 1/2 x 93 1/2 inches (186.69 x 237.49 cm) (all images courtesy Luhring Augustine)

1.

There is something subversive about Philip Taaffe's interest in how information can be preserved and transferred from one medium to another. Since the early 1980s, when he first began gaining attention, he has mastered a wide range of processes — including collage, linocut, woodblock,

rubber stamp, silkscreen, marbling and decalomania — to capture images, symbols and signs from various sources and convey them to paper and canvas. Although many discrete steps go into making one of his layered paintings, the collection, preservation and transmission of bits of information are central from start to finish. Through his imaginative repurposing of minor art forms — collage, printmaking, and marbling — Taaffe has dissolved the barriers separating artisanship from painting, effectively redefining the latter.

Taaffe has often described himself as a scribe, which is on the other end of the spectrum from being a painter or creative genius. In a [recent podcast](#) with Tyler Green, he stated:

I have this idea in my head that I am referencing ancient art and the idea of the scribe. Several of the paintings in the exhibition are derived from what I think of as illuminated manuscript paintings, so in other words I am trying to get in touch with this earlier art historical reality and trying to update it in my own sense... the idea of the scribe, the idea of the mosaic patterning, has to do with ancient craftsmanship being brought up to date and being filtered through my own artistic desire, I suppose, in terms of what I would like to see in the world.

A scribe's primary task is to record and transfer a group's accumulated knowledge, secrets, myths and lore from one generation to the next, ensuring continuity and survival. Rather than being an originator of information, the scribe is a conduit whose commentary takes places on the margins of the manuscript.



Philip Taaffe, "Sardica II" (2013), mixed media on canvas, 55 1/2 x 80 inches
(140.97 X 203.2 cm)

The idea of Taaffe being a scribe was on my mind when I went to his exhibition at [Luhring Augustine](#) (May 3–June 15, 2013) for the second time. However, instead of the "illuminated manuscript paintings" he alluded to in his conversation with Greene, I started associating his complex, layered works to the illustrated book, *Kunstformen des Natur* (*Art Forms of Nature*) by Ernst Haeckel, the German biologist who coined many terms, including *ecology*, *phylogeny*, and *phylum*, that are now omnipresent.

Based on the principles of symmetry and organization, Haeckel's book of richly colored lithographic and autotype prints — based on his watercolors and drawings — is a visual marvel, its pages replete with images of all kinds of life forms, ranging from microorganisms to jellyfish and sea anemones. *Kunstformen des Natur* (*Art Forms of Nature*) influenced many notable early-20th-century figures, including the photographer and sculptor Karl Blossfeldt, the glass artist [Émile Gallé](#), and the architect [Hendrik Petrus Berlage](#). Olaf Breidbach (a Haeckel scholar and editor of modern editions of *Kunstformen*) has written that the collection was "not just a book of illustrations but also the summation of [Haeckel's] view of the world." This — more than anything else — is what Taaffe has in common with Haeckel.

2.

Compositionally, the difference between Haeckel's tome and Taaffe's paintings is the latter's engagement with formal issues such as the figure-ground relationship, patterning, and all-overness. Moreover, Taaffe does not limit himself to biological examples, but, casting a wide net, includes reconfigured male and female forms, fossils, plant-life, emblems, glyphs, and ornamental details — a rich, unrivaled brew.



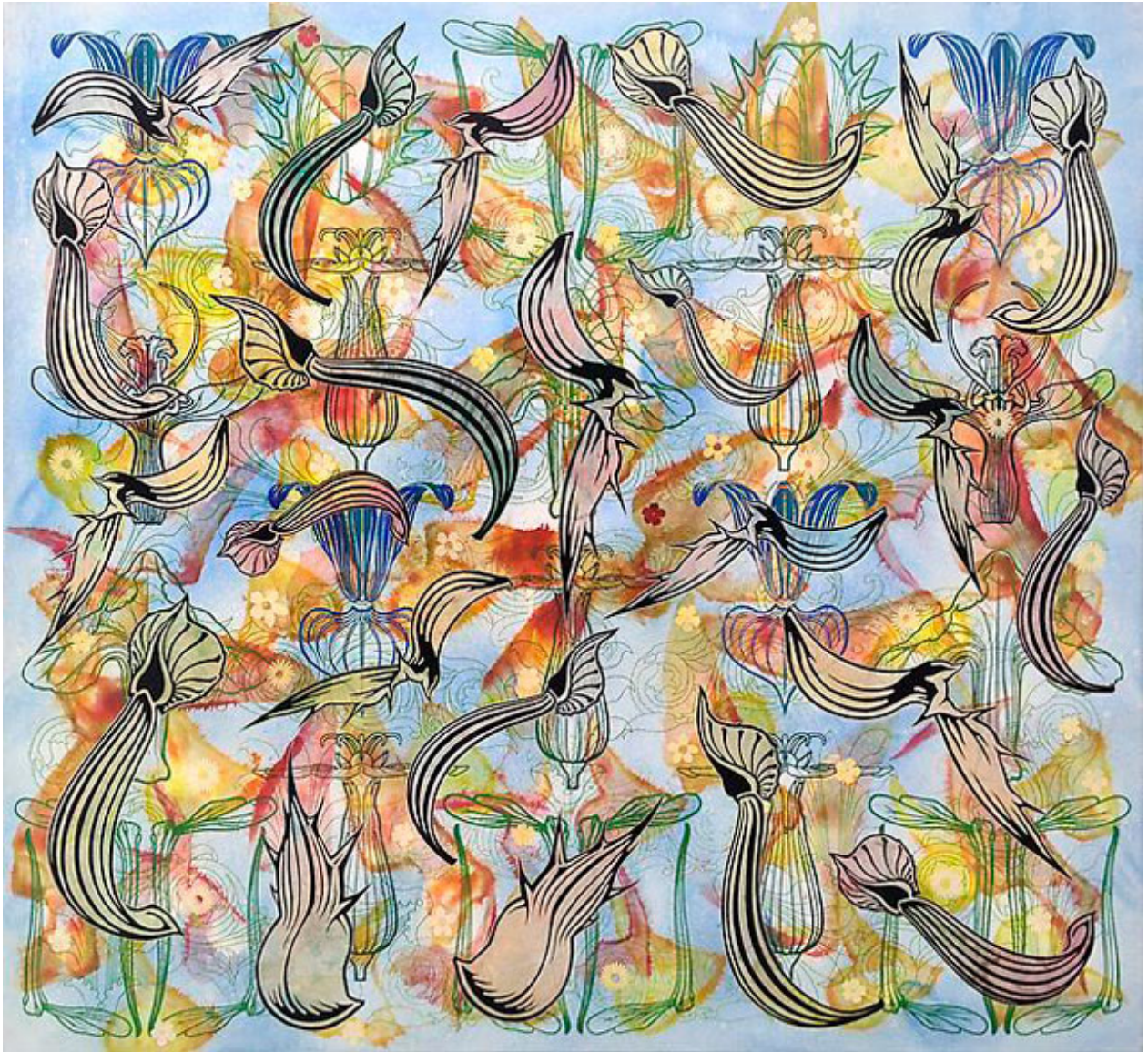
Philip Taaffe, "Illuminated Constellation" (2011), mixed media on canvas, 98 x 62 1/2 inches (249 x 158.8 cm) ([click to enlarge](#))

One of the striking things about the paintings in his recent exhibition is that none of them use the same palette or include the same signs or images. Compositionally, the paintings range from compressed layers to airy patterns, such as "Illuminated Constellation" (2011), with its repeated structure of radiating lines. The point of convergence of these lines optically vibrates, a mesmerizing experience that compelled me to refocus my attention, to shift between the overall pattern and the individual, oscillating figure. The effect was dizzying and pleasant, like being stoned without inhaling. I wondered if the optical vibrations were transmitting subliminal pieces of information.

At the same time, the subtle play between symmetry and asymmetry in this and other paintings is key to our experience of them. By disrupting the pattern through shifts in color or the deployment of similar but subtly differing forms, Taaffe activates the visual field to the point that one must keep making distinctions, such as undoing the bond between figure and ground.

In "Flowering Loculus," the black-and-white stylized floral shapes echo the pale green and darker blue ones embedded in the pale blue ground. Abstract washes of pinkish-orange float somewhere between the graphic black/white floral structures and the delicately colored ones, destabilizing the composition. Is one layer solid and the other a mirage? And if the ground is a mirage, what is its

relationship to the stark black-and-white forms swirling on its surface?



Philip Taaffe, "Flowering Loculu" (2010–11), mixed media on linen, 80 1/2 x 87 1/4 inches (204.47 x 221.62 cm)

Taaffe's paintings teem with activity, moving from the visceral to the ghostly. Our attention keeps changing gears, never finding stability. Seeing is akin to excavation, to sifting through the details without losing sight of the entire arrangement or the different layers. Every symbol and sign seems to possess an arcane power whose potential is waiting to be put to use.

Taaffe's close attention to similarity and difference endows the paintings with a state of heightened seeing often associated with hallucinations. The radiant light coming from within the paintings, the oscillations and sudden shifts between figure and ground enhance our experience. I don't think of his paintings as illuminated manuscripts so much as glowing screens. It seems to me that he has evolved from scribe to seer — a transmitter of trance states in a digital age.

Taaffe is neither a nostalgic modernist emphasizing the hand in his work nor a doctrinaire postmodernist celebrating the demise of painting. Instead, he has developed an innovative alternative to these received possibilities. For one thing, he doesn't derive his vocabulary from popular culture or mass media; Taaffe recognizes that pop culture, which is supposed to include us all, is just another case of false advertising. With its stars and legions of adulators, popular culture is postmodern society's recreation of aristocracy and royal courts; it is hardly democratic, much less open.

Against this hegemony, Taaffe posits the possibility that painting — like poetry and other marginalized forms of art — are “a tribal activity.” In this regard, he melds the aesthetic with the ethical. What he understands about the 1960s doesn't come from Andy Warhol, who, according to Hal Foster, exemplifies the possibility that if you can't beat them, you join them. For there is the other, occult side of the 1960s — as exemplified by Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, Bruce Conner and Robert Creeley — which is to find like-minded people and to loosely form what Creeley called his “company,” which, as you have probably figured out, is not at all like Warhol's “Factory.”

[Philip Taaffe: Recent Work](#) is on view at *Luhring Augustine* (531 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 15.

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