

An Interview

WITH PHILIP TAAFFE



Untitled I, (1980-81)
Collage on paper.
12 x 9 inches (30.5 x 23 cm)



Untitled II (1980-81)
Collage on paper.
12x 9 in (30.5 x 23 cm)

April 29, 1996.

Conducted at Lalibela Studios, West 30th Street, New York City.

My first real body of work, which I started in 1980, was done in bookbinding tape on single sheets of paper. The idea was to make an architectural fantasy using only straight lines. I worked on the series for a couple of years, putting on tape, removing it, and changing it so that every point in the work moved toward an expression of infinitude. For me these were enormous spaces—I was thinking of walled medieval cities, and of certain Constructivist works of self-contained abstract composition.

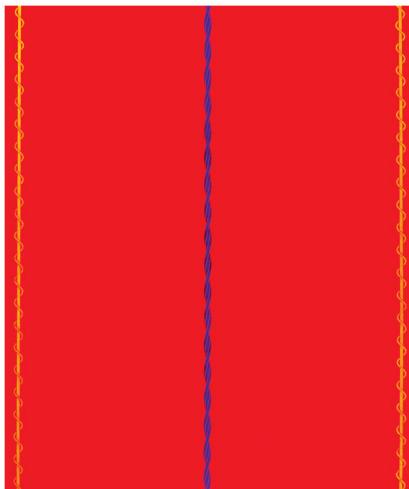
These early works were labor-intensive and rigorously composed. They developed over a period of weeks and months. After I'd made maybe twenty of them, I moved into the idea of large-scale collages. I was collecting paper from various sources—touring wastepaper-disposal plants, taking printer's end runs, and studying all this material to figure out some way of building imagery out of it. I wanted to work on a larger scale and to expand the possibilities of collage. *Martyr Group* (1983) is the first of the big collages, and it was a radical break from previous concerns with straight lines and imaginary architectures. I wanted to get outside that self-referential field of inquiry. *Martyr Group* was inspired by thirteenth-century outdoor frescoes from the Moldavian Valley in Romania, paintings of saints in rows. It's quite large, almost nine feet square.

Around this same period I also began to make optical works, collages with an unwieldy, distended surface that had an almost sculptural quality. They were done after Bridget Riley, and I decided that I would also try to



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

examine, or make homage to, or somehow recapitulate, certain works of Barnett Newman. I needed to see what I could do with this idea, because I was always very focused on New York School painting—Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Newman, and to a lesser degree Jackson Pollock. *We Are Not Afraid* (1985) is after Newman's painting *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue II* (1967). It's the same scale, but the vertical lines are printed from linoleum carvings—the same method I'd used to make the optical collages. To take the Newman zip and handle it almost physically, yet illusionistically too, was something I needed to see at that time.



We Are Not Afraid (1985)
Mixed media on canvas.
120 x 102 inches (305 x 259 cm)

I made *Written on the Bay* (1988) after an Ellsworth Kelly painting called Bay. I was living in Naples, where there are old Roman anchorages, and I made my version of Roman anchors out of cut pieces of cardboard, creating a relief surface; then I used an encaustic material (similar to large round crayons) that I made myself to transfer their impression onto paper. I wanted to make a connection between Douglas Sirk, the Bay of Naples and the anchorages there, and Ellsworth Kelly. *Cappella* (1991) was inspired by the decorations in the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, Sicily. Again, I made cardboard plates to print from, collecting images to make a composition related to a historical place or cultural location that I wanted to reenter in my own way. I tried to draw out a narrative from these possibilities. *Cappella* was also related to some of the earlier optical works I'd made.



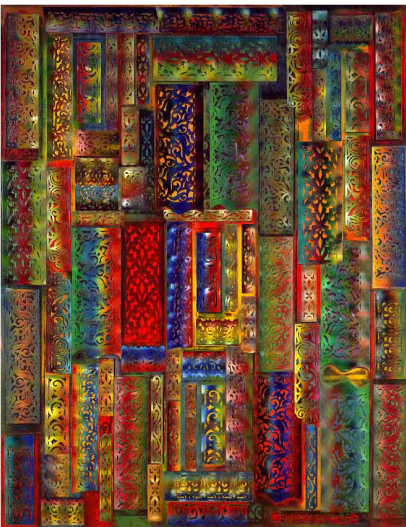
Written on the Bay (1988)
Mixed media on canvas.
70-1/2 x 57-1/2 inches (179 x 146 cm)

North African Strip (1993) is taken from templates I found in Morocco that are used by furniture makers to draw designs onto tables, shelving, and doorways. I collected these templates, turned them into relief plates, and made prints from them to create this woven space. One part of the work is left open, to give a sense of a window to move through. I used these impressions in a structured way, to push the capabilities of the arabesque idea.

I based *Tsuba Colony* (1995) on a form of samurai ornament—the tsuba is the Japanese sword guard. I've had an interest in this form for quite some time, and I made relief plates that I used in a very scattered way. *Tsuba Colony* is a work that I'm completing right now, using razor ribbon that I silkscreened onto very thin paper. It's carefully composed, but it has this



Cappella (1991)
Mixed media on linen.
110 x 110 inches (279.5 x 279.5 cm)



North African Strip (1993)
Mixed media on canvas.
113-1/2 x 89 inches (288 x 226 cm)



Tsuba Colony (1995)
Mixed media on canvas.
113 x 152 inches (287 x 386 cm)

overall feeling of moving off the edges. When I first arrived at this idea, I immediately went out and acquired some of this razor ribbon material—I took many photographs of the coils, and then made quite large silkscreens from these photographs. The two layers of the painting together are a kind of historical comparison: I wanted to propose a meditation on Japanese sword making (which was very advanced as long ago as the twelfth century), and equate or oppose that with razor ribbon, which we all know as an insidious new way of keeping humans at bay. I set up what I would describe as some sort of metallurgical narrative in this way.

I suppose I have a natural inclination to do things in a deliberately Zen-like way. I like to define the parameters of a work indirectly, by gradually eliminating considerations that are not essential to what needs to be stated. Also, a lot of my work is ritualistic, and is developed in clearly distinct stages. Perhaps for some of these reasons that I myself don't completely understand, I feel comfortable involving myself with certain forms and images from Asian cultures.

The snake motif of *Spiraloom* (1996) is very recent. I think it involves my identifying with something that has had the capacity for being culturally defined as divine and evil at the same time, and with how the snake impresses me as an evocative calligraphic line. I'm trying to see how this straightforward symbolism can be activated in the kind of work I do, which is usually more architectonic.

I'm a great admirer of Jean Arp. The American artist Charles Shaw had a relationship with Arp's work in the 1930s, and I was curious to have it again. It has to do with Dada, obviously, and with an American bringing about a synthesis of abstract and Constructivist attitudes toward Dadaist thought. I think there is a consciousness here of being once removed, or displaced from the central phrasings of twentieth-century art.

Someone told me recently that they thought my work was related to the composer Scriabin. I love music, and I'm interested in many different kinds of music, but I've never been able to find a parallel. I tried to study Kandin-

sky and Klee, to see what they had to say about this, but I never could get it: I always feel that no matter what I do, painting for me is always about silence. Music is tangential, peripheral to the visual experience, and I cannot make that equation: I've never been able to say that there's a parallel in sound. Painting is rhythmic, yes. *Inner City* (1993), for example, has what I would call riffs—these energy points that come out of certain parts of the painting, and coalesce and collide and make an aggregate experience in time as we move from one part of the picture to the next. There are these interrelationships and connections and rhythmic bounces to the painting. The rhythm is very important; the painting has to move. It has to have a kinesthetic reason to exist. That's how I compose the paintings: every part has to be activated, has to have energy. If a composition is flat, or if it's boring in certain parts, the whole thing falls apart. Every part of the painting has to be alive. I try to work on every part of it and turn it into a unified whole. I'm very traditional in that sense—it's a desire I can't get around.



Spiraloom (1996)
Mixed media on canvas.
112 x 140 inches (284 x 356 cm)



Inner City (1993)
Mixed media on canvas.
99 x 105 inches (251.5 x 267 cm)

I think a painting has to be exemplary. By this I mean that a work of art has to demonstrate certain findings that can lead to the opening up of further possibilities or outcomes. Doing this requires taking a great many things into consideration. A painting should come out of a grand synthesis of visual forces and ideas. Twentieth century modernism has been a series of ruptures: it was about abrogating belief, about consuming and moving on to the next thing and dismantling what went before it. My attitude at the end of the twentieth century has more to do with healing, storytelling, and craft. And I think there is far more potential in this, more along the lines of what we need to look at. Artists can help us come to terms with an understanding of how we're supposed to live and build a future and behave and look after ourselves in the world. I think art can be exemplary in that sense.

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