

Charles Wehrenberg

ATOMIC PAINTING

“Art and science are two sides of the same coin. Science is a discipline pursued with passion; art is passion pursued with discipline.” — ARTHUR M. SACKLER (1913–1987)

The diffracted colors are given mass by a scale demanding the sweep of eye that scans the whole like a vast page. Detail for detail, the paintings are a swim through a primordial other-world: the backdrop to an action. The mind reels as the peripheral eye is forever assessing the impact of these quiet lines and shocking colors. When I consider Philip Taaffe’s recent paintings, a sinister thread propels me beyond any decorative intrigue. Why, I ask myself, are these paintings familiar? Seductive rhythms prevail, elements repeat, waves of color counterpoint the stillness of line. They make me think about feathers... not so much any particular feather as plumage. Recognizable shapes abound: plants, animals and skulls, each a silhouette of a reality. They seem from a time before, or a time yet to be. Yet they are each one part of the conundrum, as the painter himself is part of it, this dialogue with the lizard, the fly and the seaweed that survives within each of us. We sniff the genitals of plants and smile. Birds and bees feed there. They seek nectar, we the fragrance. Molecules are exchanged, and with them information more commanding than words. We may see ourselves as larger and outside of this nature, yet the flora, as if manifesting volition, compel us to sort them by color and shape. We cultivate their seeds and study these precious floral expressions in order to identify ourselves, by giving their colors and shapes to our thoughts.

Words can be such traps. Even so, every picture seems to require at least one word, be it no more than a number, as a title to locate it. Getting a handle on a phrase can be stickier. Once you start with the likes of paideuma, soon the words chiral, conformation and enantiomeric clamor for

inclusion. Paideuma suggests the tangle of forces which make cause and effect hard to predict; chiral defines the character of mirror images; conformation is the shape a molecule assumes as atomic forces tie it into a knot; enantiomeric refers to how this final form affects light. These contemporary scientific terms are certainly relevant to getting a view of Taaffe's intriguing synthesis.

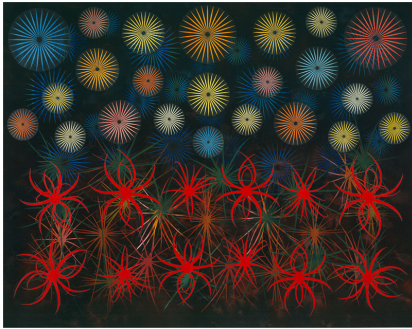
At the molecular level, shape and resonance with light determine all. But what role should this precise articulation play in aesthetic analysis? Is the abstract sublime more than just a phrase? Is it anything to dissect? Robert Rosenblum set out to define this elusive term in his famous essay on Rothko, and succeeded in saying that Rothko could take a viewer somewhere that defied words. Another definition can be shaken out of the American Transcendentalist movement wherein Thoreau's meditation on nature opens the doors of perception. While Walden comes to mind, Thoreau's essay Civil Disobedience may be more to the point: thoughtful passivity can exert more force than guns or words. This state of action (versus reaction) is probing, receptive and aware. It listens to the heart while informed by the world at hand. It sees the cosmic and the personal as concentric circles.

Trapped in insufficiency, most people squirm and surrender rather than dwell there. Yet the abstract sublime is materialized through shape and color, much as people reveal it with their body language and their tone of voice. Often, what cannot be sung can be hummed. These instinctive transformations allow patterns to be felt, and Taaffe's early paintings are a voice in this chorus: his own lyric emerges as a synthesis of natural forces, his libido melded into what others can see. The abstract sublime is an immersive state sought by the artist and offered to the viewer, one that centers the willing eye on a distant horizon, allowing the exploration of a story yet to unfold. It is directed, although not scripted, and extends definitively beyond the hypnagogic moment. It is not dreaming so much as yearning. One might call it a directed dream, dependent on that added edge of awareness, without which dream images so often degenerate into banality.

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Philip Taaffe's studio is north of Chelsea in the garment district, where on a recent evening I visited for a second look at his latest paintings. The studio is a complex of painting rooms, a vast repository of reference and working

materials. The painting process as a means of crystallizing human time was a central theme for Taaffe as he talked about several of the paintings that evening. Interactions between the idealized space of human thought and natural language inform Taaffe's aesthetics. In a back studio, *Desert Nocturne* seemed to emerge from the darkness as an amplified dreamscape: the prussian blue infinity seen above, full of human thoughts clearly shaped; the lower darker world filled with natural language, cactus thorns, linked by a common code yet with the freedom of nature to be so precisely chaotic.



Desert Nocturne, 2000
Mixed media on canvas.
80 x 102 inches (203 x 259 cm)



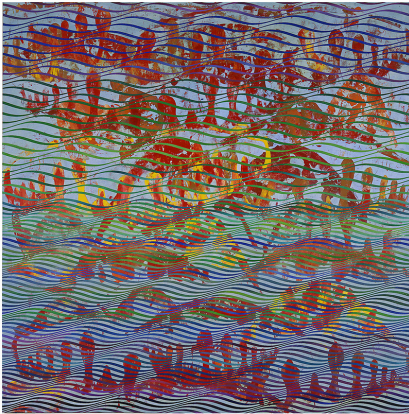
Composition with Crabs and Seaweed, 2000
Mixed media on canvas.
89-3/4 x 117-1/2 inches (228 x 298.5 cm)

Rhythm in painting is crucial to Taaffe. The perpetual motion of atomic particles and the changes produced by dynamic forces upon them lay at the root of the kinetic theory of matter. This movement which underlies stasis was evident to me as I stood in front of *Composition with Crabs and Seaweed*. The precise angle and placement of the crabs lends a circular choreography to the design. The palette is Mediterranean, washed out by the sun and sea. Philip remarked, "I think crabs are very psychic beings, having to do with thought planes and the internal nature of their physical form. Also because they live both on the sand and in the sea and are making a constant passage between these two worlds. This duality is crucial to their existence. Then there is the fact that they are living, moving architecture." The use of the word architecture to describe crustaceans struck me as an unexpected delineation which also sheds light on how Taaffe regards the world of forms.

Scattered about the painting were various silkscreens and drawings, some pinned to the wall, all depicting the thorns used in the composition (taken from an 1853 survey of the West undertaken by the U.S. Government prior to constructing the Pacific Railroad). It was an array that perfectly illustrated the process of transference and transformation that materials in these paintings must undergo. Postage-stamp size illustrations had been enlarged by the artist; decisions were made regarding scale; motifs were carefully redrawn to emphasize formal aspects that appealed to the artist; films of the drawings were superimposed, shifted out of register, doubled, and sometimes flipped to produce a mirror-image.

What makes this abstraction? Does the painting remain abstract if we talk about it? "Uh...yes, it does," Philip decided. "It is abstract to me, in a very fundamental sense, in that it is separated from the rest of reality. It is extracted. These elements are coming from other places, and they're brought

together solely for this purpose. It's a kinetic situation where these elements are interacting in an unprecedented way. As a visual structure, it is something that will happen now, and never again. It is this occasion, this theater where elements are held in stasis, but with a kinesthetic permanence. A good painting is something that moves ahead in time, and will continue to move forward even though it is completed, because of the energy contained there." In our conversations Taaffe seamlessly employs terms that could equally describe an opera or a ballet as a painting. The fact that there are characters, and the fact that there is a drama, implies a story. "There is a narrative," Philip said simply. "Whatever the components of the painting are, they tell a very specific tale about themselves and what they were doing in this situation. When I'm done, these decisions will be tangible evidence of a focused act of formation."



Reef, 1999–2000
Mixed media on linen.
112-1/2 x 112-1/2 inches (286 x 286 cm)

Complex painting, like writing a novel, requires a certain kind of control. Philip Taaffe's compositions evolve over many months. The artist must come back again and again, employing methods to re-establish the creative trance, much as a novelist carefully names characters who proceed to reveal themselves as the plot develops. Where is the security in these explorations of the unspoken? There isn't any, save for the artist's conviction. It is definitely a risk to invest one's life energy this way.

As we wandered through the studio I observed how many of Taaffe's paintings are like chemical reactions, the responsive effect of two distinct elements. *Reef* combines Taaffe's famously applied optical waves over an ammonoid abstraction, essentially the superimposition of two paintings each of which allows the other to be more. (The ammonite is a category of fossilized shells in the form of a flat spiral, common throughout the Mesozoic age.) The chaotic blue, orange and red field of the ammonite is given dimension by the sine waves in blue and green. The feeling remains interior, although there is a horizontal axis where a rhythmic transition takes place. You are taken to a point of creation, this pulsing wedge of action with and beneath the surface of the sea, where painted incident changes continuously, and intense color acceleration forces the eye to move.

In *Devonian Landscape* a stretch of extinct leaves overlays another ammonoid background and achieves a different transformation. The leaves are nature-printed from fossils, the actual bio-architecture of unique individuals frozen in stone. Stepping back from the painting, a hallucinatory



Devonian Landscape, 1999–2000
Mixed media on linen.
54-3/4 x 114-3/8 inches (139 x 290.5 cm)



Ghost Still Life, 2000
Mixed media on canvas.
78-1/2 x 50 inches (199.4 x 127 cm)



Biolumen, 2000
Mixed media on canvas.
65-1/2 x 55 inches (166 x 140 cm)

dynamic takes over. Suddenly the leaves are swimming. The eye encounters multiple colors in the background resonating with points in the foreground as if these ancient leaves could come and go in time and space at will.

On the wall next to the painting are a group of paper cut-outs of stylized grape leaves which failed to make their way into the painting. “That was the original idea,” Taaffe remarked, “but after I made them and painted this I determined the scale was wrong. It’s like the story I told you about the crabs: I don’t know what the story is going to be until I reach the end. It’s like breaking a code. There’s information encoded in the build-up of gestures that I have to figure out.”

The flower forms of *Ghost Still Life* were unrecognizable to me until the artist informed me that they are the white inner shape of the morning glory flower, without the hood, the flesh of the petal. The source of this motif was a simple instructional book on how to draw the flower. Taaffe was interested only in the central star form. The morning glory in Mexico has been employed for centuries as the organic source of LSD. The vine is carved all over the columns of the ancient temples there. Morning glory seed is theentheogen that is largely responsible for much of the visionary aspect of Meso-American religions. Chewing morning glory seeds creates explosions of colors that tone perception. Once I understood that this was the Morning Glory flower, the basic psychedelic and metamorphic concept of the painting became abundantly clear. Through the blue azure of the background emerge apparitions of skulls: bat, rhesus, and prehistoric birds. The Native Americans are fond of saying that the bones of ancient beings have been left on the Earth to frighten the living.

Idealized thoughts expressed as star bursts populate another painting in the group, *Biolumen*. A dangerous painting that defies symmetry while energized by the bloom of radiation in full force. Florescence and generation are suggested. Sparks, like seeds that may or may not germinate, crackle at the edges, their shapes interacting to fill the void. Its near perfect symmetry puzzled me. “It is an electrified mandala,” Philip says finally.

These paintings crackle with color speed, haunting us with interrogation as we encounter them, yet calming us as we try to catch a glimpse of their meaning. Taaffe often employs choices of hues reminiscent of Japanese Nihonga painters who use opaque mineral pigments that sit flat on the surface, forcing the viewer to look for other spatial cues. Atmosphere more



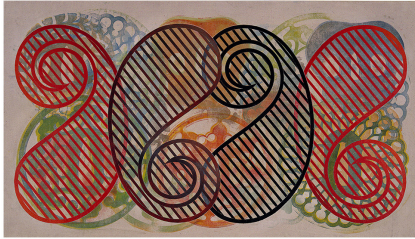
Still Life with Ferns, 2000
Mixed media on canvas. 54-1/2 x 76-1/2
inches (138.5 x 194 cm)

than depiction is the essence of Nihonga. Taaffe's love of tenebrist painting (a rubric under which many of these present works fall) is evident in the mottled elemental backgrounds where the artist places browns behind blues, or blacks behind greens. In *Still Life with Ferns* such evocations of the primigenial are reinforced by an awareness of the totemic power of plants, in this case ferns, a genus of hermaphroditic plants that extends far back into prehistory. Behind these ferns, suggestive yellow shapes (architecturalized flower profiles) seem to be figures around a fire. "I do see them as figures—communicating vessels," Philip said. "It's a fantastic still-life, as this other is a ghost still-life. They both fit into the still-life genre in a very loose sense, then go their own way. They keep shifting back and forth and I don't mind that. They're chameleon-like, the identity of the characters continuously shifting." Such shifts are likewise a function of cultural conditioning. If one thinks of these shapes as a Western or European-American idea, they seem highly abstract. When you think about the concept of psychology drawn from the *Tales of Genji*, immediately these forms become ghosts.

The way the eye works is the way the flower works. The very thing that goes on when a photon hits your eye and makes you react, also goes on when a flower is dropped into an acid or a base and changes from red to blue or from yellow to green. Certain plants and flowers are excellent chemical indicators (the Egyptian hibiscus, the morning glory, the hydrangea), and most primitive cultures conducted basic chemistry in this way. Analogously, that is how many of Taaffe's present paintings operate. In *Devonian Landscape* the collaged images of fossilized leaves are painted (front and back) in complementary colors that uncannily mimic such acid/base indicators: orange to blue, reddish-yellow to lime green, yellow to lavender. In conversation, Taaffe refers to these color shifts as speed or quickness, and this is the way an artist would talk about it. Yet the nucleic acids that code one's being are reacting in precisely the same way to sequences, shapes and colors. So it is in the human brain, with atoms and molecules in action and reaction to waves of perceived stimuli, creating memory and thought. It is this chemical milieu that we are, as a continuum.

"I have always liked the concept of atomic painting. I feel very often that I'm painting atoms," Taaffe responded at one point. I felt we had arrived at the crux of the matter. "You are painting atoms," I replied. "While you are doing this literally, you are also subconsciously doing all sorts of chemistry, not chemistry as humans who mix compounds, rather chemistry as chem-

icals react. Brain chemistry. Triggering a specific reaction by intention is the mark of an artist. A painting must create, it must implant itself. It must change a moment so that you remember it, and it must do so chemically. It must fire the synapses and create the molecules that store memory chemically in the brain.



Tsunami, 1999–2000
Mixed media on canvas. 39-1/2 x 69-1/2
inches (100 x 176.5 cm)

Philip Taaffe's occasional appropriation of the Japanese sword fitting called *tsuba* reinforces the suggestion that the biological imperative of sexual competition informs the artist's aesthetic (*Tsuba Study*, fig. 11). Shaped like the vaginal area and provided with an opening for an obviously phallic blade, the *tsuba* more than approximates such inference. Keen blades, katana, tachi or wakizashi, slip through the female component, assembling the means to one's dominance or death, the primary act of volition being to reign supreme or to die trying. I like this particular appropriation of form and motif. Along these lines, a smaller painting had caught my attention, *Tsunami*, with its geometricized paisley design superimposed over Japanese sword guards (*tsuba*). I have always been fascinated by the coincidental emergence of the fractal concept in math with the popularity of the paisley design. I asked Philip about the appeal of the elliptical construction of the paisley in light of this observation. "I think the importance of the architecture or the structure is to enable you to get those relationships more readily," Taaffe replied, "so they come at you with more directness and more precision and strength. We tend to think of ornament as being very ubiquitous, soft and free-flowing, but the incredible discipline of it is also what attracts me, this mathematical or primordial element of design." The paisley design and the *tsuba* are a cultural overlay of New York and Japan, a distillation crystallized in Taaffe's mind as a subtle homage to Roy Lichtenstein, who once defined painting as "organized perception."

Dark visions of the golden cities of the East as plunder guided the European age of discovery. Eventually, serious cultural travelers find their way to Japan where Shinto forms the root, connecting humanity to plants and stones as well as to the pantheon of animals. (Here too begins another tradition in art: the oldest oil paintings in the world are the temple doors at Nara, hundreds of years before the medium came to Venice from the Middle East where it was supposedly traded to Persians for a particular recipe for blue ceramic dye). Ancient ties to nature are often reflected in the designs on *tsuba*. This broadened view gives the Japanese a peculiar slant, one so well stated in Osamu Dazai's 1948 novel *No Longer Human*. The

rorshach vessels in certain of Taaffe's "still-life" paintings bring a particular moment in this story to mind. The protagonist, who would be famous, navigates the traps of ambition with less success than Taaffe, lamenting a chance not taken as, "The undrunk glass of absinthe."



Spiral Drawing, 2000.
Oil pigment on paper,
16-1/4 x 39 inches (41 x 99 cm)

The other continuum we are part of is time, and Taaffe's concept of painting as "something that will continue moving forward in time even though it's finished," is explored in several recent paintings and drawings. The painter's inspiration for these works was stirred by reading *The Mayan Letters* by the poet and anthropologist Charles Olson. In a letter to Robert Creeley, Olson noted with a crude drawing that the Mayan glyph for the eye was a spiral. "I found it an apt symbol," Taaffe told me, "because the eye is what enables us to have a visual memory, it records what we have seen and also allows us to envision a future. I think it's a very good correlation because of the two directions a spiral can move in." The spiral in fact is a circle seen in time: picture a particle traveling through space. It is not spiraling at all, just travelling in a circle. It is time that is moving along: the artist has seized a moment in time and then made a flattened projection of it.



Spiraling Totem (Yellow), 2000.
Mixed media on canvas
145 x 76 inches (368 x 193 cm)

There would seem to be an evolutionary tree with a few ancient branches and many splits. When feathers or leaves or carapaces change, species change. Tiny generational variants, iteration to iteration become patterns of cultures, like microbial shapes, sheens and colors; the fur of monkeys; and the color of parrots, sea shells, seaweed, and coral. An evolutionary progression, undoubtedly. One swayed by volition and serendipity, possibly. The pros and cons were argued by Lamarck and Darwin. While the polarity and voltage of evolutionary change are open to debate, within the context of the painting world, those who merely mimic the masters, no matter how astutely, can never write themselves into history. Evolution in painting is not unlike the evolution of new species. Change is required, change that propagates, and few are willing to venture close to the edge. Wallace Stevens defines this edge as the unification of the life force and the death instinct. Perhaps death is the mother of beauty. Extinction haunts Taaffe's paintings as ancient fish bones and human skulls.



Spiraling Totem (Red), 2000.
Mixed media on canvas
129 x 66 1/4 inches (328 x 168 cm)

Where is the edge? Who or what defines it? Bridget Riley, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko are evoked frequently in the discussion of Taaffe's paintings. Warhol, Johns and Rauschenberg are quoted to left his use of referential material in the pursuit of the abstract sublime. The naturalist Linnaeus and the photographer Blossfeldt are mentioned, and roots are found in the Vienna Secession. Likewise, the mosaics and frescoes of Italy and the geometric narratives of Islam have enriched Taaffe's perceptual palette. Certainly, the discussion of science and art can be conflated. If one looks back in time to that of Linnaeus and George Dionysius Ehret, one finds that it was Ehret's insightful *Plant Selectae* drawings which engendered the latinized naming system based on the categorization of the genital structures. Science and art are not divergent concerns, they share a pre-verbal resonance. Both are informed by astute observation; both are brought from the subconscious mind to an articulate level through the energy of an individual.

We are burning in time, the cycle of life but a thousand full moons. In seventy-seven years, a thousand and one: seven times eleven times thirteen. These numbers are curious in themselves, each being prime. Cycles of the moon and the frequencies of light seen as color bring shape and shade to all life on earth. Still, humans see themselves as rather singular, in spite of these realities and the fact that parrots can talk, monkeys can learn tunes, and bower birds enhance themselves with the art of feather and flower arrangement. The rules are simple. Potency and imagination wrap the artist in this power to consummate. When I encounter Taaffe's paintings with their wave forms, diffractions and fragments of nature, I see this wider vision: the biological imperative demanding satisfaction. As it may compel the evocation of a primordial landscape, it also signals the imperative to invent. It is a desire so intense that it manifests itself in biological change.

Patterns derive naturally from the textures of raw materials, and as a consequence of technical processes. The curious consequence being an increased freedom to explore as pattern evokes suggestion. In the end, this freedom always expresses itself as irregularity. Enter the artist. A significant pattern following subtle laws emerges, style becoming signature as plumage defines a species. Painting attracts the heart through the medium of the eye; the heart asks the mind to describe what is being seen. Words informed by experience or ignorance ensue. It is a transformative exchange that happens in microseconds. Do you head straight for the labels as you stroll through a

museum, or do you step back? This is not beauty displayed before the viewer by the artist, creativity here meaning that which will lead the viewer to draw beauty out of it for himself. Through these philosophical and artistic deliberations, Philip Taaffe is speaking in favor of painting as an actively meditative space.

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