

# John Yau

## DEEP IMMERSION

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In his optically rich, densely layered paintings and highly animated works on paper, many of which are the result of marbling, Philip Taaffe reconciles two divergent modes of reality, chance and order. Understood as distinct frameworks that we employ to both apprehend and sort through reality, chance and order define the extreme limits of our perceptual field. The relationship between chance and order leads back to a cluster of fundamental questions: Is existence the outcome of chance, the inevitable result of an invisible order, or a changing combination of both? These questions have haunted humankind since they first detected that the stars both followed a certain pattern and seemed to have been flung across the sky.

Taaffe's preoccupation with reconciliation starts on the microcosmic level and culminates in the macrocosmic. It inflects the way he contextualizes a dense field of writhing snakes, ornamental patterns, stem-like forms, and swirling, granular fields that are one result of his marbling. In attempting to connect the microcosmic with the macrocosmic, Taaffe constructs a metaphysical vertical axis that connects earth to sky, as well as the ancient to the postmodern. The most immediate evidence of his preoccupation with reconciliation is his recurring juxtapositions of phallic and feminine images and shapes derived from a mind-bending range of sources.

Through his careful structuring of a wide range of images, shapes, and patterns, Taaffe transforms seeing into a kind of rhabdomancy, a divining of the precious, of that which is hidden and buried. And it is this carefully calibrated tension between the secret and the visible, which the artist plays out on so many levels, that is a central feature of his work. Thus, his lay-

ered, highly compressed paintings should be understood on a metaphysical level, rather than a purely formal one. Seeing entails inquiry and speculation.



*Untitled*, (2002)  
Acrylic ink on paper mounted on canvas  
12 x 16-1/4 inches (30 x 41 cm)

If I were to make an analogy about Taaffe as a painter, I would compare him to a scholar-chemist, both the sole proprietor of a vast, maze-like repository of information and the master of myriad techniques that he brings together in his search for a heightened understanding of reality. His scrupulous techniques arise out of a pictorial ambition that is largely unparalleled by any artist of his generation. In fact, the many different technical processes Taaffe is apt to employ in his work aren't always immediately apparent. But once you begin looking carefully at his paintings and works on paper—and they certainly reward close looking—you begin to recognize his meaningful use of linocuts, rubber stamps, silkscreen, gouache, collage, chine colle, stencils, marbling, acrylic, enamel, watercolor, and gold leaf.

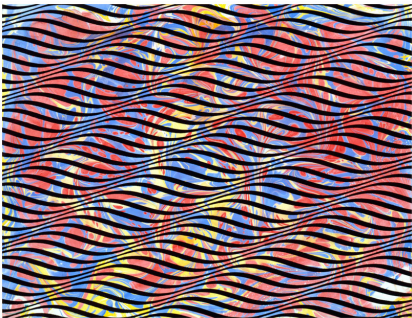
The techniques Taaffe has at his disposal enable him to move decisively between unique pictorial inventions and repeated images and patterns. In bringing together these very different modes of representation, one can observe the artist's predilection for incorporating a wide range of diverse techniques as a metaphysical engagement with light as an animistic presence. Thus, the flat patterns one encounters in Taaffe's work seldom stay flat. They undulate, flicker, and glow. A symmetrical totem of intertwining snakes, a caduceus going wild, becomes a pit, as well as a warning about the dangers of abstraction. At the same time, the images one sees in his work are both forming and dissolving, moving effortlessly from colored light to becoming an object, and from being a symbol to being a thing.

The chthonic light that radiates from the layered surface of Taaffe's work is ancient and contemporary, animistic and animated. It evokes the glowing light of myth and the steady intensity of neon. While the artist understands that reality is never static, and that change is constant, he also believes all times and epochs are accessible, that one can both enter and extract from them. This awareness of change and timelessness is crucial to all of Taaffe's work. It is in this context that his interest in the "beyond" of Barnett Newman's zips and the pulsing opticalities of the British op artist Bridget Riley should be understood. It also helps explain his interest in marbling. Although, in many people's minds, marbling is linked to the book arts, particularly as they flourished in the west after the invention of the print-

ing press, it was probably developed in China in the 6th century, during the Tang dynasty. In Japan, where marbling began to be practiced in the 12th century, it was known as suminigashi. In both China and Japan, marbling was associated with divining the occult, akin to the reading of tea leaves or the flight of birds. Because of the symmetrical shapes and patterns that can be achieved with marbling, it is easy to see why, in the course of its transmission to the West, it was connected to heraldry, secret societies, and occult and alchemical practices in the Middle East and Northern Europe. The fluid patterns were understood as glimpses of the divine in nature's forces. Taaffe is certainly aware of this resonance when he uses marbling and, to some degree, it clarifies his initial attraction to this rather arcane process.



*Lizard Music*, (2002)  
Oil pigment on linen.  
27 x 37-1/2 inches (69 x 95 cm)



*Water Music*, (2002)  
Mixed media on canvas.  
30-1/2 x 40-1/2 inches (77 x 103 cm)

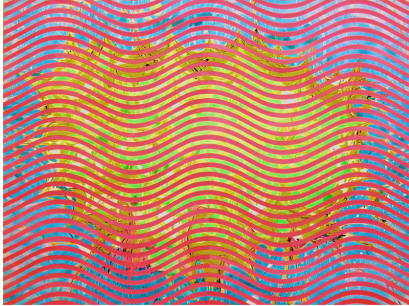
Taaffe is able to marble with acrylic, oil paint, and enamel. Each medium requires a different solution in which to float the paint. While the paint reacts differently to the solution, and very different results can be achieved with each medium, they require the artist to interact with them in largely the same way. When he uses oil paint, he fills a large, shallow vat with methylcellulose, which is a gluey yet liquid medium. Using a brush, he drips and splatters paint on its gummy skin. The paint becomes a tinted, largely transparent film floating on the surface. The drips spread slowly (think of oil on water), with the initial dots becoming circles and then pools that constantly change shape as he works.

At some point in the process, Taaffe forms a border with his drips and splatters, which, because the color also spreads inwards, pushes against whatever is happening in the changing arrangement of colors and shapes in the center. The artist works from all sides. The colors don't mix, but line up next to each other. After he has laid down a number of colors, he uses various pointed instruments to draw the colors and shapes into each other. Again he works from all sides. Satisfied with the film of colors—remember it is changing and, as I can attest, it is a semi-transparent film, rather than pools of paint—he carefully lays down a sheet of paper on the surface.

By painting on water, Taaffe both extends and reinvents stain painting. Certainly, stain painting is a well-known technique whose primary practitioners—Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis, for example—have largely worked with it in rather thin and familiar ways. In purely art historical terms, Taaffe has lifted stain painting out of its narrow formal use into a richly provocative possibility. He has expanded it from the strictly visual to engage in intellectual and imaginative processes as well as to invite the

viewer to make associations and discern connections. He has moved stain painting from the literal to the metaphorical.

Any doubts one understandably might have about what Taaffe has been able to do with his reinvigoration of painting will quickly fade when one begins considering his marbled work. Usually untitled, his works on paper evoke associations with “Scholar’s Rocks,” those highly convoluted, deeply eroded rocks that Tang scholars and poets collected and contemplated, and which served as monuments to their belief in a reality as a state of continuous flux. In their swirling clouds of color, Taaffe’s works also resemble—among other things—cross sections of fantastic minerals, rivers of magma, and the birth and death of a star in a distant galaxy. Other works evoke human and plant viscera, and even psychotropic hallucinations.



*Thera*, (2003)  
Mixed media on linen.  
30 x 40 inches (76 x 101.6 cm)

Taaffe’s use of marbling beckons consideration of his work to Jackson Pollock’s legacy. Whereas Pollock used sticks and brushes to dribble paint on a flat, static surface, Taaffe uses them to paint on water. Nature’s flux is an inherent aspect of his process. At various points in the process, he uses a stylus or a multi-toothed instrument to manipulate the way the colors are aligned. In contrast to Pollock, whose process was largely additive, Taaffe’s is more rooted in change and interaction. Like Pollock, Taaffe finds the image in the process, but, as I see it, he is using the paper to register a moment of change. Nor do I see Taaffe’s connection to Pollock as purely formal. In their formal refinement of Pollock’s process, stain painters domesticated his characteristic unruliness, as well as diluted the unpredictability of his line. And, by incorporating non-painting processes such as marbling and silkscreening into his work, Taaffe expands upon one of the central features of Pollock’s achievement, which is his break with traditional means of painting.

In a number of paintings completed in 2003, Taaffe can be said to have untangled Pollock’s work into two distinct features that he ultimately reconfigures. In *Thera* (2003), which derives its name from a volcanic island in the Mediterranean. Taaffe arrived at an abstract shape that is both heraldic and flower-like. Within the marbled, floral shape, which recalls both lava and melting ice cream, extremes of hot and cold, tendrils of green and yellow swirl around each other. The shape is surrounded by stubby blue, finger-like forms extending in from all four edges. Over this the artist has silkscreened a field of undulating red bands. Recalling both the layering

and the compressions that are possible in film, Taaffe's superimposition of one pattern on another doesn't just appeal to our eyes. The paintings are both visually seductive and far more than that. As our focus zooms in and out, we speculate about the connections and differences between the two distinct patterns. Meaning is to be found everywhere we look.

In contrast to the stain painting of Mark Rothko and Sam Francis, where the emphasis is on seeing, Taaffe connects seeing, thinking, and imagining. And, in further contrast to the celebrated work of these stain painters, Taaffe's paintings and works on paper shift between the optical and visceral. The eyes (including the mind's eye) and body are connected. In registering the different relationships the two patterns establish, we come close to repeating what the artist himself does in his work: We sort, scrutinize, and try to connect.

In *Thera*, we recognize that the floral shape surrounded by blue can be read as an island, while the undulating bands evoke rivulets of lava. And yet, even as we begin to fix this possible reading in our minds, another series of associations are set off. For might not the undulating red bands be read as bars preventing—vainly one imagines—the lava from overflowing? Taaffe's superimposition results in an irresolvable tension between stillness and movement, the ocular and the primeval. By destabilizing his images and patterns, Taaffe is able to tilt them out of a static realm into a fluid one, where multiple readings are possible. His structured multiplicities construct a reality in a relentless state of change.

Pollock once claimed that he was a “force of nature.” He also wanted the painting to “come through,” to make itself visible. During the Tang period, Chinese painters depicted figures contemplating waterfalls, nature's most perfect embodiment of chaos and a world constantly forming and reforming. In painting, one of the challenges is how to make change the subject of the work. It is not the present, but the future that painting must attempt to contain. In Taaffe's marbled works, the viewer sees a world in a state of metamorphosis. One senses that the image is in a state of becoming, as well undergoing entropy. And it is this state of becoming that Pollock's formalist heirs ever quite fully achieved in their work. Among younger artists who are regarded as being postmodern, Taaffe is one of the few that understands that one has to invent (or reinvent) painting, that this too is part of Pollock's legacy. Taaffe did so by recognizing that marbling is about making

a record of natural forces. It allows the artist to step aside and become a mediumistic presence.

Taaffe's recent works on paper mirror (in a permanent way) the forces of one medium floating upon another. And this state of floating is one of the keys to his work. Whether they evoke a film of light or an almost bodiless matter or, in many cases both, the marbled works suggest that for Taaffe, buoyancy is a primeval state, the place where emergence and disappearance are inescapable conditions. And this sense of floating is made even more complex when the artist places his sheets of paper in the vat on two different occasions, thus staining them twice. For in these works, the jarring shift between one layer of colors and the other underscores the feeling that we are looking at film-like superimpositions, a world in which light and matter almost become one.

Concomitant with Taaffe's reinvention of painting is his redefinition of the painting's surface. Certainly since Pollock's breakthroughs, a painting is thought of as a two-dimensional surface, rather than a window. Taaffe, however, redefines the surface as a film strip, a transparent, nearly weightless skin through which light passes. In talking with filmmaker Stan Brakhage, the artist stated: "One reason I use these tissue-thin layers of superimpositions in a painting is because I feel I want to simulate the dye sandwich of information on a frame of movie film."<sup>1</sup> And later, in describing his paintings, he says: "I'm doing a sort of crystallized cinema."<sup>2</sup>

In the marbled works in which he registers two different films of color, Taaffe comes closest to achieving the "dye sandwich." These layered works augur a new vista of possibilities.

Ever since humankind began pondering the stars, they have dreamed about the reconciliation of light and matter. To the artist's credit, the layers in his paintings and works on paper remain distinct, the superimposition apparent. It is as if he wants to, but isn't quite able to, push light into matter and matter into light. In these works, Taaffe achieves a breathtaking visual eloquence about the nature of inchoate desire and philosophical acceptance: the recognition that time is both fluid and cataclysmic.

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