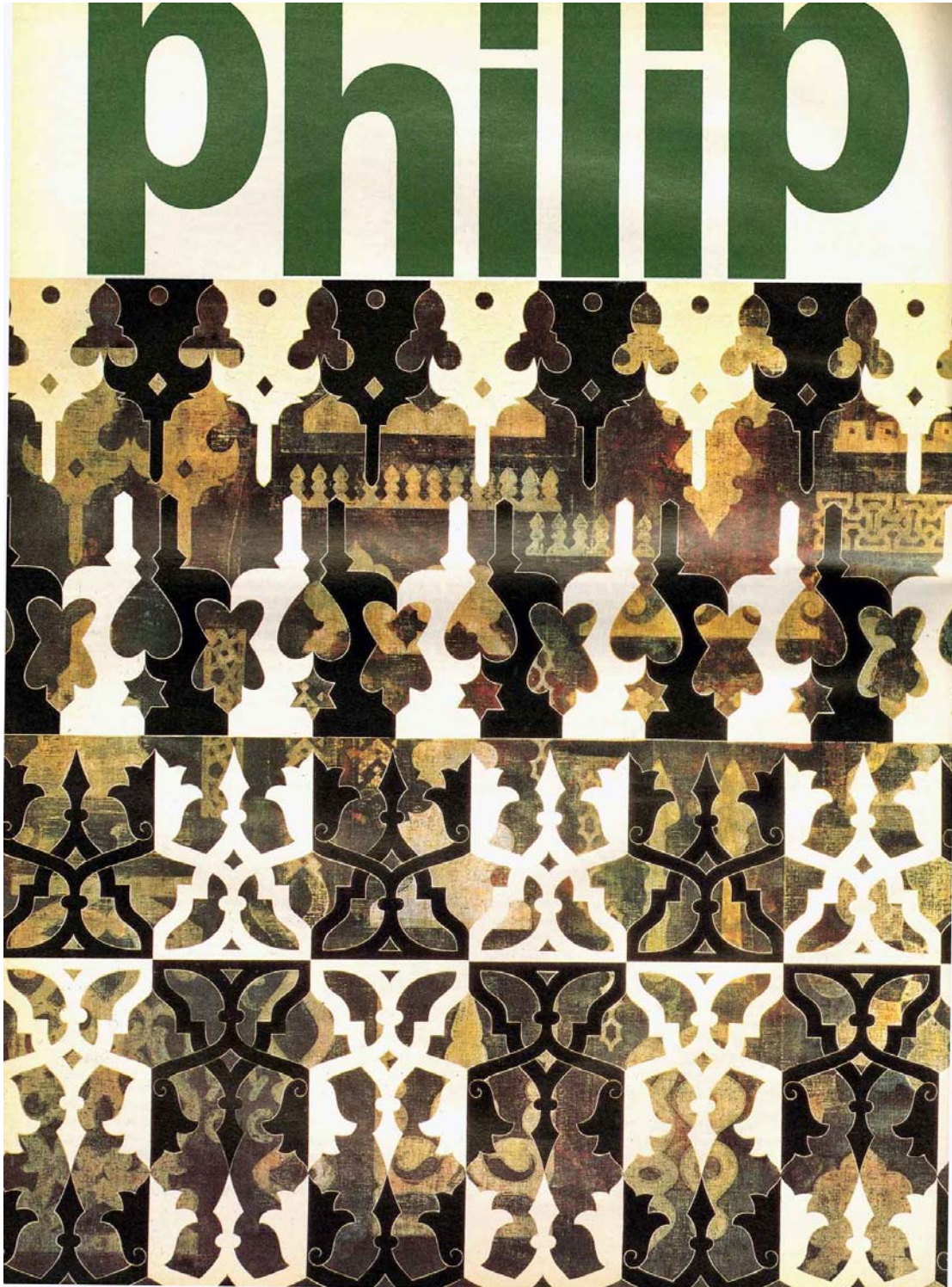
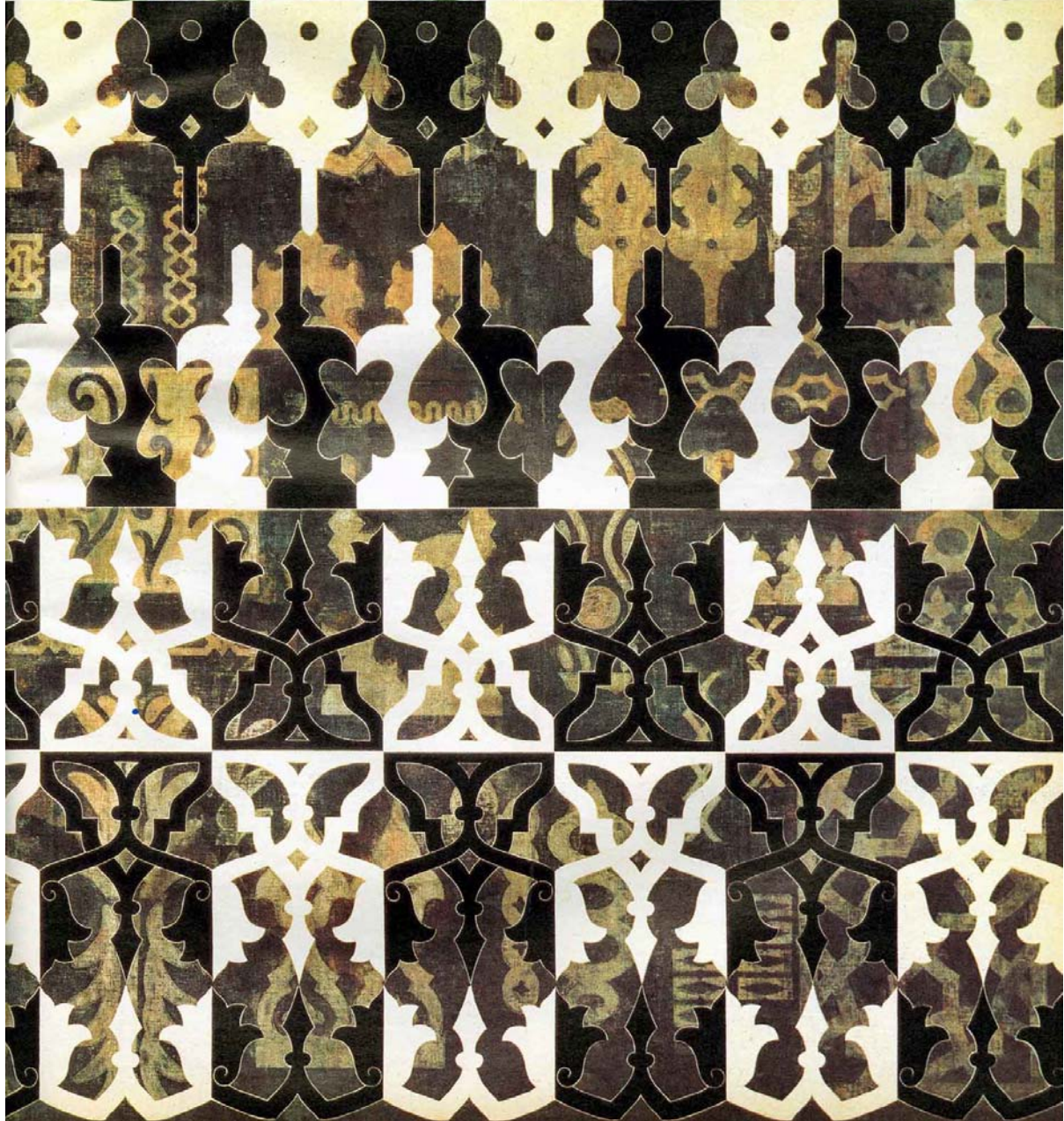


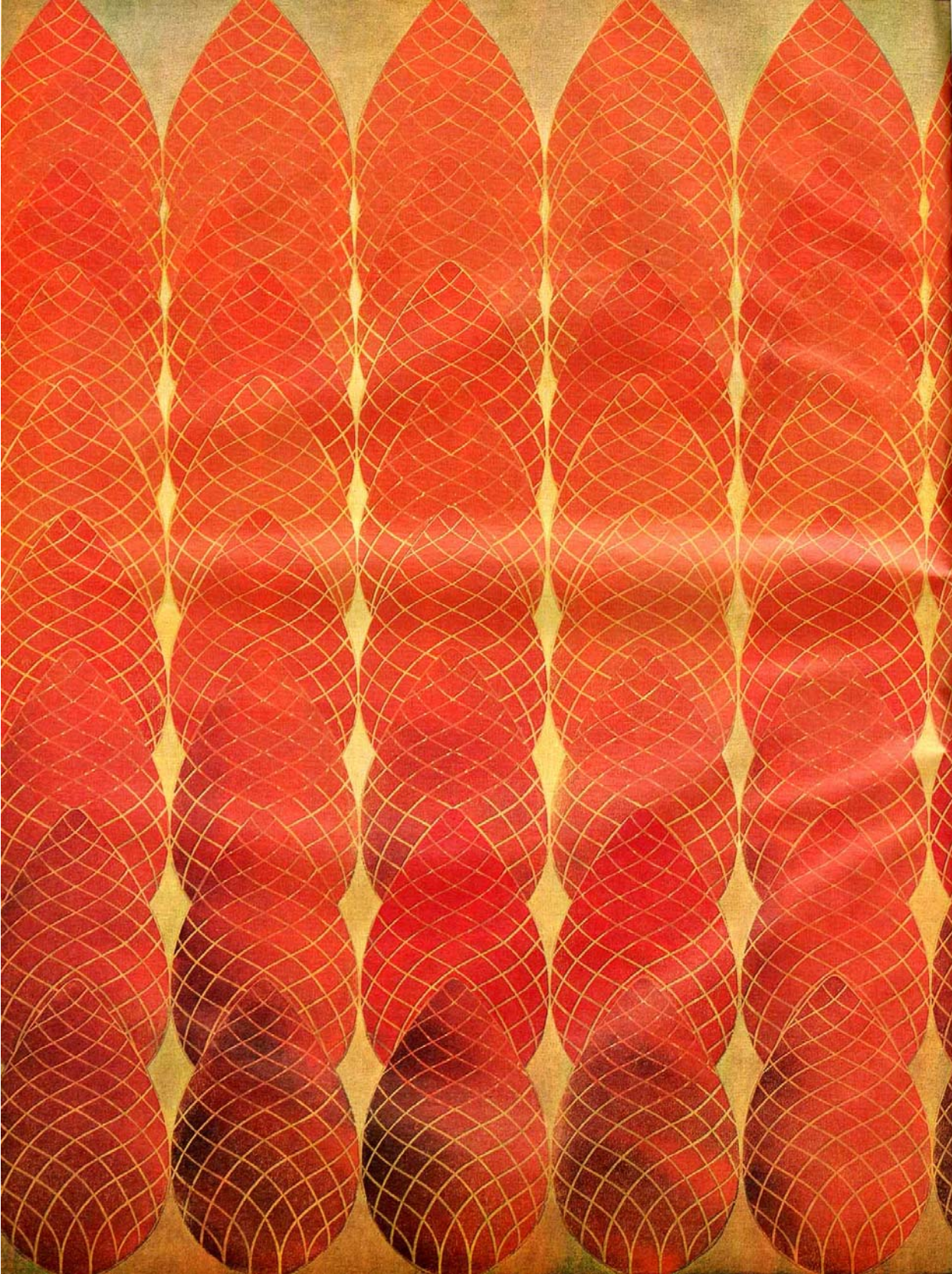
Interview
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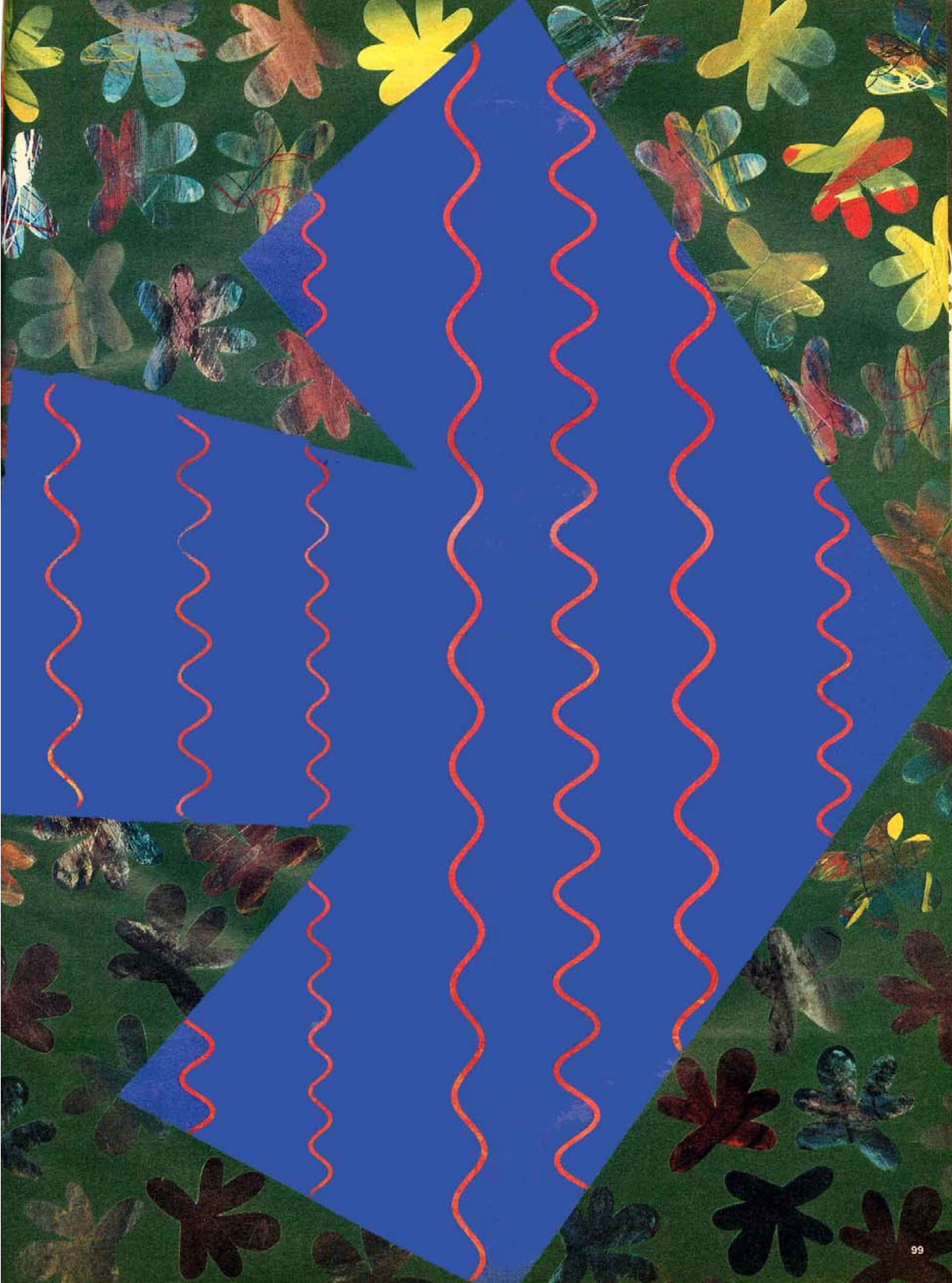


hypnotic painter

taaffe







"In America, we're very close to the dinosaurs. We have a much more primitive culture than African tribal societies."

"This bookcase was here before," says artist Philip Taaffe in his New York home, "and I decided to buy it at auction and put it back where it originally was. We found the exact mark on the floor where it used to be." After spending five years in a gorgeous villa high

above Posillipo Bay in Naples, Taaffe has been setting up house at the Chelsea Hotel, in the apartment where avant-garde composer Virgil Thomson lived for nearly fifty years. The exactitude behind the repositioning of Thomson's bookcase is key to Taaffe's personality, but he's intuitive as well. Both qualities are evident in his paintings, whether executed in Italy or the States.

Although Taaffe's been working virtually nonstop since the early '80s, there's no question that his sojourn in Italy was important to the development of his painting. "Artists," he says, "have to make an effort to expand on the possibilities of visual culture, to improve their visual knowledge, to make comparisons within a broader cultural framework." In Naples, Taaffe was inspired by the intriguing alchemy of citrus groves, the heat, Islamic ceramics, wrought-iron balconies, and the view—of both everyday scenes in the streets below and the locale's more ethereal, panoramic surroundings—from his eighteenth-century Mediterranean villa.

In New York, in his new place, the Orientalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is further affecting his work. Taaffe's relocation affords him the opportunity to observe New York from a changed point of view. His Irish roots have provided him with an input that lends a great sense of narrative detail to his work—even if the final result is what is known as "abstract painting." His being an American connects him with the tradition of a deductive formality—the history of abstraction. He is also deeply interested in philology, in the connections among literature and philosophy and art. We can find all this in his sensitivity to scale, in his embracement of complexity, in his high level of conceptual communication, and in his use of memory—in the visual pleasure we can get from the physical presence and appearance of his work.

These characteristics were central to his appropriations from modern painting styles, to his re-presenting, in toto or in part, the analytical vision of optical art by the British painter Bridget Riley or the abstract purity of Americans Clyfford Still and Barnett Newman—a passion that gave an initial identity to his work. Since then he has continued to produce a rigorous and impressive body of art. His work always follows an aesthetic itinerary, where different experiences and cultural languages meet from place to place, producing an amazing range of visual variations. This conversation occurred when he had just begun his move back to New York.

MARIUCCIA CASADIO: I've experienced your work in quite a peculiar way: I seem to have more information about it from the "European side." I want to ask you how you originally conceived what art should be and how your imagery could be translated onto a canvas.

PHILIP TAAFFE: It has to do with my background in terms of the art I was exposed to during the '70s. That was the formative period for me.

MC: Did you feel close to any artists' work in particular?

PT: I was looking toward American minimalist sculptors and painters for some clue as to what my identity was—Robert Smithson, Carl Andre, Robert Ryman . . .

MC: Did you like their work for special reasons?

PT: Well, an American concern quite prevalent in the '70s was about the material parameters of art objects—what can be put into or eliminated from a painting, or more exactly, what of a painting is going on the canvas. Also, I was fully aware of and involved with the abstract expressionists' attitudes, but in a critical way. There was always some question as to the political impetus for these heroic, large-scale paintings, which were a kind of postwar American invention.

MC: It seems to me that after the war, the increasingly powerful scale of this country became the only possible dimension for its imagery—it became an issue of quantity over quality.

PT: I guess the American idea was to reject Europe after the war: "Well, you know, Europe is in shambles, and we have this vast landscape and very new history . . ." In the '50s, we suddenly had the capacity to state artistic questions vis-à-vis Europe in a way that was unprecedented in this century. Barnett Newman talked about his relationship to European painting and how he felt as though there was this chance to make art out of forces that were internally motivated—as a result of experiencing the war, and the potential of the American cultural landscape.

MC: You're an American who comes from a very Irish family. Did you ever feel like a stranger in America?

PT: I never felt entirely American, though I was always caught up in the poetry of the American landscape, and involved in a kind of—
MC: American scale?

PT: Well, I had no choice. I mean, as a teenager I had traveled to Europe, to Ireland, but I didn't know Europe—although I was aware of where the avant-garde traditions were coming from. Germany, Italy, France . . .

MC: When I think of your early works, though, I see them as a direct elaboration of Bridget Riley's optical painting. And Bridget Riley is a British artist.

PT: In a way I carried forward the romantic aspect of her artistic program. I pushed the romantic idea because the subject matter didn't get in the way. It was an effort at remaking a painting in a manner that would

get at what her paintings were on a larger scale, using collage and washes of colors. But they were much more handmade, psychically labored objects than hers ever were.

MC: Formal visual compositions are important in your work, although it goes much further than that. It's got a kind of spatial quality.

PT: Yes. *Spaziale*.

MC: And your perception of things has always involved an architectural passion.

PT: Maybe that's another American quality that I was alluding to, regarding being concerned about the physical and contextual parameters of a given work.

MC: Robert Smithson pointed out how forms of contemporary American art could be related to the entropy of urban life, and that minimal-art objects are more figurative than we think. He mentioned a connection to modern buildings, from skyscrapers to telephone booths: emphatic and dull though they are, they represent the simplest forms of architecture produced by early urban technology.

PT: Smithson was always pointing out how close the American sensibility is to something really primeval. I mean, we're very close to the dinosaurs here. We have a much more primitive culture than African tribal societies.

MC: What made you decide to live and work in Italy?

PT: I don't know if Italy was ready for me, but I certainly was ready for it, especially Naples. It has a kind of perverse logic and a magnetic attraction for me. And I've always loved port cities.

MC: In a way it's a counterpart of New York.

PT: Strangely, yes. When I left New York I felt that I was giving more to it than it was giving to me. I was getting tired of that. New York is a very unyielding place. Of course, I'm very concerned about what people are doing in New York and how they're thinking. But I sensed that I had to make a geographical transition before I could make certain transitions in my work. And to live in Naples just felt right.

MC: Assuming that America's "greatness" was your work's initial patrimony, how did you go about assimilating the European dimensions?

PT: The first things I did in Naples were graphite drawings with contorted lines that reflected the landscape. Each was a visual response to the physical surroundings and the architectural motifs within my house, and to my own invented, imagined motifs. I would then apply this in my paintings. I started thinking about Clyfford Still paintings from the '50s. And he's, you know, the quintessential, pioneering, postwar American abstract artist. So I introduced him along with myself to this new cultural situation. In whatever way I could, I was relating the epic scale of those paintings, that field of the vast American landscape, with my own experience in Naples. I was making a transition through the work of an American (more Taaffe page 126)

Interview by Mariuccia Casadio



more taaffe . . .

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artist that I deeply admired, and I was seeing how I could put my new daily experience to work within an earlier, imaginary pictorial context.

The paintings are very diaristic in a way. But in the end they don't look that way because a lot of the decisions that go into constructing them are not evident in the final work. The changes are very minute, but they seem to affect the whole thing in a new way each time I make them.

mc: It's not like, say, calligraphy, where there's a code of shapes and very defined boundaries.

pt: **For me, the paintings represent a field of liberation, and so what goes on in the painting is all deliberation; it reflects trial and questioning and research.**

mc: You seem to be a very severe observer of your work.

pt: **I'm very self-critical. I don't accept easy solutions. But Naples helped me to eliminate a lot of that. I feel more excited about allowing things to enter my work now. I'm more experimental. Maybe it's just reflective of this . . . Neapolitan chaos, this kind of pagan anarchy.**

mc: Right. Even as you maintain a kind of irony, you also keep a sense of humor. Your work's not tragic.

pt: **The tragedy exists only along the way, until a painting reaches the point of resolution.**

mc: How did you feel about the human code in Naples? It has an ancient tradition of maintaining a theatrical facade—of not allowing strangers to know about your real problems. And there's an essential attitude about speaking when you feel sure that you have to speak or being silent if you are really confident, or being confidential in an almost irritating way.

pt: **I guess it forced me to abandon my Anglo-Saxon upbringing, to question my identity and how I respond to situations.**

mc: In a way, you "went onstage," you know, adapting to this Neapolitan code. It's like being shy but deciding to perform onstage anyway, as a form of therapy.

pt: **It was getting closer to an ecstatic situation, getting outside of oneself, being outside of stasis. It helped me see my life in more perspective, outside of my American identity or my Irish identity. And I'm much more Latino. I'm much more African Latino than I am Irish or I am American.**

mc: When did you realize that?

pt: **Oh, I've always known it. ■**