

NOTES ON A PAINTING

Jerry Saltz



Philip Taaffe, *Necromancer*, 1990.
Mixed media on linen, 89" x 69".
Courtesy Gagostan Gallery.

Re-animator

Philip Taaffe's *Necromancer*, 1991

Philip Taaffe is one of the best painters around. He turns looking at a painting into a sexy, unexpected encounter—one that is both erotic and everyday. Seeing one of his paintings is like a chance meeting with a silent stranger in a foreign country where you don't know the language or the customs, where you're a little off-balance and isolated. You look for a long time at this attractive figure. Without ever speaking you start to know a new kind of beauty, a different rhythm of rapture. This stranger is beautiful—but in a very familiar way, timeless yet in fashion. Something in the way he wears his clothes maybe, or the fabric, or the fall of his suit, tells you he's physically comfortable with himself—so you begin to feel comfortable too; you loosen up a little. He's quiet but not melancholy—alone without seeming lonely. "It's his skin," you think—the way it's not wrinkled or porous, yet so translucent and crystalline, so utterly tactile—you want to touch it, run the back of your hand over it. Or "maybe it's his coloring"—the way the light seems to play across his face, how his tone seems to shift imperceptibly

from pink to fleshy to watery blue. There's something impeccably "in accord" about him. But this stranger remains aloof and withdrawn. Taaffe's paintings also seem content to be part of the charged exotic experience of a place, rather than grab you and take the pleasure of your company. They want to be *looked at* above all, even loved—but they will never love you. They're not demonstrative in this way—there's nothing gratuitous about them. Taaffe's paintings are elegant *amalgamations* that regenerate meaning and transform your ideas about things. He makes forgotten forms stir to life and ignored visual motifs seem vital again. He makes paintings that feel at once *perpetual*, but also *ephemeral* and *transitory*, as he lets you catch a stolen glimpse into the secret life of *Beauty*. There's a history-through-the Looking-Glass quality to his best work where you feel the ghosts of the past, come to life.

Taaffe's paintings are not exhibitionistic—there's no kinky grabbiness to them, nothing leering or lewd—but they do have this dreamy, undulating *physicality* that makes you want to look at them. And it is

this tantalizing physicality, this sensuous structure, above all, that distinguishes Taaffe from so many of his peers. In his recent work he seems finally to have mastered a language of his own devising. It *fuses* various unrelated decorative sources and Western modernism by using an extraordinary technique that combines (among other things) painting, printmaking, and papier-collé. And this technique produces these marvelously taut, paper-thin, flat surfaces. He grafts one system onto another, yet keeps the parts discrete. They fuse only in the end experience of looking at them—and then they envelop you.

Taaffe deals in units—in the *nanosecond*—and this is *hot*. Every part of a painting commands his attention. He gives new meaning to the phrase "hands on." When it comes to painting this guy is a *sensualist*. You can really look at every part of one of his works and there's a payoff. It's like being in bed with someone and because your face is so close the vision of skin becomes so enlarged as to develop into a world of its own. Likewise, when you get up close to one of his paintings you see these sumptuous and jarringly weird surfaces. There's no overt *painting* in any of his work—no fancy brushwork or histrionics with paint. No, Taaffe has invented a way to do something fairly radical within the conventional "garden of painting." It's not too often that one sees a *new* way of painting, but Taaffe would seem to have perfected a *newish* way of making a painting. His process demands that he literally touch every area of the work with his hands and this lends them their sexual undertow. Taaffe has a *lover's touch*, a taciturn way with materials that makes you get a little lost in his luscious myopic effects. But Taaffe never does. He never seems to be out of control—he's always thoughtful but he's never trying to dictate terms. He's fluid, a real connoisseur who always pulls back from the pit of a horror vacui and away from an allover repeating pattern.

If you study his recent work closely, there are virtually no examples of repetitious decoration—no mirroring. It's all asymmetrically in balance. These paintings cease to be abstract—they feel altogether *real*. He finds the harmonics of form where things look stamped out and humdrum but in reality are subtly different. In a way, Taaffe delivers "Pattern and Decoration" from the desert of marginality. Complexity comes naturally to him and craft is second nature by now. This is not to say that Taaffe can't make a few duds now and then—he does—but it's okay because he doesn't seem to repeat himself. He's got a sort of formula—but he's never formulaic, and this saves him from the abyss occupied by so many recent "recipe" painters. Taaffe feels intelligent without seeming

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smart, as if pleasure is still the thing that drives his work, rather than the cleverness which substitutes for intuition in so many other painters these days. Taaffe has improved his work, made his images more his own, and lost some of the sassiness that marked some of his earlier efforts. He's well within a mature phase. Some would say Taaffe has this boring structure (the decorative) on which he hangs this interesting process, and indeed from time to time this seems to be so. However, more and more, Taaffe would seem to have nurtured himself to such an extent, concentrated and perfected his lyric intelligence, that he has become a master of his own technique. He may be the best painter today working with geometry and the decorative.

There's something vaguely cannibalistic about Taaffe's paintings—the feeling that it *eats* other work and then grows out of itself. But it never feels like tautology—rather he's regenerative; it's a window onto the painter's natural sense of curiosity and exploration. You can see shapes and negative shapes from one painting to the next—there's a sense of growth and rearrangement—it lets you know that Taaffe's mind is always in motion. All this gives his work a celestial ethereality and a humming flux. He's not trying to develop a signature style (though I don't think you'd mistake a Taaffe for anyone else). He's completely against *closure*. This is a guy who's hungry for difference, excited by the connections between things, and who wants to find the undiscovered magic within well-worn systems. Taaffe has used the expression “crescendo of decoration” and it's a good way to describe his work. It sounds good too, and you do get the feeling that these geometric paintings are about some pretty *big* things, that they can produce some fairly moving results.

He's got an amazing relationship to the decorative, as if he's performed an alchemical wedding with it. There's something eloquent about his way with form, he's an *orator* of geometry. You can't compare anyone to Matisse (it's suicide), but Taaffe's proclivities with cutout paper and design and pattern makes it apparent that he too touches that area where decoration, ornamentation, craft, and art merge into an ineffable poetry—a place Matisse knew the password to. Taaffe takes bits and pieces of adornment from all over the world, mixing and matching these disparate elements. He joins them back together, as if they were all part of some long-dispersed family, and finds new possibilities

for these otherwise overlooked and forgotten shapes and forms. But he also uses well-known forms from modernist painting. The two together, in any event, are highly combustible.

N*ecromancer*, the best painting at Gagosian and one of the best paintings I saw last year, uses six sixteen-pointed stars of Taaffe's own invention combined with a biomorphic field derived from an early Paul Feeley painting (untitled *Blue on Blue* 1956) and amorous kidney shapes extracted from Jean Arp (Taaffe's used both artists before). You might not know his sources right off—but you sense they're there. And he sets the whole soup into *aphrodisiacal* spin. It evolves into something shamelessly lush. In spite of *Necromancer* having these 'bygone' sources it doesn't feel nostalgic or like the decadent sublime—mostly because of his ravishing process and laser intelligence. It's like he's improving other people's work. He really breathes the sexy second wind into Feeley, you want to run out and see his work again. Taaffe gets all these parts to sing in keys they never would be able to do otherwise. He creates a new form by dissecting the physiognomy of decoration and the languages of modernism—and all without cynicism or coyness, and without any heavy-handed seriousness. He's sincere, while avoiding the sentimental.

With relatively simple ideas he gets some astonishing effects. He's not a great colorist—but his colors are great. They have an evocative crispness and an enchanting off-ness. He is a natural colorist but he never forces the issue. Instead, Taaffe is the American master of patterned shape. This is his mantra, his gift. What should be fairly boring, isn't. He orchestrates these forms in such a way as to make them click. When a painting doesn't work, you know it immediately—otherwise it bodes well to go slow. There's a solemnity to his best work, a grandeur without grandiosity. Looking at *Necromancer* is like looking at a mandala—it has the power to cast an intangible spell. It's like a magic carpet, a visual elixir that takes you away and it has a very inbetween scale. And it's got great blues. Taaffe can really weave a painting—he is to abstract layering what David Salle or Sigmar Polke are to figurative layering. I can't think of anyone better at it, and he appears to be improving with age. He's also a master with edges—he gets them to vibrate with tension the way Modrian did.

Taaffe partakes in the secret life of *Beauty*. Above all he wants to behold the beautiful—and he goes to great (labor-intensive) lengths for it. He's a real Knight Errant here. You feel that Baudelaire would have

loved a painting like *Necromancer*. The title (and Taaffe's titles often have an elliptical poetry to them) feels very *Fleurs du Mal* and means one who conjures the spirits of the dead through the craft of magic in order to reveal the future. It's almost an exact description of how the painting works. And in a way, it reveals one of the fundamental sources of Taaffe's magic, and the shrouded door to *Beauty* that Baudelaire, too, discovered.

Taaffe reaches the beautiful by combining two elements. One, an *eternal* element—like classic Islamic design, for example—whose qualities of beauty are difficult to define, but timeless. The other, a *relative* or *temporal* element, like collage or modernism or some nuance of fashion, a jag in style, or a twist of taste—putting what Baudelaire called “icing on the divine cake.”

These two components combine within *Necromancer* to create an original yet familiar kind of beauty and also reanimates the dead or sleeping qualities of the ancient or the antique. Thus Taaffe's paintings have a “double-natured charm”—they feel timeless and temporal, of their own time yet with one foot planted squarely in the sands of history.

There is an inebriated wooziness to these chimerical surfaces, a supple ease and a vulnerable fragility. You get this in certain holy paintings or metaphysical images. You feel this enchanted *juju* in Taaffe, but his paintings are forever withheld and distant. You can love them but you can't visually possess them—they have this peculiar electricity. Like certain songs, once you see a good Taaffe painting, you want to see it over and over again. This is the weird, overpowering, opium-like pull of his best work—as if you could actually get *addicted* to one of his paintings.

A painting like *Necromancer* feels very “man-of-the-world-ly,” alive to the passing moment and all the intimations of the eternal it might bring, yet withdrawn slightly, and silent. It's hard to rouse. A Taaffe painting doesn't *bap* you over the head—it's much more meticulous, seductive, and bewitching—you have to give it time. They're mysterious this way. But once you give yourself over to one, its hypnotic visual incantations hold you, make you lose track of time and float for a while. Like that stranger, a Taaffe painting has an unknowable distance and an aloof tranquility. But most of all it has an “amazing grace” that stirs you to life and makes you feel unashamed in the face of *beauty*. □

Jerry Saltz has edited several books on contemporary art. His column, which concentrates on a single work, appears monthly in *Arts*.

