

S P O T L I G H T

PHILIP TAAFFE

DAVID CLARKSON

Beauty, beetles, and butterflies — it is clear that Philip Taaffe's recent paintings seek to escape the captivity of critical logic, to elicit a sense of sensuous reverie and languid metaphor in its place. In a way, this slippage allows Taaffe's pictures to operate in the manner of a dream, in which anxiety associated with painting's unresolved crisis dissipates through fantasy and temporarily disappears. This is a strategic intermission — a lacuna — a respite during which various psychological options can be rehearsed without harm.

In combination with Taaffe's familiar imagery of abstracted architectural arabesques and stained "time-worn" surfaces, these new works also present an array of simply painted, figurative images. These isolated images — groupings of arrows or insects of a similar genus — seem divorced from any explicit narrative function and, in their apparent absence of authorial direction, may best be interpreted symbolically. Such a challenge runs the obvious risk of severe irrelevance, and is perhaps only pertinent because of Taaffe's previous gambit regarding the recuperation of "irrelevant" decorative elements in his earlier work. The lingering success of that work, though, also suggests that any critical effort expended to interpret these emblems would be misspent: since meaning, for Taaffe, seems to ultimately reside in the simple pleasures of looking.

This leaves a sort of paralytic conundrum; a

conceptual vacuum which, unlike those of the Victorian naturalist, delights in its vacancy. For all of his incessant pictorial inscription, Taaffe's surfaces remain blank and empty in a way by refusing representational completion, eternally poised in mid-flight between conception and closure. In fact, two major paintings in his recent exhibition articulate such a state.

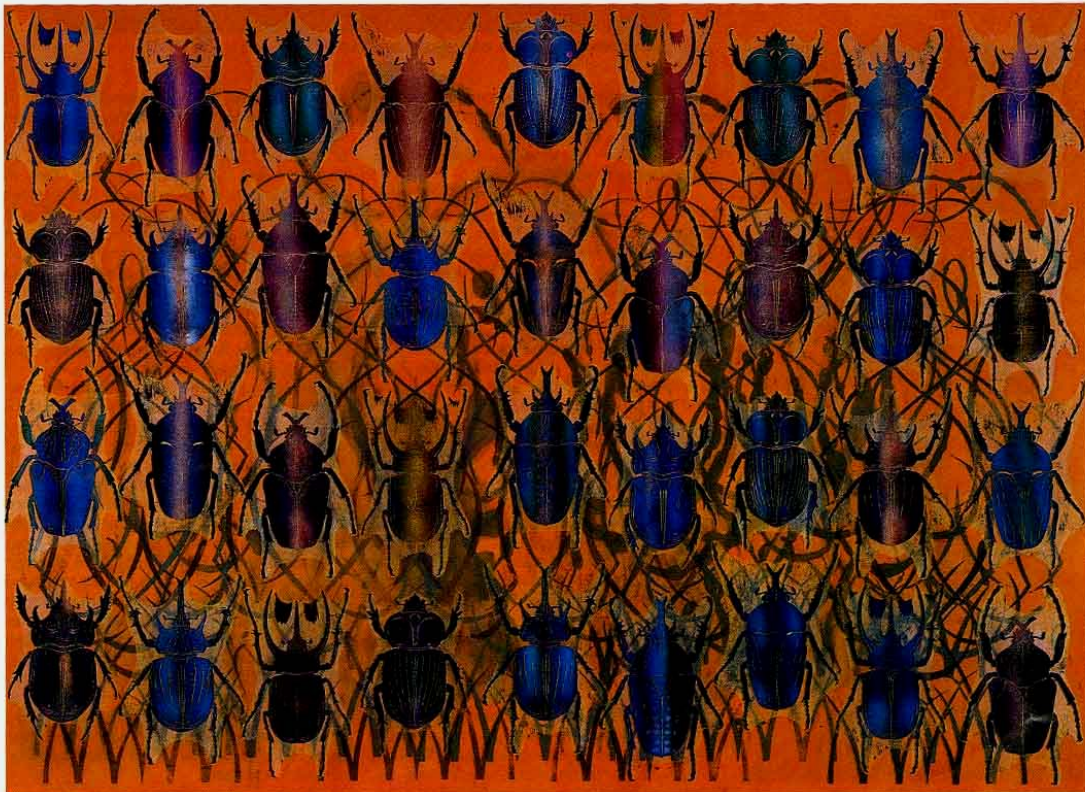
In *Siraspatha* (1994), a multitude of carefully rendered butterflies appears to flit about an abstract field of blurry light and color. On closer inspection, however, the insects seem devoid of animation, like a collection of flattened specimens pinned to the surface of the painting. In their static state, they become signs of Taaffe's neutralized representational process itself, traditional symbols of transformation paradoxically suspended in an act of simple appearance.

In a second painting, *Eros and Psyche* (1994), countless arrows are pictured, apprehended at the chaotic moment of their apogee in an apocalyptic crimson "sky." The dynamic of their journey is interrupted, as the shafts are caught between origin and destination, never to fall. Such an image brings to mind the famous philosophic axiom which seems to disprove the possibility of action and effect; for if an arrow is to reach its target, it must first fly halfway to it, but in order to reach halfway, it must first fly a quarter of the way, although to reach that point, it must first reach

an eighth of the distance, and so on. Of course, it is evident that an arrow sometimes hits its mark, and that what really is at stake in this paradox is the possibility of philosophic logic to account for even the most self-evident physical effects.

By eschewing such logic to better aim at the production of an entrancing optical reverie, Taaffe's work successfully postpones an entanglement with critical theory, yet begs the question of what would occur if the dream were to end.

*At Gagosian SoHo, New York.*



SCARABESQUE, 1993-94, MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS, 76 X 104"