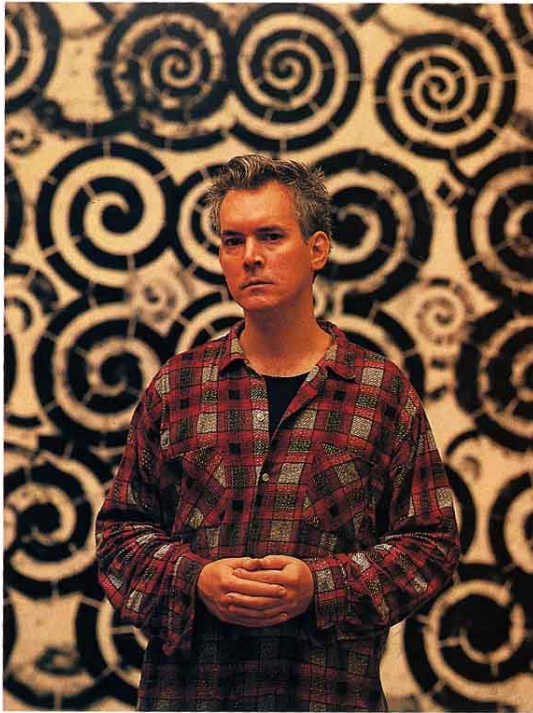


*Fanfare*

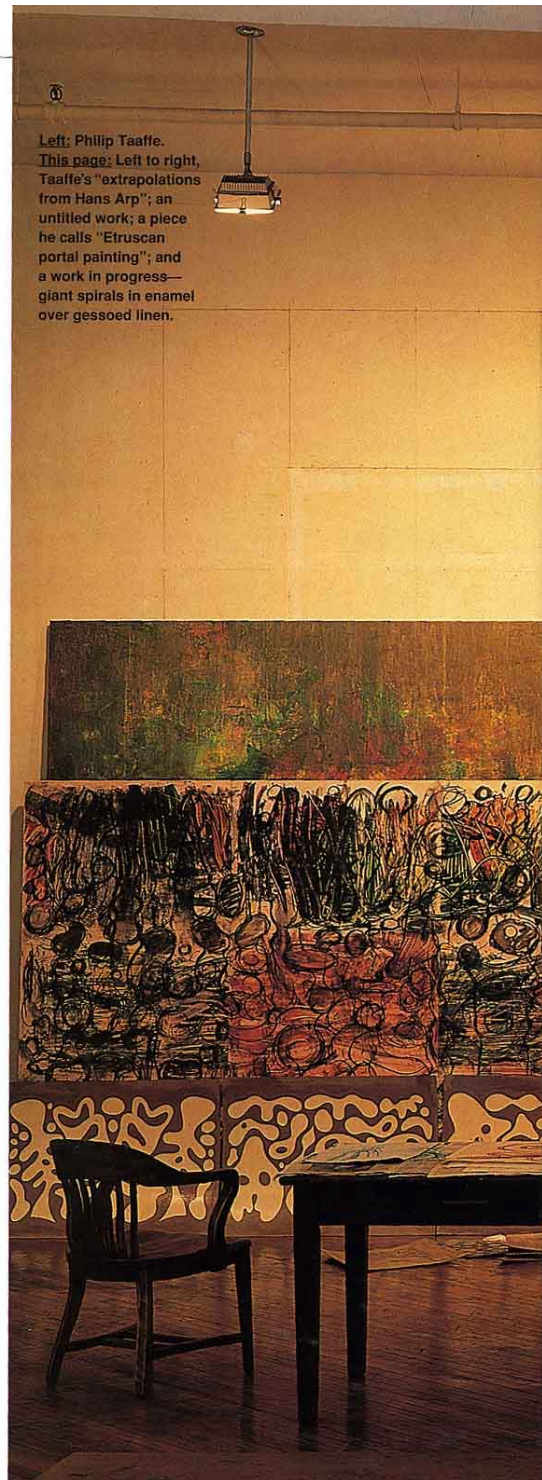


**He produces fantastical paintings in quarters that are a visionary feat of restoration**

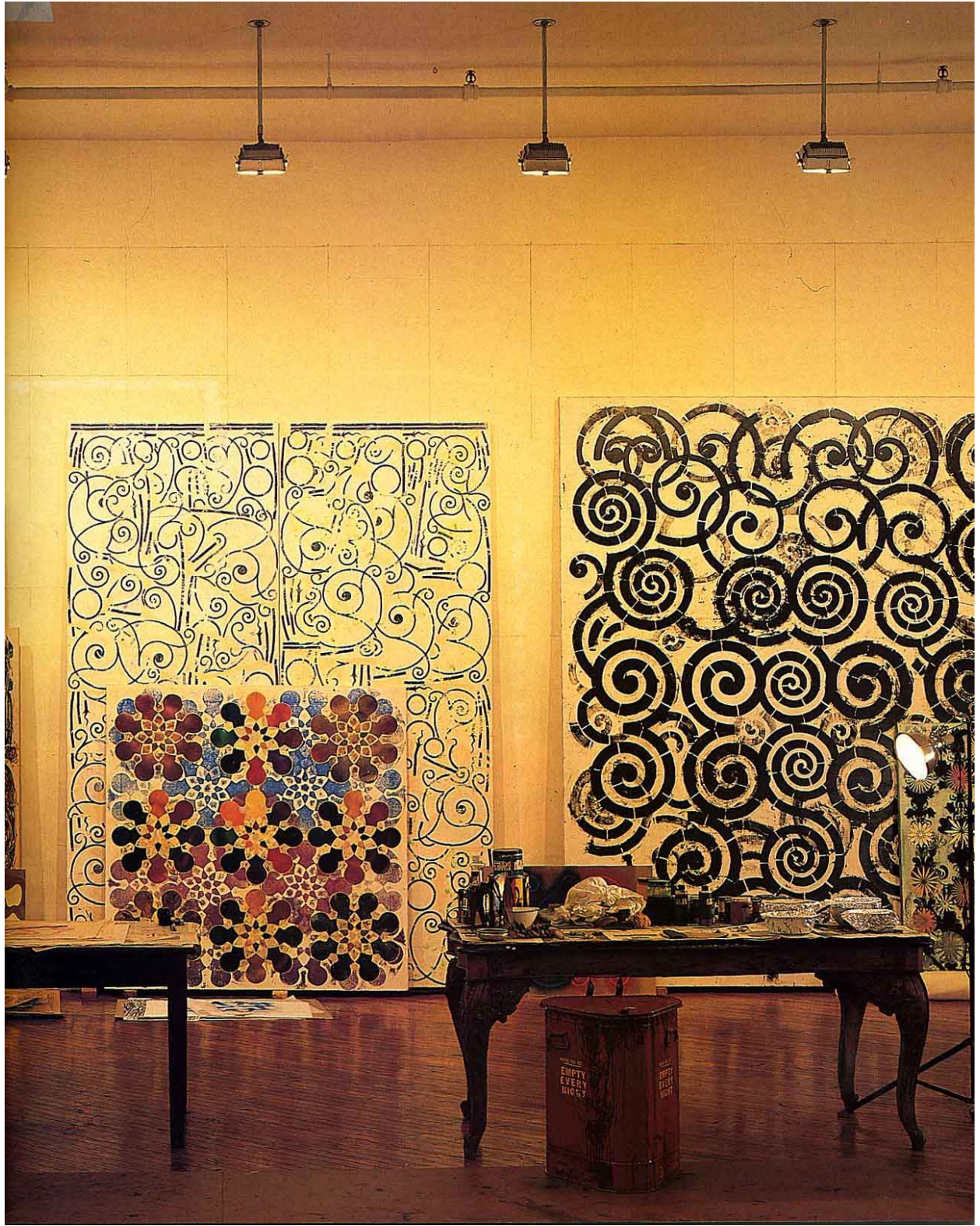
## TAAFFE'S TEMPLE

■ Scenic locations and grand interiors are today the working habitats mainly of Sunday painters, who can still be found setting up their easels on canyon overlooks or in the great galleries of 19th-century museums, seeking relief from daily stress in the picturesque. Most serious painters now stay in their studios, regardless of the style or subject of their work, and with few exceptions, painters' studios tend to be rather unprepossessing affairs; boxes with blank walls basically, the bigger the better, onto which the artist's imagination, often coupled with actual slides, may most efficiently be projected. The extraordinary beauty, therefore, of Philip Taaffe's immediate physical surroundings over the last several years—first in Naples, Italy, then in New York—has even to his worldliest visitors seemed shocking.

LISA LIEBMANN; PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD EBERLE



Left; Philip Taaffe. This page: Left to right, Taaffe's "extrapolations from Hans Arp"; an untitled work; a piece he calls "Etruscan portal painting"; and a work in progress—giant spirals in enamel over gessoed linen.



The half-ruined, moonstruck villa on the Bay of Naples that Taaffe lived and worked in between 1988 and 1992 has already become the stuff of legends at once art-historical and Viscontiesque. Indeed, it was almost worrisome at the time to find an artist as young as Taaffe, who is now 38, going about his daily business with the distant Vesuvius looming within sight and the island of Capri—Somerset Maugham's land of the "Lotus Eaters"—just a quick hydrofoil-ride away. What manner of studio could he possibly conjure up in New York that might live up to so preposterously glamorous a precedent?

Yet on a particularly dour and gritty block in the industrial West 30s of midtown Manhattan, a virtual miracle of modern urban real estate is now manifest: Taaffe's enormous new studio



**The shocking subject of Taaffe's elaborate and exacting work is, in short, beauty itself**



**Above:** In the room he calls his archive, Taaffe keeps architectural rubbings, relief printing plates, linoleum carvings, and other drawings and reliefs, made on site, to be used as source materials. **Left:** On one studio wall, he's hung monotype prints of Japanese sword guards, or *tsuba*, as well as polygon motifs derived from the work of Arp disciple Charles Shaw.

suggests nothing less than a temple to the deities of aesthetics. With its eclectic array of Levantine motifs and its atmosphere of utter grandeur in terms both of scale and subtlety of detail, the place is suffused with sensuous theatricality—chastened, slightly, by an underlying clarity of purpose and of space that suggests a missionary's rigor.

Taaffe's uncommon working quarters occupy an entire 10,000-square-foot floor in a 19th-century former school building whose modern, emphatically utilitarian front rooms and façade were added on in the 1930s. It includes what had clearly been the school's gym or chapel, along with a terrace, perhaps a half-dozen large classrooms, a couple of big meeting or study halls, and a lavatory complete with shower stalls. When Taaffe found the place, he was somehow able to see through dropped ceilings, bricked-up windows, all sorts of ugly ducts, and a maze of cheaply partitioned cubicles. With its cathedral windows and thrilling 20-foot-high central space—not to mention such luxuriously Taaffe-ish amenities as an orchid- and antiques-filled Orientalist salon, a terrace now decked and strewn with big potted trees and plants, and a Moroccan-tiled ex-school bathroom decorated with framed photographs of the popular Egyptian singer, the late Oum Khalsoum—it is, among other things, the result of a visionary feat of restoration.

Traveler Taaffe—who sounds quite a bit like actor Jimmy Stewart, and whose demeanor suggests a handsome and neurotically febrile young priest—has so far led a bachelor's life. And though raised in suburban New Jersey, he seems almost anything but bourgeois.

Taaffe's unusual way of working is fundamentally abstract in the extreme: his paintings are

