

Art on Paper
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art on paper

Philip Taaffe's Animistic Light

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Animistic Light

By using the ancient technique of marbling, Philip Taaffe reinvigorates a st(r)ain of abstract painting that can be traced back to Jackson Pollock.

by John Yau

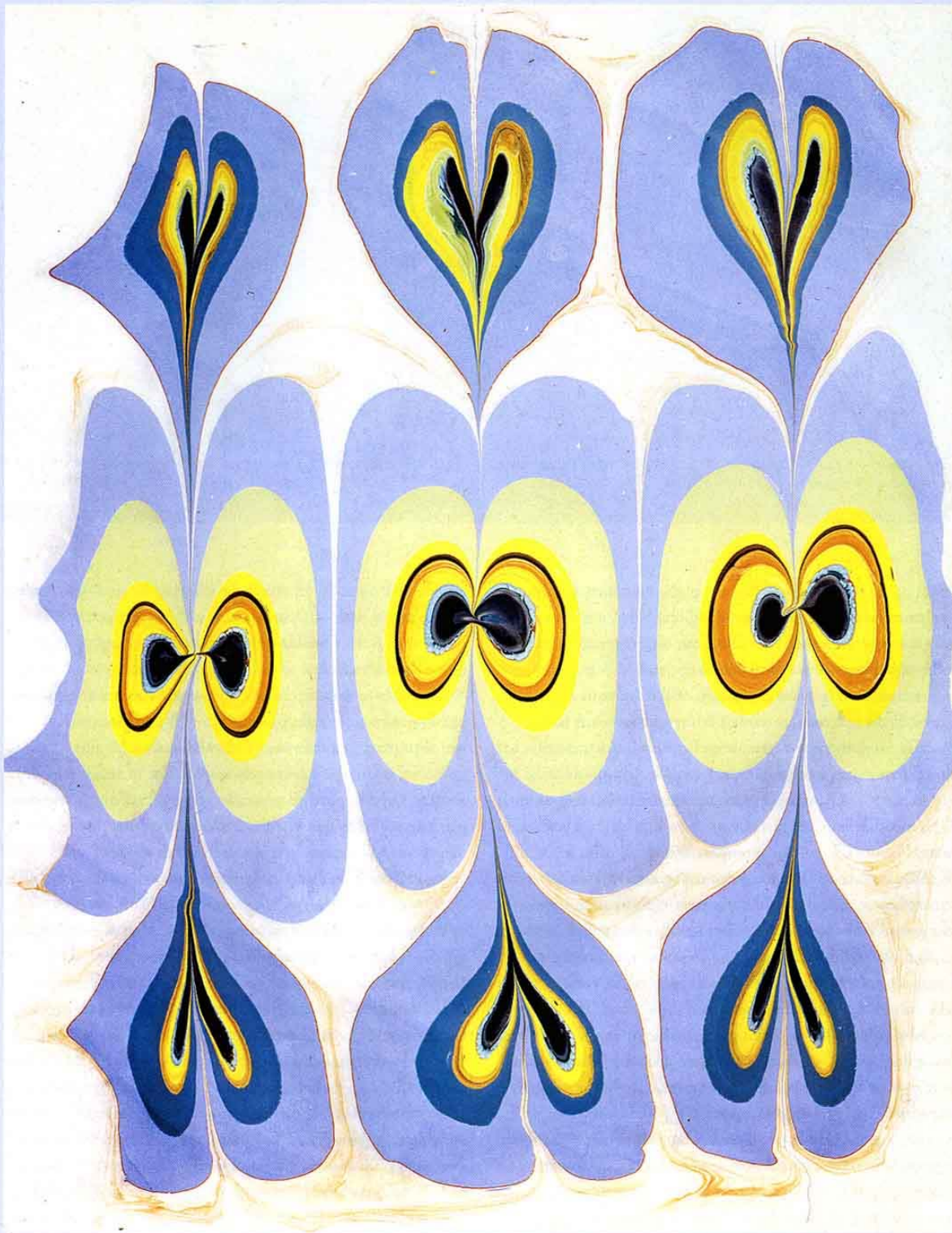
In his optically rich, layered paintings and animated works on paper, many of which are the result of marbling, Philip Taaffe reconciles two divergent modes of reality: chance and order. This preoccupation with reconciliation can also be found in his juxtapositions of phallic and feminine images and shapes that he has derived from a mind-bending range of sources. Taaffe's dense, hallucinatory work transforms seeing into a kind of *rhabdomancy*, a divining of the precious, of that which is buried and hidden. And it is this carefully calibrated tension between the secret and the visible, which Taaffe plays out on so many levels, that is a central feature of his work.

If I were to make an analogy about him as a painter, I would compare Taaffe 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, 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 his bringing together of these very different modes of representation, his predilection for incorporating a wide range of diverse techniques is best understood as a metaphysical engagement with light as an animistic presence. It is in this context that Taaffe's earlier interest in the pulsing opticalities of the Op artist Bridget Riley should be understood. It is 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 printing press, it was probably invented in China during the Tang dynasty. In Japan, where marbling began to be practiced in the twelfth century, it was known as *Suminagashi*. In both China and Japan, marbling was associated with divining the occult, akin one might say to the reading of tea



Three Figures, acrylic ink on paper mounted on canvas (17 1/4 x 13 1/2 in.), 2002. Private collection, New York.



Untitled, pigment on paper (14 7/8 x 11 in.), 2003.
Courtesy Thomas Ammann Fine Art, Zurich.



Red Caliph, acrylic ink on paper mounted
on canvas (10 1/2 x 6 in.), 2002.
Collection Ruth Kaufman, New York.



Untitled, pigment on paper (14 7/8 x 11 in.), 2003.
Collection Vincent and Elizabeth Meyer, London.

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 it was connected to heraldry, secret societies, and occult and alchemical practices in Northern Europe and Middle East. The 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 explains his initial attraction to this rather arcane process.

Taaffe is able to marble using acrylic, oil paint, and enamel. Each medium requires that the solution in which the paint is floated be of different consistencies. While the paint reacts differently, and very different results can be achieved with each of them, 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 methyl cellulose, which is a gluey yet liquid medium. Using a brush, he drips and splatters paint on its gummy skin. The paint becomes a 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 spreads, pushes against whatever has happened in the changing arrangement of colors and shapes. He works from all sides. The colors don't mix, but line up next to each other. After he has laid down several colors, he uses various pointed instruments to pull the colors and shapes into each other. Again he works from

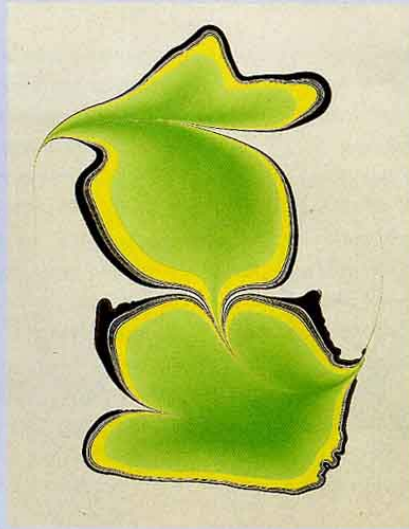
all sides. At some point, satisfied with what he sees—remember, it is changing and, as I can attest, it is a semi-transparent film, rather than pools of color—he carefully lays a sheet of paper down on the surface.

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 employed it in rather thin and familiar ways. In purely art-historical terms, Taaffe has lifted stain painting out of its narrow formal use into one of richly provocative possibility. He has expanded it from the strictly visual to engage in intellectual and imaginative processes as well.

Any doubts one might have about what Taaffe has been able to accomplish with his imaginative reinvigoration of painting will quickly fade when one begins considering his marbled work. Usually untitled, these 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 a reality in continuous flux. Taaffe's works, in their swirling clouds of color, also resemble—among other things—cross sections of fantastic minerals, rivulets of magma, and images of the birth or death of a star. Other works evoke human and plant viscera, and even psychotropic hallucinations. Taaffe's use of marbling also beckons consideration of his work with regard to Jackson Pollock's legacy. Whereas Pollock used a stick to dribble paint onto a flat, static surface, Taaffe



Untitled, oil and enamel on paper (35 3/4 x 24 in.), 2004. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York.



Calligram (Yellow/Green), acrylic ink on paper mounted on canvas (11 1/4 x 9 in.), 2002. Private collection, Italy.



Untitled, oil and enamel on paper (39 3/4 x 26 1/2 in.), 2004. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York.

paints on water, using a stylus to manipulate the way the different colors interact. Nature's flux is an inherent aspect of his process. Whereas Pollock's 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 a number of paintings completed in 2003, Taaffe can be said to have untangled Pollock's work into distinct features that he ultimately reconfigures. And, by incorporating non-painting processes such as marbling and silkscreening into his work, Taaffe expands upon one of the crucial features of Pollock's achievement, which is his break with traditional means of painting.

Abstract forms that are fluid and asymmetrical are the results of only one strain of Taaffe's marbling. In *Thera* (2003), the title of which is derived from a volcanic island in the Mediterranean, Taaffe arrived at an abstract shape that is both flowerlike and heraldic. Within the floral shape—which recalls both lava and melting ice cream, extremes of hot and cold—tendrils of yellow and green swirl around each other. This shape is surrounded by stubby, blue, fingerlike forms extending in from all four edges. Over this, he 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. As our focus zooms in and out, we speculate about the connections and differences between the

two distinct patterns.

In contrast to the stain painting of Louis and Frankenthaler, 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 the visceral. Eye (including the inner eye) and body are connected. In registering the different relationships that the two patterns establish, we come close to repeating what Taaffe himself does in these works. We sort, scrutinize, and connect.

Pollock once claimed that he was a "force of nature." He also wanted the painting "to come through," to make itself apparent, visible. As I have suggested in an earlier piece that appeared in this magazine (see *AoP* Jan/Feb '04), it is this part of Pollock's legacy that artists who both redefined and extended modernism—and here I am thinking of Brice Marden, Louise Fishman, Pat Steir, and Bill Jensen—have addressed in their work. Among younger artists who are regarded as being post-modern, Taaffe is crucial because he understood that one had to invent (or reinvent) painting, that this too was part of Pollock's legacy. Taaffe did so by recognizing that marbling was about making a record of natural forces. His works on paper mirror (in a permanent way) the forces of one medium floating on another. □

John Yau is a poet and critic.