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GALLERY-GOING

Ornamental Agility

By DAVID COHEN

If, as the early modernist architect Adolf Loos famously contended, ornament is crime, then Philip Taaffe can expect a stiff sentence. In his opulent, layered, and shamelessly decorative paintings, ornament is rampant, eclectic, and serial. Motifs are appropriated from wildly disparate cultures. Science and religion are raided with equal rapaciousness. The loot is thrown together with seeming indifference to source.

In a Philip Taaffe, it is not so much that ornaments are painted as that ornament is the paint. Mr. Taaffe's equivalent of brushstrokes are individual screen-printed or otherwise transferred ready-made devices, patterns, and signs. He is a painter who has internalized the collage sensibility to the extent that it is no longer useful to think of him as an appropriator. Rather, with world culture as his palette, these individual signifiers

PHILIP TAAFFE

Gagosian Gallery

ENA SWANSEA

André Schleichtriem Temporary

are his pigments.

But he does remain a collagist in that his pictorial organization resists a melding of motifs. He creates a stir fry, not a stew, with each individual ingredient retaining its shape, color, and flavor. Actually, color sometimes wins independence from the things to which it adheres, creating its own secondary subject, as in "Cape Sinope" (2007), where waves of red and blue traverse vertically arranged totem poles of Polynesian tribal objects. But this only serves to make the painting as a whole a giant ornament, made up, so to

speak, of individual ornaments — rather like Oceanic carvings themselves.

Ornament, in Mr. Taaffe's work, is at once affirmation and denial: Although there is an emotional and sexual energy that recalls the use of ornament by Gustav Klimt, a willingness to submit his motifs to bland regimentation has the nihilistic nonchalance of Andy Warhol.

Mr. Taaffe aspires to the condition of an Oriental rug weaver: Strict yet playful, he intertwines a lexicon of motifs into inventive structures. Then again, great rugs usually achieve an internal dynamic; however much they play games with scale, they exude a sense of containment. Like mosques, they are conceived as symbolic portraits of the universe. Mr. Taaffe, by contrast, sometimes implies a continuing grid, as if his selection is arbitrary in where it cuts off, as in "Mirage" (2006), where one senses that the rows of neatly ordered swords and daggers might

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TAAFFE from page 11 continue in the horizontal. Whereas "Garden of Extinct Leaves" has a relatively dense gestalt with enough neutral ground around the edges to suggest a no man's land between the pictorial subject and the world beyond. This is an image that most strongly evokes a page in a book. If it were a flower bed the sense of wildness would be achieved by planting in abundance rather than abandon.

Mr. Taaffe is as much awash with influences as his paintings are with motifs. He was formed by the 1980s, when he emerged in the company of such artists as David Salle, whose realist paintings juxtaposed details from pornography, art history, decorative art, and (provocatively) tribal objects. But Mr. Taaffe also came out of the Pattern and Decoration movement, which sought to extend the life of abstract color field painting while also rebutting the high modernist approbation of decoration and ornament. Among his favorite borrowed motifs are several from the British Op artist Bridget Riley with her teasing moiré effects and perceptual conceits that borrowed from Escher and other illustrators. In the Taaffe mélange, Ms. Riley takes her place with Islamic tile work.

In his new paintings, as much as ever, there is a bravura insolence in his collision of cultures, his insistence that everything can be reduced to ornament. But philosophically these sumptuous canvases can equally be argued the other way, as reminders that every ornament has its origins in something once deeply experienced. Mr. Taaffe's eclecticism long outgrew 1980s attitude in favor of an enlightened universalism. These accomplished, rich, thoughtful paintings mark the election of the artist as a trustee of what André Malraux termed the "Museum Without Walls."

♦ ♦ ♦

In Rainer Maria Rilke's sense, Ena Swansea is "resolved to be always beginning." (According to the poet, the angel of inspiration demands this, rather than tears, to deign to appear.) Like Mr. Taaffe, this accomplished painter also has roots in the 1980s East Village scene, though her career really got going in the 1990s. After she secured her reputation with paintings of plant forms in shadow that were sumptuously elusive, Ms.



GAGOSIAN

Philip Taaffe, 'Mirage' (2006).

Swansea took a step back in terms of apparent mastery to tackle complex, in many ways more ambitious figure compositions. The nine paintings at André Schlechtriem Temporary, in her

Taaffe creates a stir-fry, not a stew, with each individual ingredient retaining its shape, color, and flavor.

first exhibition with this gallery, show a remarkable artist back on top form.

The first painting to greet you is an equestrian portrait, "Princess Elisabeth" (2006). The sitter, an associate at the gallery, is a scion of the house of Thurn und Taxis, patrons of Rilke in his time. The face has the melancholy beauty familiar from the work of Elizabeth Peyton, who is similarly in awe of celebrity — by

coincidence, Ms. Peyton once made a painting of a Princess Elizabeth, in her case the young Elizabeth Windsor. But Ms. Swansea eschews Ms. Peyton's deliberate use of illustration technique to express humbleness or alienation, investing the paint with lush presence. Not that weirdness and alienation are absent from these works — they are all painted on grounds of intense liquid graphite, and like her early shadow paintings, are basically grisaille with color the exception not the rule.

Ms. Swansea paints with deft economy. In "Identity" (2006) a regiment of cheerleaders marches past a stadium where only the letters "IDEN" are visible on the curved LED display. Against the prevailing gray, each girl is constructed from quick stabs of the brush, a stroke or two each for limbs, yellow torsos, red feathers, face. Yet, miraculously, each girl is an individual, some smiling, other intensely self-absorbed. "Picture Plane" (2006) offers a similar balance of detail and whole, of human presences within a crowd, of con-

trasting material substances — reflected light signage in glass, rusticated stonework — somehow all democratically sharing the picture plane of the title. In "Happy Valley," what seems like a few tossed off casual brushstrokes capture with anatomical and expressive exactitude the voluptuous muscle of a stockinged transvestite leg. Volumetric credibility plays against flatness in this image as surely as do masculine and feminine, artifice and reality. The painting is a "pride parade" in terms of its own facture as much as its subject.

Ms. Swansea's paint is slick, succulent, and elastic, but her slippery brilliance rarely seems an end itself. Instead, she exudes that magic compact you get in Manet and other old masters of awkwardness and fluency.

Taaffe until March 31 (980 Madison Ave., between 77th and 78th streets, 212-744-2313);

Swansea until April 7 (524 W. 19th St., between 10th and 11th avenues, 212-929-6119).

