

**Philip Taaffe
at Gagosian**

Like smart appliances, Taaffe's big, sumptuously patterned new paintings seem to know what their users want. They reward erudition and provide visual pleasure unstintingly. In fact, some of the most potent seem to stare right back at the viewer. A trio named *Cape Sinope*, *Cape Vitus* and *Cape Zephyr* (2006-07) all feature, amid many layers of painted and printed imagery, several kinds of heavily stylized eyes. Some are borrowed from Native American art of the Northwest; other, generically googly versions are made of concentric ellipses. Arranged more or less symmetrically on grounds of lemon yellow, dusty pink or pale orange, these jangly but elegantly disposed features mingle with a range of motifs that include bug-eyed, ancient-looking sculptural heads; screened and stamped onto the surface, they suggest Nancy Spero's scrolls on steroids.

Elsewhere, it's Bridget Rileys on mushrooms that come to mind. Two paintings, *Locus Auratus* (2005) and *Port of Saints* (2005-07), feature undulating gold-leaf stripes that surge across canvases brightly patterned with allover designs of Moorish origin. If all these paintings show Taaffe browsing among the treasure chests of world culture like any good postcolonial tourist, he is not oblivious to the work's political dimensions. Or so it seems with *Garden of Extinct Leaves* (2005-06), a hothouse sampler of hyper-vivid green leaves that implicitly cautions against improvident consumption of all kinds (it is based, press materials say, on rare 19th-century botanical fossil prints). A doubled-edged form of politics may also be at work in *Mirage* (2004-06), in which the repeated forms are all one or another variety of bladed weapon: daggers, axes, swords, stilettos and scimitars, all blood-red, their wet-looking surfaces slightly curdled with black.

These paintings' unstable mix of beauty and brains doesn't always hold together. In an odd-lot assortment shown in a downstairs room, Taaffe experiments with psychedelic-looking marbling (*Caravanserai*, 2006) and causes viciously thorny stems to snake across a primly ruled field (*Magic Lantern with Rugosa*, 2005). Most weirdly of all, he plants three totemic figures, assembled from screenprints of tree bark, in a weedy field; a brilliant blue sky extends behind them.



Philip Taaffe: *Cape Zephyr*, 2007, mixed mediums on linen, 114 by 96½ inches; at Gagosian.

The neo-Geo stars of the '80s, among whom Taaffe emerged, tended to avoid the accusations of market pandering leveled at figure-painting peers—an exemption largely due to their preemptive engagement with consumerism. Taaffe's work is still supported by the idea that you can have it all: that painting can be pushed to within a hairbreadth of high-end textile design—of luxury goods pure and simple—while still maintaining intellectual dignity, just by virtue of formal rigor and symbolic ecumenism. Even if you think the argument's fishy, it's impossible to resist the work's enchantments—which, possibly, is all Taaffe really wants. —*Nancy Princenthal*