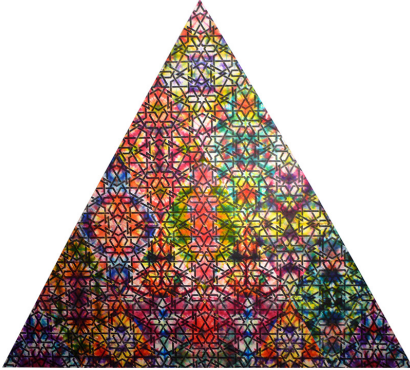


Oleg Grabar

THE TENSIONS OF VISUAL CREATIVITY



Damascene Triangle III (2008)
Mixed media on canvas.
88 x 88 x 88 inches
(223.5 x 223.5 x 223.5 cm)

Some fourteen years ago, I had the pleasure of introducing a series of paintings by Philip Taaffe through the publication of excerpts from a memorable conversation we had while looking at his mostly new paintings. I remember so well being struck by several tensions in his work. There was a tension between what may be called naturalism in the representation of things, insects or flowers, and the overall composition of a single motif repeated many times. There was also a tension between geometry of finite forms and an arabesque-like playfulness of potentially endless patterns. Both of these tensions illustrated in a contemporary idiom or grammar the ways and problems of the decorative forms which appear on walls and objects of the art of Muslim dynasties and cities from the ninth century onwards. The fascination I, as a historian, developed for Taaffe's work grew out of this wonderful coincidence of the very modern with ancient ways.

Meeting a second time for several hours of exchanged views around recent paintings, finished or unfinished, I realized that certain words, ideas, or concepts kept recurring in Taaffe's comments, words like "experiential," "physicality," "meditation," concepts like "unleashing of certain historical forces" or "of forces of memory." What these words reflected, it seems to me, is a new and far more profound tension in Philip Taaffe's work and in the expectations he has of a public's reaction to his work. In a general way, it is a tension between the artist as maker of works of art and as provider of, almost compelling, certain reactions in the public. I will elaborate on this tension around three features which struck me so much in his recent paintings.

The first feature is that of surprises, of unexpected features which may even contradict each other. A given painting looks like a strong and forceful geometric composition. And at the same time the geometry is set over an explosion of colors which seem almost wild in their exuberance and in their arbitrariness and whose segments never correspond with the pattern of the geometry. Which is the subject of the painting? The colorful base or the geometric frame? Does this painting mean perhaps that this sort of dichotomy is an essential aspect of a human conflict between order and chaos? The artist here does not argue that order controls chaos, but that both exist together and that one is inseparable of the other. Another surprise lies in the techniques chosen by Taafe. Most of the completed paintings consist actually of panels of the same size set next to each other. In other words, what we see as a single composition is in fact the combination of any number of similar but not quite identical pieces. I shall return shortly to a curious and somewhat enigmatic aspect of this characteristic.



Peregrine Falcon Over King Snake (2008)
Mixed media on canvas.
30-1/8 x 30 inches (76.5 x 76.2 cm)

The second feature is not as new as the first one and consists in a continuing tension between identifiable subjects and abstract patterns. Philip Taafe is clearly tempted by representation, especially of birds, insects, and mythical monsters. But he is reluctant to show these beasts directly and he transforms them into patterns or covers them with color in ways that make them difficult to identify. He also avoids human beings or, as would have been possible in some of the models that may have inspired him, even segments of human beings like hands or feet. Why? Is it because abstract patterns or colorful transformation diminish the reality of the animals and subordinate them to some other order of matter? Or is it a maker-artist's fear of representation? In this aspect of the tensions which seem to me to characterize his work, Philip Taafe responds in a profound, even if obvious, feature of all representational arts which is to make visible and real something that does not exist or somebody unknown.

The third feature of the tension I am trying to define is the ambiguity of Taafe's imposition of meaning to his paintings. I keep feeling that he is almost reluctant to give them titles, because titles impose a single permanent significance to the work of art. He prefers, I feel, to see each painting as a

source of meditation for the viewer, the subject of the meditation being decided by the viewer, not by the artist. The function of the latter is to make one feel or think, not to provide or compel an ideological or other position or attitude or judgement. But it may be tempting to try to persuade rather than simply to attract, to give rules for understanding what one sees rather than let every viewer choose his own ways. As with the first set of features I mentioned, there is something mysterious in many of these paintings. The mystery may just be a game, a playful riddle, or else it will lead to some deeper statement in the years to come.

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OLEG GRABAR (1929-2011). His work has had a far-reaching and profound influence on the study of Islamic art and architecture. A native of Strasbourg, France, Grabar was born into an intellectual environment fostered by a highly-intellectual family that included his father, André Grabar, an eminent scholar in the field of Byzantine art. He received his Ph.D in Oriental Languages and Literatures and the History of Art (1955) from Princeton University. In 1968 he accepted a post as Professor of Fine Arts at Harvard University. He became the first Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Art and Architecture when that chair was established at Harvard in 1980 and joined the Institute for Advanced Study in the School of Historical Studies as Professor Emeritus in 1990, where he devoted himself full-time to lecturing and research. Professor Grabar was the author of some 18 books, including *The Mediation of Ornament* (Bollingen, 1995), *The Art and Architecture of Islam 650-1250*, with Richard Ettinghausen and Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, (Yale History of Art, 2001), and *The Dome of the Rock* (Harvard University Press, 2006).