



## ANIMA MUNDI

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I.

A single vision would have come to him again and again, a vision of a boat drifting down a broad river between high hills where there were caves and towers, and following the light of one Star; and that voices would have told him how there is for every man some one scene, some one adventure, some one picture that is the image of his secret life, for wisdom first speaks in images...

W. B. Yeats †

Philip Taaffe, whose first solo exhibition took place in 1982, belongs to a generation of artists who in the eighties succeeded in restoring credibility to abstraction after the suicide of sorts it suffered under the theorising of Minimalism, with its drive to reduce painting to a mere index of formal characteristics. From Kazimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky to Robert Ryman and Brice Marden, via many other artists of the last century such as Piet Mondrian, Jean Arp, Joan Miró, František Kupka, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, abstract art had, up until this point, been emblematic of Modernism, constructing a space where

stylistic revolution was ever possible. In the sixties, however, the most advanced theoretical debates migrated towards the realm of sculpture, and from there to art forms centred on the creative process and its conceptual formulation, which some (Thomas McEvelley, for example) have called anti-artistic.<sup>2</sup> This period also sees the discovery of video as a medium, followed by other forms of digital technology, and the development of a multi-disciplinary art scene. Some two decades passed before painters such as Philip Taaffe, alongside Terry Winters, David Reed, Jonathan Lasker, Juan Uslé, Olav Christopher Jenssen, Bernard Frize, and Helmut Dorner, succeeded in reinvigorating abstract painting, and painting in general, by steering the theoretical debate away from syntax and towards semantics. All of these artists have demonstrated that painting continues to be a valid language in an increasingly multi-cultural world dominated by information technology.

In the eighties and nineties, various international group shows explored these questions from a range of viewpoints.<sup>3</sup> Philip Taaffe's work appeared in some of these exhibitions. Soon after, solo exhibitions were organised in art institutions featuring the artists involved in these shows, with Taaffe's first retrospective taking place in Valencia's IVAM in 2000.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, a new group of painters began to emerge that included such influential figures as Luc Tuymans, Franz Ackermann, Ellen Gallagher, Chris Ofili, Udomsak Krisanamis, Thomas Scheibitz, Julie Mehretu, Fergus Feehily, Francis Alÿs, and Amy Sillman, who, in some ways, follow in the footsteps of the first generation of postmodern painters leaving old arguments, e.g. whether painting is merely for bourgeois consumption, far behind. For some of these more recent artists, painting is but one facet of their artistic output. Even Taaffe has created spaces which could be described as installations – rooms completely covered in monotype prints – in recent museum shows in Wolfsburg and Luzern.

Over a thirty-year career we can analyse not only Taaffe's evolution within a wider artistic milieu, but also examine the defining characteristics of his work as an individual outside the context of his artistic generation. While the present exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art looks exclusively at work over the past ten years, I would like to begin by discussing his work prior to this period, and in so doing refer to some developments that are fundamental to a proper understanding of it.

The artist's earliest surviving paintings were completed between 1980 and 1982. They belong to a group of works known as the *Picture Binding* series, a group of collages that employ black, blue, or red adhesive tape (of the type used for mounting photographs in photo albums), composed on white backgrounds of collaged paper or masonite panels. *Glyphic Brain* (1980–81) belongs to this series. Taaffe builds imaginary architectural spaces closed in on themselves – the artist explained that he was thinking of medieval walled cities as he created them. These works are generally small and employ one colour on a white background. Formally, they are linked to the Constructivist tradition, but already show some enduring characteristics of the artist's mature work. First, he uses collage as an organising principle. Second, he constructs an abstract image that is both representational and emblematic,



Philip Taaffe, *Sanctuarium*, 2010.  
Installation, Kunstmuseum Luzern



Philip Taaffe, *Lalibela Kabinett*, 2008.  
Installation, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg



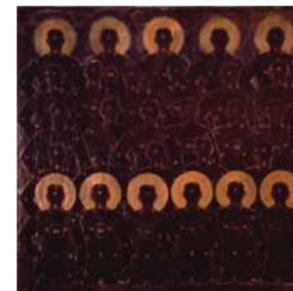
Philip Taaffe, *Glyphic Brain*, 1980–81

presaging his later work, where ornamental motifs are often repeated. Clearly for Taaffe, painting has already become a means of depicting a distinct space, which is simultaneously idealised, imaginal, and intellectual. Lastly, we see the ritualised repetition of a specific way of working, particularly laborious and rigorous, which, despite the level of concentration it demands, nevertheless leaves room for chance and improvisation.

In 1983, Taaffe's work changes scale. His first large format collage, *Martyr Group* (1983), took its inspiration from twelfth century frescoes from the Moldavian region of Romania. The work was made using police target-practice figures that Taaffe found outside one of the printing plants he frequented in search of discarded materials, in the vast industrial parks near his studio in Jersey City, New Jersey. The resulting image presents a contemporary reality: the targets allude to those by Jasper Johns, while the martyred figures refer indirectly to AIDS, which was devastating the artist's friends and society at the time. These themes are placed side by side with a medieval mode of composition and a frontal arrangement of figures. This juxtaposition of forms and ideas from heterogeneous sources becomes a defining characteristic of his work.

From 1983 until more or less the beginning of the nineties, Taaffe frequently although not exclusively made works in homage to other artists from the modern period, especially Bridget Riley, Ellsworth Kelly, and Barnett Newman, but also to Marcel Duchamp (see *Green/White Stoppages*, 1984), Jean Arp, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, Ad Reinhardt (see *Chi-Chi Meets the Death of Painting*, 1985) or the less well-known Paul Feeley, Charles Shaw, and Myron Stout. Throughout this period, he became associated with other 'appropriationist' artists such as Mike Bidlo and Sherrie Levine, and also with so-called Neo-Geo painting, a group that included artists such as Peter Halley, Peter Schuyff, and Ross Bleckner (who wrote the introduction to the first Taaffe exhibition catalogue).<sup>5</sup> At the time these Taaffe works that incorporated specific references to others received significant attention and sparked quite a bit of controversy – naturally, considering Bridget Riley and Ellsworth Kelly are alive and, indeed, still working today. It is understandable how the use of their art as sources for decorative motifs, treating them as works from the past, could be provocative, even if the op-art paintings of Bridget Riley, which reached their peak during the 1960s, were of declining interest by the 1980s.

It should be pointed out that Philip Taaffe's so-called 'appropriationism' is in no way cynical, nor is it an act of artistic necrophilia. It does not play conceptual or theoretical games. Taaffe recreates these canvases from pioneering periods of the recent past without questioning or ridiculing them, but rather he taps into a tradition that he wishes to be a part of, invoking these works as in a magic ritual. Taaffe specifically used Riley's paintings as models to create his own, and gave them new titles, for example: *Overtone* (1983) or *Brest* (1983–84), the latter a reference to Jean Genet's novel *Querelle de Brest*. Importantly, one should note these are also collages. Taaffe made linocut prints, imitating the British painter's curves and waves, which he later pasted onto thick paper (likewise discarded print runs, this time of light bulb packaging).



Philip Taaffe, *Martyr Group*, 1983



Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968): *Three Standard Stoppages* (3 Stoppages Etalon), Paris, 1913–14.  
New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)



Philip Taaffe, *Green/White Stoppages*, 1984



Philip Taaffe, *linocut*, 1983

Philip Taaffe, *Ghost Still Life*, 2000Philip Taaffe, *Unit of Direction*, 2003Philip Taaffe, *Abraham and Isaac*, 1986 (detail)

The result is texturally rich and fragile and has little to do with the highly finished, almost industrial perfection of the works that inspired them. Taaffe's originality, or authorship, comes through the process of conceptualising the final images (which are no longer ends in themselves) and constructing them in a way that can be described as at once verisimilitudinous and hand crafted. The artist does not treat these models of inspiration as banal or obsolete; on the contrary, he reconstructs them in order to celebrate them and explore their meaning, offering us a kind of romantic reverberation or echo. Furthermore, this reconstruction of space, in the act of painting itself, becomes the representation of a pulsating world of unquenchable metaphors. This interpretation is supported by many later works that show extremely dense rhythmic spaces which at times approach psychedelia. The psychedelic aspect of Taaffe's painting appears in more recent works such as *Cairene Window II*, *Damascene Triangle I* (both from 2008) or *Flag* (2009), which we will return to later. *Ghost Still Life* (2000) is in fact dominated by a Mexican species of morning glory whose seeds are ingested in Mesoamerican civilisations for their hallucinogenic effects.

Looking again at the paintings inspired by Bridget Riley, we can see how, over time, Taaffe's use of waveforms prefigures an interest in optical spaces as metaphors for the ecstatic/meditative power of the image. After the eighties, paintings such as *Inner City* (1993), *Reef* (1999–2000), *Chasm* and *Rose Nocturne* (both from 2002), and *Unit of Direction* (2003), continue to explore these rhythmic, compositional, and symbolic ideas towards metaphorical, rather than appropriationist, ends. In all of these works, Taaffe transforms metaphors into visual images, and this becomes one of the defining aspects of his work.

Paintings such as *We Are Not Afraid*, *Queen of the Night*, or *Homo Fortissimus Excelsus* (all from 1985), reference Barnett Newman. One of the best examples of this can be seen in Taaffe's 1986 painting *Abraham and Isaac*. In these works and *Abraham and Isaac*, (1986), Taaffe transforms into ornamental twists the line that runs vertically through Newman's canvases (referred to as the 'zip' by the artist and, for a while, something of an emblem of abstract modernism). The intention behind this act has been much debated but clearly contains elements of both irony and homage. In relation to this, Taaffe himself declared: "I am interested in a sublimity which encourages laughter and delight in the face of profound uncertainty".<sup>6</sup> Looking back, however, I think it is even more relevant to highlight another aspect of the artist's versions of Newman's work, and that is the will to *read* abstract images. These paintings are, after all, representations of other paintings, only now the 'zips' have been transformed into garlands. Kay Heymer explains how Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* (1967), which led to Taaffe's *We Are Not Afraid* (1985), may have been inspired by a scene in Mike Nichols' film of Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), in which the protagonist, played by Elizabeth Taylor, is sitting on a swing. The division of space is very similar to Newman's composition, and Heymer suggests that in some way Taaffe is representing the rope that holds up the swing.<sup>7</sup> Also shared with Newman are the triangular formats that of late appear in Taaffe's works.

Taaffe has come to consider Abstract Expressionism as a repository of pictorial forms and ideas, which he uses in much the same way as he uses visual sources from diverse periods in history and diverse places around the world. For example in his snake paintings (*Snake Totem* or *Painting with King Snakes* from 1998), in which the reptiles are transformed into calligraphic forms, Taaffe refers to the drippings of Jackson Pollock's 'all-over' works, as well as to Arabic calligraphy. In another work, *Ahmed Mohamed* (1989), he superimposes Arabic calligraphy on an Adolph Gottlieb background. And *Old Cairo* (also from 1989) refers as much to Rothko as it does to Islamic ornamentation. One might add that Taaffe also carries on a number of Joan Miró's ideas, for example his constellation compositions, but transports them to the monumental formats of Abstract Expressionism. Taaffe's work can be seen as a continuation of Abstract Expressionism and not merely for the appropriation of some of its formal characteristics. This is certainly the case for Taaffe as regards Rothko and Newman, whose works are full of religious and transcendental connotations. Their great monochromatic expanses evoke the abstract sublime, continuing a Romantic tradition which includes Caspar David Friedrich and J. M. W. Turner.

Taaffe has also made versions of Ellsworth Kelly paintings where he fills the flat areas of colour with repeated ornamental motifs, e.g. *Nativity (Red/White)* (1986), and *Blue/Green* (1987). In so doing, Taaffe 'colonises' Kelly's spaces. In clearly suggesting an intention not merely concerned with form, the ornamental shapes grow like a coral reef, giving Kelly's forms a new life beyond the limits of formalism. The use of ornament soon becomes the most conspicuous aspect of Taaffe's work, as he develops his mature style towards the end of the eighties with works like *Intersecting Balustrades* (1987), a scaled rendering of a section of a wrought iron balustrade from the Jersey City Public Library. Although Taaffe has created other works inspired by wrought iron railings, e.g. *Onement* (1987) – a motif that also inspired Paul Klee when he visited Tunisia – he more often finds his subjects in old illustrated books. His library is certainly spectacular, almost Borgesian.

In 1989, having been invited to exhibit in Naples by the legendary gallery owner Lucio Amelio, Taaffe relocated to this city at the centre of Mediterranean culture, where one can observe the influence of many civilisations stacked on top of each other – a condition that undoubtedly interested him. Taaffe resided in Naples for almost four years. From Italy, he travelled to Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Morocco, India, and other places, developing a profound interest in Islamic art.

The beginning of the nineties saw a major new development: Taaffe started to introduce zoological and botanical motifs regularly into his work, with images that traced the development of natural history illustration from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, as much a subject for Taaffe as the imagery depicted. These images were often interwoven with other decorative and architectural elements, reflecting the interrelation between nature and art. At this point the basis of his visual language was consolidated, and ever since that time he has been adding further layers of complexity.

Philip Taaffe, *Calligraphic Study I*, 1996Calligraphy, Ottoman, 19<sup>th</sup> centuryPhilip Taaffe, *Blue/Green*, 1987Philip Taaffe, drawing for *Intersecting Balustrades*, 1987Paul Klee (1879–1940), *Structural I*, 1924. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Philip Taaffe, *Scarabesque*, 1993–94Philip Taaffe, *Chi-Chi Meets the Death of Painting*, 1985

The first of these more complexly layered paintings was *Scarabesque* (1993–94), a large horizontal frieze of images of Scarab beetles – the Egyptian symbol of resurrection and eternal life. In terms of its use of figurative elements, this has a precedent in the dogs depicted in *Chi-Chi Meets the Death of Painting* (1985).

Taaffe's interests are broad and his knowledge of the history of image making is encyclopaedic. His methods have allowed him to develop a body of work that is visually extremely rich and highly individual. He is capable of harmoniously intermingling diverse ideas and cultural phenomena in a very open, inclusive, and seductive way, that leaves room for irony and political commentary while remaining open to interpretation by the viewer.

On one occasion Taaffe spoke about his work as having a healing aspect, coming after a century of continual aesthetic ruptures. Yet for him style is not an end in itself. In a text published in 1998, shortly before the first works in the current exhibition were painted the artist explains:

I would say that to look at a painting means one is taken up with another reality, a pictorial fictive reality, and as such that picture represents an imaginary location. So if one is fed up with the mundane and pedestrian experiences of life, and instead stands in front of a painting, that is a place, an imaginary construction to inhabit with one's sensory being. To be lost inside of a painting is the crucial experience here, as an alternative to other places in the world.<sup>8</sup>

The often superimposed ornamental motifs that populate his canvases are a mechanism to transport us to another place, which is not necessarily a physical space, a characteristic shared by Islamic art and the art of Thailand, to give two examples. Raymond Foye wrote that Taaffe: "uses the decorative to inspire an awareness of the divine order behind the world of appearances."<sup>9</sup>

In early December 2010, I visited the artist at his New York studio and also attended a public conversation with the poet and art critic John Yau at Rutgers University (New Jersey). During this time I had the opportunity to speak to him in person about the selection of paintings for this exhibition; our conversation forms the basis for the following exploration of the semantic implications they convey.

## II.

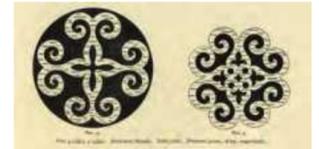
Between voice and echo infinite rains and crystals float

José Lezama Lima<sup>10</sup>

Philip Taaffe's paintings carry immediate references to other regions of space and time, yet in the same breath construct a language which is perfectly contemporary. In describing some of the artist's works one might start with those titles that refer to places – a regular occurrence with Taaffe. Words such as 'port', 'cape', 'passage', 'strait', in the titles of works in the present exhibition (and others such as 'canyon', 'archipelago', 'city', 'garden', 'megapolis') refer to the history of travel and the circulation of people, ideas, goods, and other cultural phenomena. Words such as 'sanctuary', 'reliquary', or 'cappella' refer to sacred places, and others, such as 'field station', to isolated places dedicated to scientific research. Bearing in mind these facts alone, it is not difficult to see Taaffe's work as a kind of universal quest, even though the locations described are sometimes imaginary.

Let us begin with *Porte Amur* (2001) (p. 51), which takes its name from the white shapes that dominate the composition. These ornamental motifs are patterns inspired by bark stencilling used by the people of the Amur River in Mongolia, one of the most northerly locations where Buddhism became established. The central pattern, which appears a further four times, in two instances inverted, looks something like the head of a deer, while the others are abstract. These white shapes cover almost the entire surface of the canvas with the exception of the upper section, which features a line of stylised vine leaves, giving the work a festive or Bacchic feel. The vine leaves and the Amur decorative patterns appear on different layers, the lower layers in darker colours. The effect of superimposing colours and forms is vibratory, like falling snow, and accentuates the rhythm of a composition based on repeated shapes, whose orientation occasionally changes. The background of the upper section is dark blue, giving it a vespertine air, and the warm red of the lower part suggests, perhaps, fire in a grate. As with many of Taaffe's works, everything is balanced symmetrically and has an architectural quality. It is as if we were looking at the elaborate door of an ancient temple built by a sophisticated civilisation now lost in the mists of time.

The composition of *Sanctuary* (2002) is dominated by petroglyph images (also known as rock engravings), some of which were used earlier in *Glyphic Field* (1998–99). Petroglyphs are found in distinct locations across the globe and some may be precursors to writing. They are considered symbolic and have profound cultural and religious significance. Some interpretations indicate that they were most likely made by shamans working in altered states of mind, although there is as yet no consensus on how certain geometric forms could have recurred in civilisations that had no contact with each other. The great Romanian historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, believed that coincidences in shamanic phenomena

Laufer, *Decorative Art of the Amur Tribes*, 1902Philip Taaffe, *Amur Field*, 2009Philip Taaffe, *Glyphic Frieze*, 2003Antonio Núñez Jiménez, *Petroglifos del Peru*, Havana, 1986

have to do with primordial and even genetic realities and “belong to man as such and not to man as a historical being.”<sup>11</sup>

Some of the predominant forms in *Sanctuary* are stylised images of birds and women with elongated arms. Beneath these reddish and earthy coloured forms there are other more abstract blue shapes, and on a level lower still one can make out mosses and ferns. The whole ensemble is dark with muted and humid tones and is clearly evocative of a sacred cave, with the symbolic suggestion that caves form passages and entrances to other subterranean worlds. The rectangular format and large scale of the work gives it an enveloping quality. The curved forms seem to move slowly, and the different layers suggest depth. Everything is ritualised and secret.

*Field Station* (2003) takes its name from the places where botanists and naturalists set up camp out of doors while doing research. The background of charcoal lines drawn directly on the canvas and oil paint in muted primary colours is overprinted in green with images of Indian fodder grasses pressed against the coloured background. The upper layer is a lattice of bands of ornamental black and white shapes that suggest an observation station set up to examine the vegetation in the background. The lattice is made up of four bands. The lower one comprises three elements and the three upper bands two. In the second and third, the forms are black or white; on the upper level they are both black and white. It is a mysterious work that both reveals and conceals. Once again, the metaphor of looking into the depths of things, through the lattice is made visual.

*Asuka Passage* (2006) refers to the site in Japan of the oldest surviving wooden constructions in the world – some very early Buddhist temples. The largest shapes in this work are a series of flaming Buddhist aureoles of perforated bronze. These appear over and beneath a rhythmic series of curved forms which, in combination with the yellow and orange tones, give the whole a fiery appearance, suggesting Buddhist illumination.

*Cape Siren* (2007) is the fourth in a series of paintings that have fictive capes in their titles. All of them feature decorative motifs used by the natives of western Canada, a zone full of capes. Forms from this shamanic culture are alternated with Chinese heads and mermaid and siren heads (hence the title) of Greco-Roman origin. The whole has a totemic feel to it – the thin, vertical totem format is one which appears regularly throughout the artist’s work.

*Port of Saints* (2007) takes its title from a book by William S. Burroughs, and is dominated by gold leaf lino carvings of curves borrowed from Islamic decoration. The painting has a cosmic dimension depicting a sky filled with Islamic stars, with decorative work below taken from the *mihrab*, or prayer niche, of a mosque. The gilded curves undulate and shimmer, making the work dynamic and Dionysian. The Burroughs reference is not by chance, nor simply a result of their collaborating on a catalogue.<sup>12</sup> The ‘cut-up’ technique invented by the author whereby texts are cut up and later strung together again to exploit the expressive possibilities of chance and unforeseen juxtapositions, has a clear connection with Taaffe’s work.



Illustration of the Indigenous Fodder Grasses of the Plains of North-Western India. Nature-Printed at the Thomason Civil Engineering College Press, Roorkee, 1886. Plate XXXIX



Seiroku Noma: Ancient Japanese Gilt Bronze Buddhas Formerly in the Imperial Collection. Benrido Co., Ltd., Kyoto, 1952. Plate 116



Cape Siren Figure illustration, Dietrich Reimer (Ernst Vohsen), Berlin, 1913

The painting *Artificial Paradise (Loculus)* (2008) refers to the French poet Charles Baudelaire’s book on the use of mind-altering substances. Images of seeds, ferns, corals, cacti, and echinoderms float over a black background, reminiscent of Miró’s constellation compositions and also, more obliquely, of his spiritual *Self-Portrait II* (1938) in Detroit. The colours used are almost fluorescent, bringing to mind fireworks or pulsing energy points. While making it, the artist was thinking of the atmospheric electrical phenomenon known as Saint Elmo’s fire that sometimes occurs on ships during storms. Normally it blazes violet and blue and appears on masts accompanied by a buzzing sound. Originally the phenomenon was considered mysterious and of divine origin.

In summary, all of the works mentioned above emphasise the concept of painting as a mechanism or point of entry to another dimension. This is achieved through decorative motifs which are themselves crystallisations of energies and modes of thought and metaphors for ecstatic trance.

There is a further large body of work that contains botanical references. *Devonian Leaves* (2004) is a floating, constellation-like arrangement of images of fossilised leaves from extinct plants of another geological epoch. The enamel marbled background gives the work a magma-like quality, bringing to mind the Big Bang and the origins of the universe. In some ways it is also an ecological work, in that the leaves depicted are already victims of history and evolution. The irregular white band in the upper part of the painting gives the work a glacial appearance, suggesting the conditions for how these plants might have become extinct.

*Composition with Shells and Algae* (2005) depicts exactly what its name suggests: superimposed shells and seaweed in a celebration of the possibilities of abundance. The artist explains how he made this work after seeing some photographs of the Convento de Cristo of Diogo Arruda in Tomar, Portugal, built in the Manueline style. This particularly exuberant Baroque style evolved with a knowledge of the architecture of South Indian temples, the Portuguese having taken Goa not long before. Both Indian and Portuguese temples exhibit something of the exuberance of tropical vegetation.

The botanical references continue with *Dryadic Figures* (2006). The dryads referred to in the title are tree nymphs. Dryads were said to live inside trees and risk death if they strayed too far from them. The five nymphs suggested by the vertical shapes in the work are made of bark patterns from the giant Douglas fir, trees being symbolic of life and growth in many cultures. These bark columns are decorated with motifs taken from a German cabinet-making manual and with distaffs from ancient looms. The lower part of the work, which we can read as the earth, is green, as are the grasses growing on it, while the blue starry sky employs star shapes from Egyptian funerary paintings on tomb ceilings in the spectacular Valley of the Kings.

Other paintings have more abstract titles that merely refer to the pictorial elements in each composition. For example, in *Abstract Painting (Vipera russelli)* (2002), the motifs that Taaffe uses (nine times) are the snakes referred to in the title, a particularly venomous specimen.



Joan Miró, (1893–1983), *Ciphers and Constellations in Love with a Woman*, 1941. Gift of Mrs. Gilbert W. Chapman, 1953.338, The Art Institute of Chicago



Constantin Ritter von Ettingshausen, *Leaf-Skeletons of Dicotyledons*, Vienna, 1861



Diogo de Arruda, Convento de Cristo, Tomar, Portugal, c. 1510



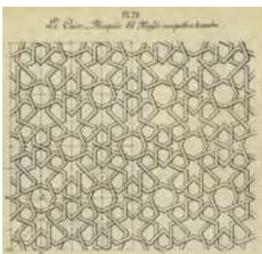
Jasper Johns (b. 1930), *Painting Bitten by a Man*, 1961. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)



Cosmati work, Monreale Cathedral



Detail from Wladyslaw Duczko, *The Filigree and Granulation Work of the Viking Period*, Stockholm, 1985



J. Collin, *Étude Pratique de la Décoration Polygonale Arabe*, Paris, c.1920

The background is made using lithographic ink on glass transferred to paper sheets that are collaged to the canvas. A tension is produced in the work between the celestial, i.e. the blue, and the earthly, and also between the calligraphic snakes and the lithographic marks in the background.

*Painting with Teeth* (2002), by contrast, shows six vertical, decorated columns composed of representations of neatly ordered teeth that, again, refer clearly to tribal totem poles. Teeth (and skulls) are a motif Taaffe had already used in *The Sorcerer's Apron* (1998–99), a work that, according to the artist, was inspired by a short story by Georges Bataille, which refers to a painting comprised entirely of teeth. Later, the artist noted an unintended reference to Jasper Johns' *Painting Bitten by a Man* (1961) in the MoMA collection. The title of the earlier teeth painting also refers to magical Tibetan aprons worn by shamans during a wrathful dance, as part of a Tantric initiation ceremony. Again there are parallels here between Taaffe and Johns, the latter painting a series of works entitled *Tantric Detail* at the beginning of the eighties in which skulls and scrota appear over a decorative background.

The titles of other works refer to different forms of decoration. *Cosmati* (2007) is the name of a Roman family who, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, invented decorative, geometric designs for church floor mosaics using tiny triangular and rectangular pieces of stone and coloured glass. The painting has a varnished, shiny surface. *Viking Filigree Totem* (2008) belongs to a large series of works that use a vertical format in the form of a totem pole, although in this case the painting is much wider. Once again, these works lead us to think immediately of primitive and tribal art. The imagery in this canvas comes from a book about Viking filigree work. The book includes detailed close-ups reminiscent of bacteria or other biological specimens. Taaffe uses these here for the background. The dark tones give it a medical or scientific quality like images seen through a microscope.

*Painting with Byzantine Fragments* (2008) is an unusually monochromatic work. In making it the artist took images from books on the archaeology of early Christianity and its architecture in Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt. The artist re-sized and carefully re-drew these elements using an antiquated and labour-intensive resist technique of stopping-out, using grease crayon and shellac, on silkscreens that were later printed.

Lastly, the works *Damascene Triangle I*, *Cairene Window II* (both from 2008), and *Flag* (2009), belong to a recent series where Islamic decorative elements from a French book entitled *Étude Pratique de la Décoration Polygonale Arabe* are superimposed on backgrounds of saturated colours made using *orizomegami*, a Japanese craft of folding and dying paper. Taaffe was fascinated by the fact that both techniques originate in the eleventh century, a time when pre-geometricised Islamic art still retained a closeness to imagery from nature. These works are not about mixing styles and cultures freely, but are the product of patient observation of historical instances where visual epiphanies are brought into concrete existence – all viewed and recombined by the artist through the lens of the Western tradition of abstraction. As we have seen, superimposing geometric structures over unbridled

multicoloured backgrounds is a method that Taaffe uses often, exemplifying the contrast between Classical and Romantic and between Apollo and Dionysus. Both the ordered geometry of the surface and the luminous chaos of the background are composed of motifs that could extend to infinity, suggesting a tension that cannot be resolved. With regard to his use of decorative elements, Taaffe has said:

Decoration is usually derived from a local natural situation; it can epitomize the lush quality of, let's say, palms or lotus flowers or jungle overgrowth.

Decoration in this sense is a kind of culturalized representation of nature. It's closest to the raw elements that reflect a very specific geographical situation in historical time. The importance of it for me is that I can have these circumstances of time and place in a crystalline form, and I can feel those realities, feel the history that they inevitably speak about in this natural cultural sense (...). I primarily want to feel the living reality of these elements, and to respond to them in a personal way by making a composition that allows these other voices to speak again in a way that I've understood and responded to. These voices are part of this lived experience represented by decoration, and I would like those voices to share a dialogue with the formulations that I produce. The fact that one can repeat something in order to achieve a dynamic synthesis, a sort of crescendo of decoration – having this possibility of tempo, change and restructuring – means that these voices can be amplified and joined together in a way that I couldn't have anticipated. And I want to see, I want to hear, I want to experience this ... I don't use them [these images and decorative fragments] only because they are interesting or exotic forms, or because they can be used in a certain way structurally or formally. It's always a matter of feeling ... and shaping something out of that enthusiasm, that passion.<sup>13</sup>

In recent years the artist developed two important series on paper using the specific techniques (that reflect the use of the traditional to form something altogether new) of paper marbling and decalcomania. Marbling was most likely invented in China during the Tang dynasty before passing to Japan. In both countries marbling was associated with divination, and later, in Europe, it had links to alchemy. The backgrounds of paintings such as *Devonian Leaves* (2004), *Porte Amur* (2004), and *Plinth* (2006) use marbling on paper collaged onto canvas. It is easy to imagine why Taaffe is interested in this manner of working. With it the artist is able to attain visually rich effects, bringing to life the conflict between order and chaos and the tension between what is visible and what is hidden. Decalcomania was used especially by Spanish surrealist painter Óscar Domínguez in the beginning of the twentieth century. Taaffe used decalcomania to produce a great number of works on paper during the summers of 2007, 2008, and 2009. The resulting images are complex and mysterious and feature symmetrical frameworks with skulls, spirals, and vegetation, suggesting dreamlike, hermetic, and psychedelic ideas.



Cosmati mosaic pattern, *Le Décor Géométrique de la Mosaïque Romaine*, Paris, 1985



Philip Taaffe, *Orizomegami drawing with linocut overprinting*, (detail)



Philip Taaffe, *Untitled*, 2003

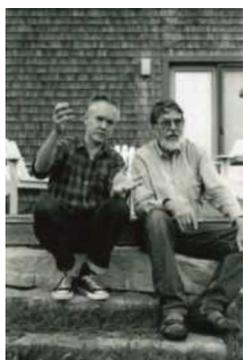


Philip Taaffe, *Gravinia*, 2008

## III.

In this rite the Great Magician stirs in His dream,  
 and the magician dreaming murmurs to his beloved:  
*thou art so near to me*  
*thou art a phantom that the heart*  
*would see –*  
 and now the great river of their feeling grows so wide  
 its shores grow distant and unreal.

Robert Duncan<sup>14</sup>



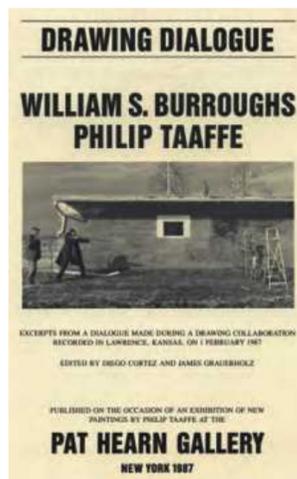
Philip Taaffe and Robert Creeley,  
 Waldoboro, Maine, 1999

William Butler Yeats is perhaps the most famous poet from the previous century to be associated with esoteric traditions. Alongside a rich lode of Celtic myths (the texts of which had been translated into English not long before his birth), this spiritual ancestry served the development of his original visionary poetry. In the words of Daniel Albright:

As a poet, Yeats hoped to subvert a language created for the description of the everyday world, in order to embody visions of the extraterrestrial ... Yeats's poetry shows a lifelong search for such images, images that were not reflections but illuminations ... he came to the conclusion that there was in fact one source, a universal warehouse of images that he called the Anima Mundi, the Soul of the World.<sup>15</sup>

I believe this text has particular resonance with the painting of Philip Taaffe, an artist who seeks the radiant points of energy in decorative motifs from all epochs to create hypnotic and pulsating images that invite us to enter meditative trances and the gateway to paradise.

Taaffe's art also brings to my mind the work of the great Cuban writer José Lezama Lima. He was one of the greatest twentieth-century poets writing in Spanish, yet his work is relatively unknown in the English-speaking world (although perhaps it is worth noting that he maintained an important correspondence with Wallace Stevens). Lezama cultivated a language – a poetic system – to understand the world in which everything must be invented anew through imagery. These poetic images are the manifestations of an invisible world, and grant us access to what Lezama called “the imaginary eras”, a universe of signs and possible meanings. For him, culture was not an historical moment but rather the coexistence of images in a landscape. The manifestation of these images creates opportunities for chance, coincidence, and unexpected connections rather than historically located meaning. In transporting the culture of our time to an imaginary era, Western teleology and European time/logic are made redundant and a new version of history yields to the poetry of his Latin-American roots. Here poetry is a magical act that allows one to enter into the flux of things, into all eternity simultaneously. Thus the poet becomes a shaman whose body is

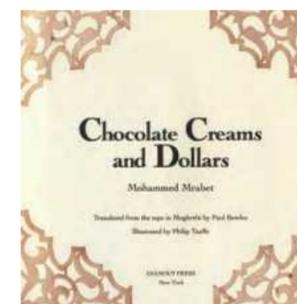
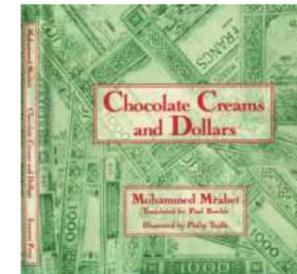


*Drawing Dialogue*, William S. Burroughs and  
 Philip Taaffe, 1987

transformed into an eternal flow of imagery that transcends physical constraints. For Lezama poesis is an act of release. In *Confluencias*, one of his most renowned essays, Lezama describes the poet as a being who waits for the night to cover him completely. The night is black, vast like the sea and full of voices. Gradually, the sea and the night become one, indistinguishable from the breathing and concentration of the poet, who becomes transformed into an organic flow of imagery. All of this I see in a painting such as *Artificial Paradise (Loculus)* (2008).

This year an unusual book by another poet has been published in full for the first time: *The H.D. Book* (2011) by the American, Robert Duncan.<sup>16</sup> Like Yeats and Taaffe, Duncan was interested in obscure traditions. The book in question is a reflection on the work of H.D. and other modern poets that develops into an extensive treatise on poetry. Duncan maintains that “the poet’s craft is to bring what is hidden to our attention while honoring its hiddenness”.<sup>17</sup> For Duncan, whose own poetry is not only a vivid representation of sensations but also evocatively scratches beneath the surface, the poet’s craft is completely bound up with the sense that craft itself is something that emerges from the work as a permanent fact, albeit obliquely at times. Every artist must find his or her own way of making meaning visible. Contemplating Philip Taaffe’s work, I feel that these notions resonate with the artist, who (to mention one final literary reference) has expressed an interest in Charles Olson.<sup>18</sup> Also a poet, Olson is credited with coining the term postmodern; his tremendously ambitious work is very dense in cultural and historical references. Taaffe’s open work has always attracted the attention of writers. William S. Burroughs, Robert Creeley, Vincent Katz, Rene Ricard, Mohammed Mrabet, Gore Vidal, Marina Warner, Edmund White, Peter Lamborn Wilson, and John Yau have all written about or collaborated with him. This is due to the fact that his work is complex and suggestive in an artistic scene where the critical essay – theoretical and sociological – has asserted its authority over poetry.

Some days before I began writing this text, I had the opportunity to see *Film Socialism*, the most recent film by French-Swiss director Jean-Luc Godard. The work feels like a testament of sorts, and in fact Godard has announced that it will be his final picture. The film is shot entirely in digital and features stunning images and colours as well as a moving soundtrack. The narrative is non-linear, portraying a series of interconnected stories. Despite there being no clear plot, the film deals with some of Godard’s constant obsessions, e.g. the Spanish Civil War, the concentration camps, and Palestine, as well as with cinema itself. Godard tasks himself with inventing a language capable of developing all of these themes in a precise way, in a historical period characterized by information overload and the impossibility of knowing or including everything. *Film Socialism* is also a very intimate, calm, and reflective film. Among its innovations is the decorative and aesthetic treatment of the subtitles in the English version. The overall effect is hypnotic and filled with references to history, culture, and political conflict, in Europe especially but also throughout the Mediterranean. Contemplating this film, with its rhythmic editing and metalinguistic references, I could not help thinking



Mohammed Mrabet, *Chocolate Creams and Dollars*, New York, 1992

of the work of Philip Taaffe, its way of being historical and outside history at the same time, its radical will to discover a unique language capable of incorporating the personal and the political. His respect and love for the medium in which he works sets him apart from much of today's anti-artistic and cynical art practice, exhausted by the impossibility of doing anything new, beyond dragging old ideas from the archives. To my mind, both artists, as well as Yeats, Lezama, Duncan, and Olson – and of course all of the tradition of abstraction referred to throughout this text – remain radically moving and absolutely essential.

1

William B. Yeats, "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" (1900) from *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 94–95.

2

Thomas McEvilley, *The Triumph of Anti-Art* (New York: McPherson & Company, 2005).

3

*Post Abstract Abstraction*, Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield (1987); *Similia/Disimilia: Modes of Abstraction in Painting, Sculpture and Photography Today*, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (1987); *Psychological Abstraction*, Deste Foundation, Athens (1989); *Strange Abstraction*, Touko Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (1991); *The Broken Mirror*, Kunsthalle, Vienna (1993); *Italia/America: Abstraction Redefined*, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, San Marino (1993); *Unbound: Possibilities in Painting*, Hayward Gallery, London (1994); *The Adventure of Painting*, Kunstverein für Rheinlande, Düsseldorf (1995); and *New Abstractions*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid (1996).

4

I curated both Taaffe's retrospective at the IVAM and the "New Abstractions" group exhibition in Madrid. The latter show traveled to Bielefeld, Germany, and Barcelona.

5

Ross Bleckner, *Philip Taaffe* (New York: Pat Hearn Gallery, 1986).

6

Philip Taaffe, "Sublimity Now and Forever, Amen," *Arts Magazine* (March 1986), 19.

7

Kay Heymer, "On the Development of the Pictorial Work of Philip Taaffe," in *Philip Taaffe. The Life of Forms, Works 1980–2008*, (Wolfsburg: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, 2008), 17.

8

Philip Taaffe, "A Conversation with Stan Brakhage," in *Philip Taaffe: Composite Nature* (New York: Peter Blum Edition, 1998), 110.

9

Raymond Foye, "The Alchemical Image," in *The Heavenly Tree Grows Downward* (New York: James Cohan Gallery, 2002), 47.

10

José Lezama Lima, "Cuadernos Americanos," Issue 53/54, Mexico, 246.

11

Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, translated by Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964).

12

William S. Burroughs and Philip Taaffe, *Drawing Dialogue* (New York: Pat Hearn Gallery, 1987).

13

Shirley Kaneda, "Interview with Philip Taaffe," *Bomb* (Spring 1991).

14

Robert Duncan, "Transgressing the Real," passages 27, in *Bending the Bow* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 121.

15

Daniel Albright, Introduction to William B. Yeats, *The Poems* (London: Everyman's Library, 1992), XXI–XXIII, XLI.

...Each human soul could attune itself to revelation, to miracle, because each partook in the world's general soul ... Yeats tried to discipline his imagination to cultivate a detachment from the normal world, to smooth and empty his mind until it could flame with images from the world beyond our own ... he favoured images of extravagance ... All the mind's eye needs is a slight adjustment of focus, and paradise is right there ... Yeats was equally excited by the notion that amazing energies, at once artistic and sexual, could be whirled into tight focus, brought to bear on one small spot. Yeats's poetry continually strives to embody the processes through which the imagination receives images, as if a poem could be a funnel delivering symbols from the Anima Mundi.

16

Robert Duncan, *The H.D. Book* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). An extensive reflection on the work of the American poet, novelist and memoirist Hilda Doolittle, better known as H.D., and other modern poets which develops into a broader thesis on poetry, hermeticism, and modernism.

17

Michael Boughn and Victor Coleman, Introduction to *ibid.*, 7.

18

Robert Creeley and Philip Taaffe, "Conversation," in *Philip Taaffe* (Valencia: IVAM, 2000), 158–161.