

# Philip Taaffe

*You were telling me about your rather splendid, cavernous studio, with multiple antechambers and hidden corners ...*

It used to be a schoolhouse for Afghan immigrants. The school was closed down in the late '70s.

*How did you find it?*

I was living in Italy, and moved back to New York in 1991. New York was very different at that time, and there were spaces such as this available. After the school closed, a courier service took it over. They had fiber-optic cables running under the floor and dropped ceilings with offices everywhere. I came here with the real estate agent and we were popping sticks up through the dropped ceilings and I saw that it had a lot of potential. The windows were bricked up and everything was completely hidden. I spent about half a year doing renovation work before I moved in.

*Do you not find it a desecration, what has been done to New York by so-called developers?*

Certainly! The one thing that you can rely on in New York City is that it will always change. It always seems to be a transient situation. New York is a place that has no culture of its own. Many cultures come to New York and shape their own reality. It's the kind of place you have to shape yourself.

*For a place that has no culture of its own, it's doing well at being the center of contemporary culture for the whole universe, don't you think?*

I meant from a more holistic standpoint. Paris is Parisian, London is a cosmopolitan city but it's still very British, Rome is a very Italian place. New York is American and it's an international city, but it's very prismatic.

*Leaving aside London, Paris and Rome don't have any contemporary art worth going to look at.*

Maybe that's why contemporary art thrives here. We get very little support and recognition when you think about it, though. Artists are the creative force. They discover a situation and then they get shoved to the side. They get used.

*I was at a dinner last night with lots of developers. They all love to be taken for art patrons or collectors. Oftentimes I see developers using artists as communities to exfiltrate culture and impart some kind of ...*

Legitimacy to their plundering of a place? They need legitimacy.

*Talking of legitimacy, you've been called one of the most significant painters to have emerged from the postmodernist 1980s. How do you define postmodernism?*

Modernism has been the history of rupture and of precedent-breaking activity. Now, in the postmodern period, it's necessary to re-evaluate the modernist programme.

*So in effect postmodernism is a diacritical diatribe about what modernism was.*

Artists quietly go about shaping new reality, doing the hard thinking and the hard work. It's about transporting soul and mind to people. Art can point the way toward something that needs to happen.

*You were born in 1955 in New Jersey. Then you traveled widely, to the Middle East, India, South America, Morocco. You lived and practiced art for several years in Naples. Can you explain why you are who you are and why your art is where it is?*

My roots are Celtic Ireland, and I've often described my activities as shamanic. During the making of a painting, I feel as though I'm living out a previous existence, an ancient existence. So I see my activity as trying to summon these ancient forces coming from deep within my own DNA. There're a lot of decisions that have to be made, but during the activity of shaping something it's important for me to try to summon this previous existence. It goes back a lot further than 1955.

*So in effect you see yourself as a reincarnation of a spirit trying to reinterpret an art form?*

In the Jungian sense, there are archetypes that pre-exist within us, and we have the capacity to tap into this ancestral behavior and thinking. You asked a provocative question so I'm trying to give you the best response I possibly can ... I don't understand a lot of contemporary art. I tolerate it, I contend with it intellectually, and I see it as part of socio-cultural discourse, but I question a lot of what gets done, and that's a healthy thing. We're supposed to question one another. We're supposed to be critical of culture at large.

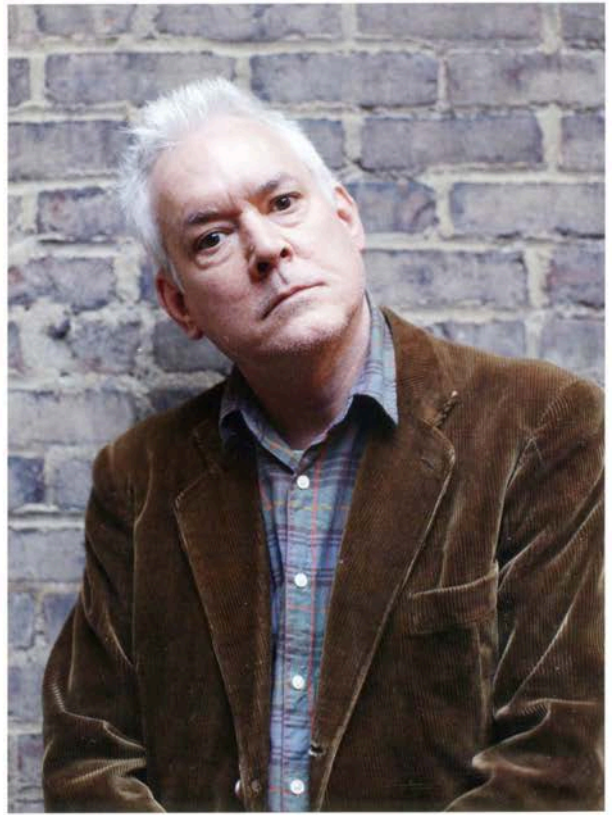
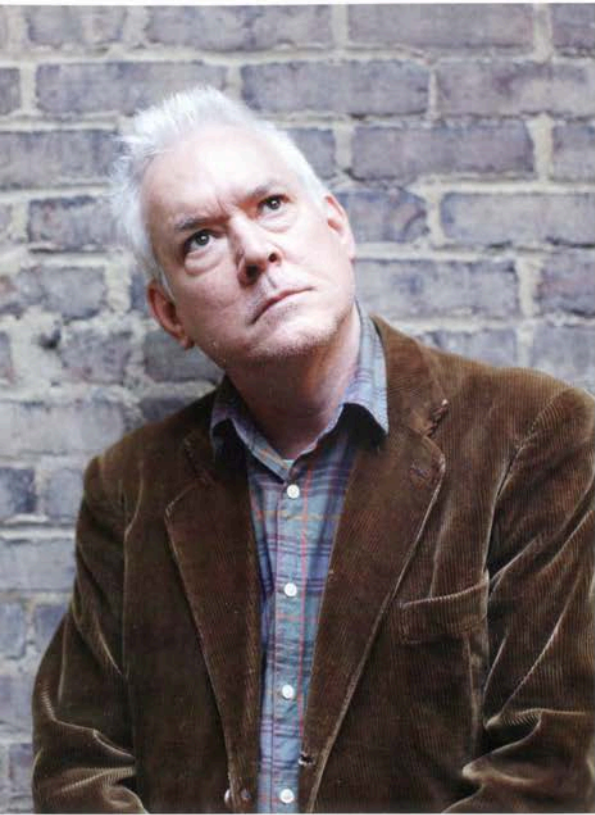
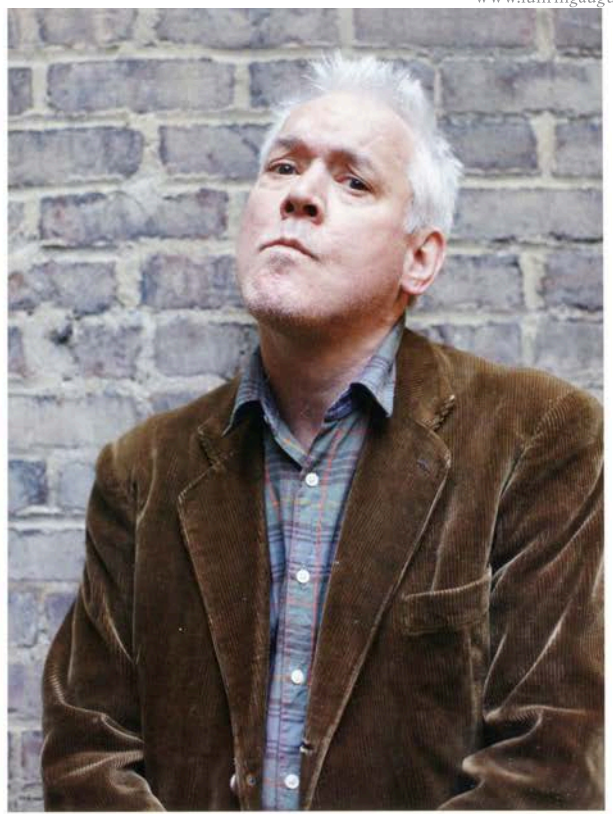
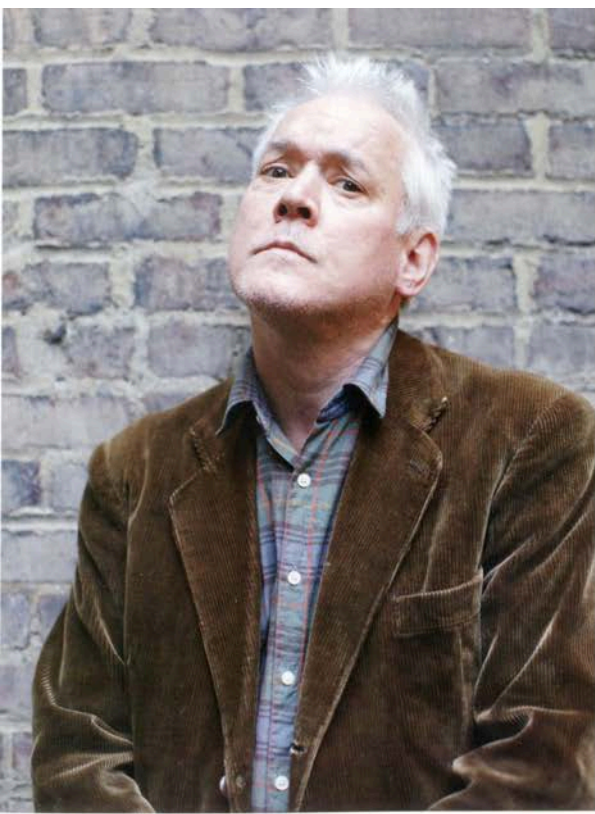
*Do you feel threatened by some of this conceptual mumbo jumbo?*

I'm more of a poetic thinker. True poetry, true art, is unassailable if it's genuine, if it's sincere, if it's coming out of a strong personal position and belief system.

*I see you as a cerebral artist. Can you say more about your thinking process?*

I start with a gesture or a sign, with an image, or I often start with a period of research. When I travel, I find things. I take pictures, I come back. I start to use the things I've found, and as I'm using them other things begin to occur to me. The result leads to further deliberation and speculation as to what needs to be added. I like layer upon layer of imagery and information.

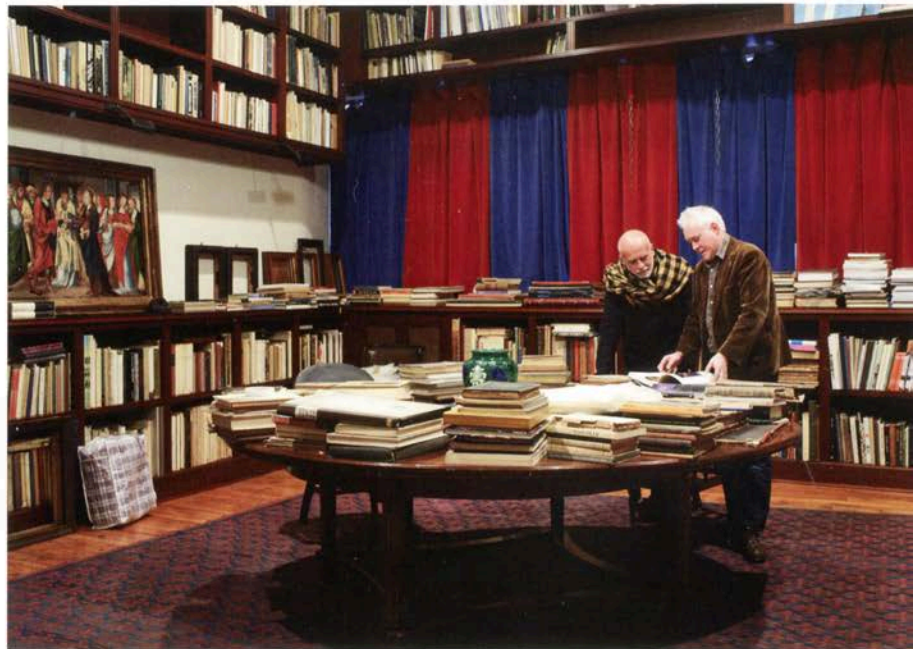
Even though the surface of my painting is very thin, that's illusory. The layering takes place almost like a piece of old film stock made up of minuscule layers of color. You shine light through the film and you get this image. My paintings are cinematic in that sense. They're very impacted.





The studio (above) that Philip Taaffe has rented for the past twenty-one years was part of a school for the Afghan community in Midtown Manhattan. Taaffe and Francesco Clemente (right), close friends, in the studio library. "You can always trust an artist to guide you to another artist," says Taaffe

Taaffe among the luxuriant ferns (facing page) that he grows in his studio, the plants serving as inspiration for his paintings and prints



*You're almost saying that your art is you shining light through canvas.*

That's a beautiful way of putting it. Painting is about light, no? It's about internal light and about the light that emanates from the picture plane. So my consciousness is manipulating the light coming forth from the picture to ignite the light in other people's minds.

*Say you were at the court of Nebuchadnezzar, and you were commanded to make a portrait of this mass murderer or great man, whichever. Where would you start?*

You're playing a historical trick on me! If I were to have been in that situation, I would have been a court painter.

*A court lackey?*

You think that's a fair question? I would like to think that my ancient incarnation would have been heroic, but I would probably have ended up toeing the line. Out of my instinct for self-preservation, I would probably have done what was expected of me. I don't think there was much in the way of avant-garde art at that time.

*You've suggested that art and politics are one and the same, and that an artist can be an activist. How else can an artist be defined?*

The artist is the ideal *flâneur* because you sit around and you make observations and you take notes and you're alive to the world. People today need that kind of role model because they are obsessed with all kinds of silly things, doing a lot of busywork that doesn't lead anywhere. In fact there's very little work to be done; there are more and more people with less and less to do. Artists have a cultural/political role to play in this big issue of our time, which is: What do we do? Art doesn't have always to be about rupture, which was the avant-garde modernist program. Art can involve healing and regeneration.

*You've talked about needing to move forward to explore new territory. Every time you begin a painting, are you entering a danger zone?*

I feel as though I'm entering a situation where there are hidden codes that have to be broken. It's often a deciphering process.

*And painting can lead to new ideas about life as well, yes?*

One would hope so.

*What new ideas would they be?*

That there's the possibility of discovering transcendent emotional realms of beauty, consciousness, intelligence that other human beings have tried hard to bring into existence, and that that can be shared and can lead to a more elevated understanding of what it means to be human. That, in spite of all the evil and ugliness and greed and horror, we can find true loveliness and grace.

*You've been quoted as saying, "I'm trying to make a primitive painting. I'm trying to summon up the archaic." Are you looking all the way back to cave painting?*

I like raw pictorial situations. I'm a big fan of the Romanesque. I like early illuminated manuscript painting; I like certain Fauvist work; I like Abstract Expressionism; I like a lot of so-called "primitive" gestural stuff. My least favorite century is the nineteenth – until the beginning of modernism, because Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin were struggling against Academicism, against refinement, against polish.

*When you've talked about the paintings of Brice Marden, for example, you've referenced what you've called their "religious basis". What is it that interests you there exactly?*

I come at art from a monastic standpoint. That's a romantic notion, the idea of the sole practitioner, but it is true, isn't it? I work with a couple of assistants a little bit, but art is a solitary, concentrated effort.

I'm interested in the profoundly human. Religion has to do with binding ourselves to the most profoundly human experience imaginable. That's what we will never get rid of in spite of the efforts of religious communities to undermine humanity. We need this under-girding, and religion can help with that.

*Does art do that as well?*

It's supposed to. It's an alternative to sensory deprivation and globalization.

