

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

ArtSeen

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## SUSPENDED TURNS On Philip Taaffe's "Sardica II" (2013)

by Jarrett Earnest

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Philip Taaffe's new paintings press your face up against a fence, and, like the first line of *The Sound and the Fury*, leave you looking "between curling flower spaces." Each piece presents two distinct planes: one is firmly on top of the other—or rather, one is clearly *closer* to you, a relationship held in place by collage technique which *suspends* figures over the ground. Taaffe screens images onto the face of very thin paper with color gradients painted on the backside, transforming each shape into a translucent membrane. These cutout pieces are then pasted into niches carefully carved out by violet floral patterning. Gentle washes of color are applied, licking up to the collaged edges, giving them a subtle shiver that hums the foreground forward.

In "Sardica II" (2013) these collage elements create the all-over latticework of an iron gate. As it turns out, the images come from ethnographic photographs of ritual breads of the Balkans, though they could easily pass for carved stone or metal jewelry: dough to vine to stone to iron—to photograph to painting. It is a composition in the musical sense: a study in visual rhythm. There are 12 of these bread-figures on the canvas, two rows of six in gridded alignment. Naturally they divide into side-by-side couples, like chromosomes, yet within this general structure multiple rhythms are created by repetition and inversion of color and shape. For instance, the 12 figures are taken from only three different photographs, which we might label *a*, *b* and *c*. Bread *a* is repeated six times, *b* appears four, and *c* only



Philip Taaffe, "Sardica II," 2013. Mixed media on canvas 55 1/2 X 80". Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

two. Taaffe embeds rhyme into this basic vocabulary by including inversions of each: for our purposes, *e*, *q* and *ɔ*. Using these symbols we could chart the basic visual structure of the composition as:

*a b / e e / c q*  
*ɔ e / b b / e a*

Just on the level of the shapes, you can see how sophisticated and pleasurable the mounting rhythms are—the way the identical reiteration of the central pair echoes above and below, setting off a formal call-and-response across the rest of the canvas. Each pair has its own relationship—there are no repeats—but whenever you expect symmetry or a reflecting axis, there is a variation that sends you zipping somewhere else. For example, the *a* and *b* create an undulating double-helix horizontally, which is, incidentally, the shape of the breads themselves, orientated the other way.

The second layer to this is the color, which brings incomparable nuance and complication. Each bread image is divided in half by two icy underlying hues, either pink and green, or pink and blue. The descriptive lines printed on the paper's surface are in corresponding dark ink—red and dark blue respectively, with the meeting becoming a kind of plum. Sometimes, as in the upper left and lower right couplets, matching colors face one another, creating a band between them (such as pink-blue / blue-pink). Other times, this happens and makes new pairs out of already-married neighbors. Blue-pink throbs all the way across the lower level, and in this way alternating currents charge the whole painting.

All this is to say that these paintings have a lot to do with time, because that is what it takes for complicated formations like this to unfold—which they do with increasing excitement the longer you engage them. I would like to make clear, though, that the paintings have no movement; they are *about* movement. As in most of his new paintings, in "Sardica II" Taaffe gives us a suspended yet ever-imminent present—a schema for potential movement, like a Twister mat or, more precisely, diagrams for Baroque court dances. The artist suggests the choreography, but it takes people doing it to make the fun begin. Here, looking is structured as an exciting social activity, and as Taaffe's knowing excavation of historical images alludes, an intergenerational one stretching across civilizations and centuries.

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