

Philip Taaffe

interview: 'Painting is about capturing light'

Philip Taaffe's latest allover paintings are inspired by the war in Syria and the brilliance of Matisse

By Paul Laster

Posted: Tuesday January 13 2015



Photograph: **Raymond Foye**: Philip Taaffe in his studio

One of the most significant American painters of his generation, [Philip Taaffe](#) has been exhibiting on the international art world stage since the early-1980s. A master of mechanical processes of reproduction, Taaffe mixes cross-cultural references to make layered artworks that bring the past into the present. With his upcoming show of new, large-scale canvases at [Luhring Augustine](#) in [Bushwick](#), opening Sat 17, Taaffe shared his thoughts about the role of ritual in art and his debt to the French master of the cutout.

What does painting mean to you?

It's a personal artistic interaction with the history of images and a way of creating an intimate pictorial reality that can be shared with the world.

Would you describe your approach as ritualistic?

Absolutely. I often think of painting as a liturgical practice—as a form of sacred theater.

You recently wrote an essay on Matisse's cutouts, in which you state how they're "as brilliant for their economy of means as they are for their vibrancy and energy of expression." You also singled out their razor-sharpness and crystalline quality of light.

How do these qualities apply to your own work?

I use a limited vocabulary of signs or elements to come up with something that creates a unified, thematic core. And for me, razor sharpness creates a sense of scale or the perception of infinitude. It corresponds to how we use our eyes in the shifting of focus and emphasis. As for light, painting is primarily about capturing it which is critical to the power of a work. Light is the crux of the matter.

You also use the term "contrasting velocities" to describe Matisse's execution of cutouts, as they unfolded over time. What do you mean by that?

I'm referring to the ritualistic aspect of making work, which I mentioned earlier. There's a rhythm between intense periods of activity on the one hand and moments of deliberation on the other. But the work always gains strength and resolution, even when nothing is happening to it.

Does research play a part in how you proceed?

It's a big part of the work. I'm always looking for new elements to introduce into the paintings. In fact, I'd say that art is visual research, period.

So what are some of the things being explored in this new work?

I visited the Syrian city of Aleppo once a long time ago, and I've been quite disturbed by its

destruction due to the conflict there and other parts of the Middle East. I've dedicated one painting, *Nocturne with Architectural Fragments*, to the people in Aleppo who've suffered such a decimation of their cultural and historical heritage.

Anything else?

There's another painting depicting an imaginary fountain that includes details taken from 11th- and 12th-century English monasteries. It's also about the loss of architectural and religious heritage, which is happening throughout the world. I'm meditating on that concern quite extensively in this work.

What about your use of spirals in some of the new works? They seem to be an important motif.

The spirals represent a kind of symbol of memory and history. For the Mayans the spiral was the symbol for the eye and the eye is what we use to observe and remember things. So it has to do with preserving the past while looking toward the future and understanding so we can move forward in a constructive way.

You often refer to painting as a journey. How has your own journey progressed over time, especially since turning 60?

I've always tried to avoid a sense of closure and keep work open to new possibilities. I'm confident that I'll continue in this way.

Philip Taaffe opens Sat 17 at Luhring Augustine (see Brooklyn).

Tiffany Edwards; © Philip Taaffe; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine; New York

Philip Taaffe, *Nocturne with Architectural Fragments*, 2014