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## PHILIP TAAFFE

### Luhring Augustine

What a difference seven years make. Political and economic circumstances altered radically between Philip Taaffe's last two solo shows in New York, and this may have something to do with why his recent outing was so much the better. Veering between the beautiful and the morbid, his later paintings are an expression of the slippery, liquid moment of our modernity.

Both exhibitions presented large multicolored canvases covered with designs repurposed from other cultures and periods, applied using silkscreen, collage and other brushless techniques. The earlier show, held in 2007 at Gagosian's hushed uptown space, relied partially on images of masks and faces. Arranged as all-over compositions, these big paintings nodded at cross-cultural understanding yet smacked of cultural imperialism. More than that, they seemed to satisfy too cannily the pre-crash art market's hunger for giant, over-produced works. Taaffe's patterned appropriations have always skirted an overly decorative tendency, and the 2007 exhibition seemed to support the criticism that his works at times function as little more than pretty pictures made with a designer's eye for color and a tasteful level of dramatic frisson.

Taaffe's latest show displayed many of the same techniques, but the outcome this time was thoughtful and occasionally mesmerizing. The new works, all dated between 2010 and 2013, have a lighter feel. By and large, the explicit images of faces are gone; in *Sardica II* (2013), a much eerier effect results from the way the black and white underlayer, using a repeating Mexican baroque-style pattern, evokes skulls that aren't there at all. Eye sockets turn out to be curling ribbons and the grinning teeth a recurring collar-ruff.

Without Taaffe's extensive research library at one's disposal, it's hard to know what all his sources are, and he capitalizes on that uncertainty, frequently choosing motifs that evoke several, often contradictory things. In *Earth Star I* (2013), the middle layer is, according to the gallery, a grainy black silkscreen of infrared photographs of Viking filigree jewelry from the 9th and 10th centuries. Pretty enough a piece of information, but the graininess with which these coiled beads are printed lends them a disquieting similarity to internal organs, particularly entrails or brains. The canvas underneath is dyed in a rainbow spectrum of thin pigment that allows the warmer colors—yellows, oranges and reds—to glow. The topmost layer is a scattering of fanciful, nearly opaque white shapes, a mix of stylized mustaches, palmettoes and heraldic, medieval-style motifs such as a three-pointed crown. Their buoyant late-Matisse quality presents a contrast to the darker, more unsettling shapes underneath.



Ever since the 1980s, Taaffe has mined not only historical ornament and decoration but Op-art devices to achieve his illusionistic effects. Not all the canvases in this show played that game, but in one of the most entrancing, *Illuminated Constellation* (2011), Taaffe composed the painting using three different types of pointed ellipses whose interplay, in turn, constitutes a myriad of other shapes. Ranging from squat to long, the ellipses are arranged as running circles, throbbing sun-shapes and a zigzagging line that frames the composition. It's a remarkable manipulation of one basic shape to radically different ends, evoking at once the illustrations in an atomic-age textbook and the tile-work of a mosque. As with many of the other paintings on display, repeated visits yielded unexpected layers, and open-endedness translated as evidence of a lively mind at work and play.

—Julian Kreimer

Philip Taaffe:  
*Sardica II*, 2013,  
mixed mediums on  
canvas, 55½ by 80  
inches; at Luhring  
Augustine.