

Philip Taaffe at Gagosian

In Philip Taaffe's paintings of the mid-'80s, there was a neat fit between the ironic, mildly transgressive content and the sensually gratifying form. With his materially and decoratively enriched versions of paintings by Bridget Riley, Barnett Newman and Ellsworth Kelly, he was an insouciant smart aleck elegantly thumbing his nose at modernist pretense. Now, however, that mischievous anti-orthodoxy is not much felt in Taaffe's paintings. His works are as visually and sensually luxurious as ever—on first sight they can take your breath away—but they've become stately and masterful in a way that's very impressive but also a bit depressing.

Like his earlier works, Taaffe's new paintings are complicated craft-intensive collages of forms appropriated from a wide variety of sources, from ancient to mod-

ern. He makes prints on paper, pastes the printed sheets—whole or cut into shapes—in patterns onto large canvases and then adds paint and varnish; ultimately he achieves something like the tactile quality of an old wall that's been painted and repainted many times. To his credit, as obviously comfortable as he is with his process, Taaffe doesn't just repeat himself formulaically. Each of the three large paintings displayed in Gagosian's main gallery seems freshly conceived.

Kaleidoscope is a 10-foot-square picture made of four 5-foot-square panels. On each panel is a set of variations on linear knots reminiscent of Islamic, Celtic or medieval tracery. Each panel is a monotype printed on paper, and each has a watery, blotchy look. Pastel colors and the soft focus give the whole a feeling of sweet ethereality. *Herculaneum*, measuring 10 by 12 feet, is a massive wall built of

smoothly shaded black and gray cutout elements. Each of these pieces is made of razor-sharp curves, points and straight lines, and some have holes cut out that make them seem like masks. Pasted into orderly stacks, they make a shadowy, incipiently surrealistic screen through which you see a background of colorful, painterly splatter reminiscent of Pollock. There's a haunting quality about the work. *Cappella* is a roughly 9-by-9-foot grid of 36 large circles interspersed with 25 small circles. Each circle has a printed paper pinwheel of red and white spirals emanating from its center. All these pinwheels (they also look like beach balls) are pasted in orderly rows over a school bus-yellow ground. Textured so that they seem old and weathered, they make you think of a Victorian fairground.

As the foregoing might suggest, what Taaffe produces at best is a kaleidoscopic array of forms with poetic overtones. His work is still animated by childlike playfulness and ingenuity, but there has crept in a certain calculated ambitiousness that is off-putting. The largest paintings look like they're on steroids; they seem too pumped up—too big, too solid, too muscular—for Taaffe's irreverent, mercurial sensibility. Presented in the plush museumlike surroundings at Gagosian, these undeniably sumptuous works emanated a bloated self-importance. —Ken Johnson



Philip Taaffe: *Cappella*, 1991, mixed mediums on linen, 110 inches square; at Gagosian.

