



Philip Taaffe
Scarabesque 1994
Mixed media on
canvas

Ultimately, 'Drawings and Cartoons' is closest to the artist's notebook, be it a loose-leaf version. With this show, Fairhurst has opened up an area where ideas are in development: the temptation now must be to carry over the distorted figure and concerns surrounding the anthropomorphic representation of wildlife into his regular art practice.

Gregor Muir

Philip Taaffe

Gagosian Gallery, New York

I think we all know what Philip Taaffe's pictures are about. Years ago he adopted the veriginous effects of Op Art with the proviso that they be plied with the fashionably imprecise labour of the artist. Bypassing 60s psychedelia and technology, the artless sources and inspiration for Bridget Riley and others, Taaffe made his printed collages by hand, replacing Op's flat optical technique with the mood of his legitimating craft. In this way he could be doubly nostalgic. His pictures were the stylish sirens of longing: first, for the 'mind-expansion carried out by a brave 60s counterculture', and

then for an earlier and legendary time when the 'touch of an artist' had a different kind of relevance. From all appearances, not much has changed in Philip Taaffe's world during the intervening years.

With this clutch of new pictures Taaffe has chosen to continue his tropes of Visual Musak, attempting to enlarge the issues which once nested near pattern painting. In this exhibition he deploys serial ornaments to be interpreted through the handmade. His pictures are fairly easy to spell out. As complementary colours do, the orange field in his painting *Scarabesque* (1994) vibrates against the rows of mostly blue bugs whose shells virtually shimmy with iridescence. And trusting in a flat-footed understanding of art history, Taaffe puts the 'esque' in *Scarabesque* by awakening the low level mysticism and exoticism which Egyptology and the new New Age fascination with prismatic bugs guarantee to deliver – as sure as complementary colours vow to vibrate! Standing in front of *Scarabesque* my mind turns to other artists and the extent to which they invoke and survive funny comparisons: This is Mark Dion – This is Mark Dion on drugs.

These are very, very good patternesque paint-

ings, would Taaffe simply leave it there, but oddly enough he seems to possess other ambitions which, in the end, snarl the otherwise uncomplicated meanings that his pictures happily express. Surprisingly, Taaffe sees these ornamental paintings as rendering themes connected to contemporary political and social events. He has admitted that he conceived of the alternating black and white pattern running along the bottom of his picture *Charterhouse* (1994) as a metaphor for the ratio of dark- to light-skinned people on New York's subway system (by the account provided in his picture, it's about fifty-fifty). What this discloses about the increasing racial tensions here and abroad is hard to know, but it does give rise to another entertaining question: imagine if someone took him seriously. Collegiate theorists and the like would have to generate their critique of Taaffe's persistent colonisation of race, gender and culturally-specific motifs, without being too closely tied to a defence of authentic Pattern Painting. Taaffe's conflicting ideas about his pictures stir up a debilitating spasm over their identity, even though at first, these new paintings seem at ease with the modest disposition he invests within them.