

PHILIP TAAFFE

PETER BLUM

If Philip Taaffe has gone from appropriating Op art to lifting images of flora and fauna from nineteenth- and twentieth-century books, the overall effect—a splendid array of visual conceits arranged in lush, intriguing patterns—is not much different. While these pictures form an aestheticized alternative to the scientific systems of classification that are his point of departure, Taaffe's point seems to be that nature, in

all its manifestations, is inherently aesthetic, and to make that natural aesthetics as sublimely self-evident as possible.

Thus the sea creatures in *Cancer Ruricola with Starfish* (all works 1997), while meticulously rendered so as to remain unmistakably themselves, also function as pure forms, black-and-red gestures. This doubleness makes them seem all the more perfect, as though to confirm their superior necessity. Proliferating across the paper (as across the gallery walls, in great numbers) and intricately superimposed, they become details in an all-over painting, even as they seem to generate spontaneously from a pointlessly fecund Mother Nature. Taaffe's all-overness emulates that fecundity.

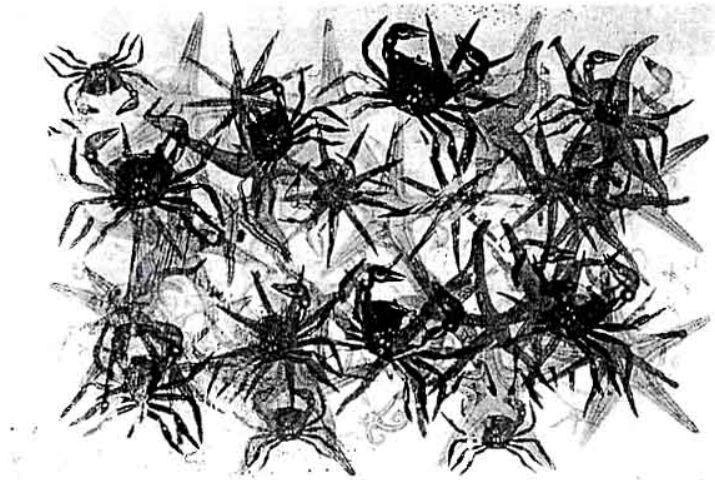
The ulterior motive of these "Composite Nature" pictures seems to be the exploration of abstract beauty, however much that autonomous beauty is understood to be "normative" for nature. Taaffe wants to understand the dynamics of beauty, for it seems in his works to account for the vitality of the natural creatures whose intricate bodies disclose it. There would seem to be a mystical or occult dimension to Taaffe's admiration for nature: for him its flora and fauna are not simply given, but are unique manifestations or occasions, as the philosophers call them, of the ineffable intelligibility and precision that beauty is.

Taaffe's feeling for the beauty in and of nature is evident in his rich colors, his careful attention to subtle differences in

texture (as indicated, for example, by his sensitive renderings of scales on fish, snakes, and bird claws) and perhaps above all in his sense of light. His sea creatures especially seem to swim in and be permeated by it. Their transparency demonstrates Taaffe's expertise at turning white paper into indwelling, seemingly divine light, an effect not unlike Plotinus' belief that natural beings were merely enigmatic emanations.

Organic nature is Taaffe's alibi for a beauty that is ultimately neither organic nor inorganic but radiant. Indeed, seen in the right light—and Taaffe's is never wrong—nature seems supernatural. But sometimes this nature appears to be more shadow than substance, as in *Spondylus (Flaming)*, suggesting that, for all their beauty, his pictures are a kind of ecological warning. In the end, this mass upheaving of creatures seems to be apocalyptic or contaminated. All that remains of them is their idealized illustrations, that is, their intellectually petrified forms.

—Donald Kuspit



Philip Taaffe, *Cancer Ruricola with Starfish*, 1997, oil pigment on paper, 26 x 40".

