

Pattern & Dissipation

I am now going to beat a dead horse. What is a painting at its simplest? A surface with some kind of image or motif applied to it. Yes, I know you can cut holes in it, hang it from the ceiling, stick things on it, and push it toward sculpture; you can ink-jet pictures on it and pull it toward photography. But in the end, people keep coming back to this basic, extraordinary, infinitely elastic formula. Painting's magic has been with us for a millennium or so, and successive generations of artists keep lump-starting it out of the somnambulant state into which it, like any other art form, periodically drifts.

Two such jump starters from different generations are Philip Taaffe and Christian Schumann, both of whom have impressive if flawed shows up right now. While both take riveting routes to visual newness—Taaffe through the techno-conceptual-decorative, Schumann through a sophisticated cartooning—the '90s is not a decade that puts much stock in incremental or technical innovation, so both occupy a strange, just off-center position in today's scene.

Taaffe, 44, is one of the last great art stars of the '80s. Actually, he may be the last star of the '70s, because his work is the apotheosis of Pattern & Decoration. While other members of his generation were undoing art by cynically redoing it, Taaffe undertook the resurrection of painting in a very literal sense. Starting with his first show at the Pat Hearn Gallery in 1984, he found a beguiling way to critique and pay homage at the same time. Taking motifs from other painters—Barnett Newman's "zips," Bridget Riley's wavy fields—and adding to or augmenting them, he made this older art new (some might even say improved). He also made the way painters build on previous painting tangible. And though Taaffe almost never paints directly on his canvases with a brush—he uses silk screens, stencils, woodblocks, linocut, and collage—he has developed one of the most voluptuous touches around.

In the late '80s and early '90s, Taaffe began to add decorative sources into the art-historical mix. By 1991, he had found one of the secret passages between art and ornamentation, and his paintings became crescendos of taut, balanced, elegant, original beauty. Then, about two years ago, things began to get fuzzy. He just kept adding decorative motifs: butterflies, lizards, snakes, palm fronds, ferns, fish, and insects, images from the history of ornament, reproductions from books, zoological and ethnological sources, spirals, heraldic design, and who knows what. Because of his liberal use of the silk screen, he was like Andy Warhol in the

Philip Taaffe
Gagosian Gallery
136 Wooster Street
Through June 28

Christian Schumann
Postmasters
459 West 19th Street
Through June 19

BY JERRY SALTZ

natural-history museum. Taaffe had become a master of research, and maybe of application, but his paintings dissipated into oversize trinkets, wallpaper samples, and spruced-up batiks.

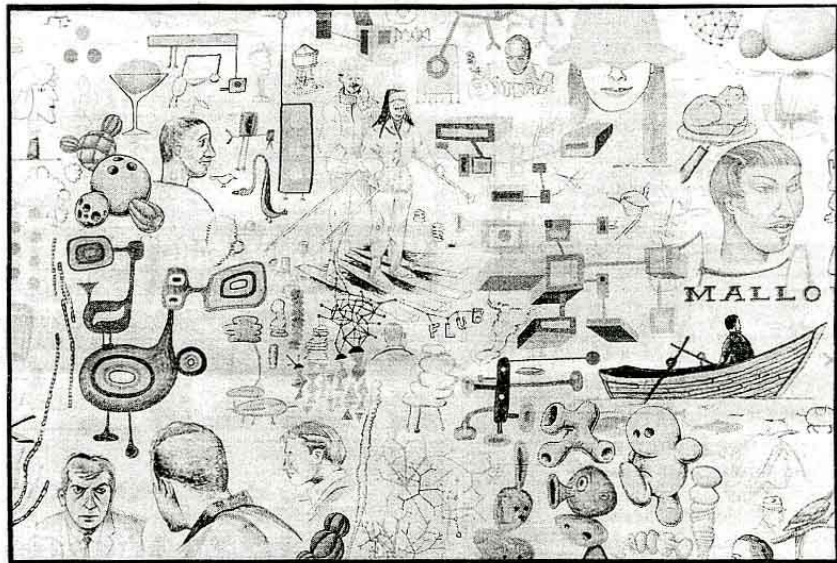
This exhibition of nine large canvases finds Taaffe still caught in these straits. In *Ariary*, he stencils and collages various birds and feathers onto a

looking sand dollars, can't escape the regularity of this kind of placement.

Still, two of the paintings sizzle. *Bal Astérie*, which looks like the ocean floor covered with a carpet of starfish, has tiers of intricate space and moments of reverie. Here Taaffe seems to have hand painted several of the silk screens and broken free of his hang-up with symmetry. The colors are beautiful and the decorative elements do double duty as subject matter and scrumptious visual icing. Very symmetrical but electric is *Cycadaceae*, in which a curtain of pinecones or seed casings hovers in hyperspace over an unremarkable patchwork of woodblock patterns. These two paintings are whole and singular; they turn into

scores of words dot the surface, scraps of paper are collaged to the canvas, and biomorphic blobs and chains are painted here and there. But Schumann has the opposite problem of Taaffe's: the pictures in *Nomads* never turn into a painting; they remain details. After a while—and this happens much too often—you don't even care if they mean anything.

Constellation, all black and white, looks like a giant, undulating crossword puzzle on amphetamines. Thousands of little squares are filled with letters, spelling out words and phrases like *multiplex*, *mimosa*, *cabala*, *you have messages*, *trembling like a leaf*, *ten most wanted*. This work is an analog for how Schumann makes a painting: bit



Cy Twombly scrambled in a Pop accelerator: a detail of Christian Schumann's *Nomads* (1998)

stark white ground. But the painting never comes together and is lost between the wallpaper designs of William Morris and the decorative commissions of J.M. Whistler. Worse is *Glyphic Field*, a dark, mural-size work sprinkled with Peruvian-derived petroglyphs of stylized animals, astronomical events, and humans. It has the presence of a washed-out Miró, a fabric swatch, or something you might find at Zona. These works make you feel as though Taaffe is losing his discerning capacity for self-criticism.

For all his investigation into processes and sources, Taaffe's ideas about the structure of a painting have remained relatively conventional. He almost always sets up a symmetrical, bilateral field, using the center as a measuring point: if there are two objects left of center, there will be two to the right; if four below, four will be above. Unfortunately, this just makes the paintings monotonous. *Dindem*, an otherwise arresting canvas of cellular-

pictures. You walk away with an image rather than a bunch of parts.

Christian Schumann is a voracious graphic wizard. He started showing in the early '90s and, at 24, appeared in the 1995 Whitney Biennial. He collages scraps of drawings and advertising onto canvas, then paints over them; he covers waxed paper with figures, then transfers those likenesses onto canvas, creating ruptures on his surfaces. He loves to pile pictures into a painting—especially comic book-like images—and never follows an overt narrative line. His paintings are like teeming encyclopedias of the found, the invented, and the altered; his aesthetic, an art of accumulated moments.

This exhibition shows Schumann perfecting his techniques and inventing some new ones, but it also suggests he's in trouble. *Nomads* resembles a Cy Twombly that has been scrambled in a Pop accelerator. It also looks a lot like a Jean-Michel Basquiat. Hundreds of images vie for attention,

by bit and part by part, segments form, then have to be fitted in. Nothing is known at the outset; the result is as much happenstance as it is hard work. The best thing about *Constellation* is its gyrating, Piranesian structure. It's a one-off tour de force. Even so, there are very few moments of linguistic serendipity, the words form almost no associative chains, and the painting loses momentum.

Finally, in *Good Sport* (a portrait of a goofy farmer) and *Dairyland* (a picture of a bionic cow standing in a vaguely Japanese, pastel-colored landscape), Schumann takes on cohesive images. These are the paintings that come closest to Peter Saul, Kenny Scharf, or Chicago Imagists like Carl Wirsum, Barbara Rossi, and Jim Nutt. While they may be the least successful pictures in the show, Schumann at last stands behind a single representation, his moments become more meaningful, and we get to see his imagination out in the open, where it belongs. ■

