

Reviews: New York

## Philip Taaffe

### Gagosian

In a 1998 dialogue with avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage, Philip Taaffe explained, "I try to subvert the decorative in various ways, even though it is not always easy to recognize how this has occurred." Here, in a sumptuous show of 12 large mixed-media works on canvas, Taaffe's tactics and their effectiveness were fully evident.

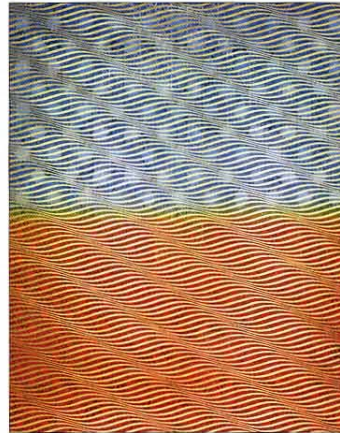
He provided variety and, at the same time, branded each work—ranging from Op art experiments to riffs on totemic images and reworkings of leaves from fossil prints—with his signature colors and geometric motifs. As esthetically compelling as the works were, they certainly were not decor.

*Locus Auratus* (2005), one of the largest canvases in the show, exemplifies how Taaffe creates unity and diversity in the service of non-decorative beauty. The Latin title means gold or gilded place, and the waves of gold pigment floating over a field that is predominantly blue above and reddish below create a three-dimensional effect reminiscent of the works of Bridget Riley. But Taaffe is not so much concerned with dynamism as with creating a mirage (the title of another piece). What we see isn't really there.

The same applied to works incorporating totemic or natural elements, most notably *Cape Sinope* (2006–7), with its serial repetition of animal faces. There were anthropological or archeological elements ranging

from Islamic geometric patterns to natural motifs in every work in the show. *Garden of Extinct Leaves* (2005–6), even though it derives from 19th-century botanical prints, is not an environmentalist sermon about extinction. The dead leaves "live again" in art.

And just when Taaffe seemed to have exhausted his possibilities, he produced a superb synthesis, *Plinth* (2006), that



Philip Taaffe, *Locus Auratus*, 2005, mixed media on canvas, 120½" x 96½". Gagosian.

combines geometric elements from other works in the show in a beauty that transcends the decorative.

—Alfred Mac Adam