



# PHILIP TAAFFE

Ruth C. Horton Gallery

September 3–November 15, 2015

**CENTER**  
FOR THE  
**ARTS**  
AT VIRGINIA TECH



▲ *Mirabilis Station II*, 2011–12

Mixed media on linen

72 ¼ x 90 inches

© Philip Taaffe; courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

One of the preminent painters of our time, Philip Taaffe has, for close to 30 years, created a prolific and singular body of work in which “images referenced from cultural and scientific sources are layered together with invented pictorial motifs.”<sup>1</sup> His imagery draws from an encyclopedic range of references to history, architecture, anthropology, and the natural sciences, as well as the art of our times, in bold, vibrant paintings distinguished by formal rigor and commanding presence. Ancient and exotic decorative motifs, Peruvian glyphs, references to Islamic art and Byzantine architecture, images from Mesopotamia, and 19<sup>th</sup>-century natural history illustrations are some of the wide-ranging sources that infuse his canvases. In a masterful and unusual synthesis of imagery and technique, Taaffe interweaves silk screening, stenciling, collage, paper marbling, staining, and many other approaches to image making into his rich and complex compositions.

Front cover:

*Asuka Passage*, 2005–06 (detail)

Mixed media on linen

116 ¾ x 100 ⅞ inches

© Philip Taaffe; courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York



▲ *Ostuni*, 2013

Mixed media on canvas

96 ½ x 45 inches

© Philip Taaffe; courtesy of the artist and  
Luhring Augustine, New York

Taaffe's interest in symbols, cultural traditions, and rituals across civilizations and historical eras throughout time resonates throughout the selection of paintings in this exhibition.

*Pharos* (2001) refers to the Pharos of Alexandria, the lighthouse built circa 280 B.C. that is one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The painting, tall and richly colored with optically charged spirals, assumes a mythic and an almost totemic stature that alludes to the ancient city of Alexandria and its famed library, one of the most important centers of knowledge of the ancient world, while also suggesting a beacon for those adrift or lost at sea trying to find their way. The white forms floating across the surface in *Porte Amur* (2001) were inspired by the ornamental bark stenciling on canoes of the people of the Amur River in Mongolia. *Asuka Passage* (2005–2006) with its emblazoned images of Buddhist aureoles refers to an historic and sacred site in Japan where some of the very early Buddhist temples and oldest surviving wooden constructions in the world are located. The title of *Ostuni* (2013) refers to the coastal town in southern Italy, the "White City" of Puglia, which has been inhabited since the Stone Age, destroyed by Hannibal circa 200 B.C., then successively conquered, destroyed, and re-built over the millennia.

"I have often considered my paintings," Taaffe has stated, "to be geographic locations, sometimes created in response to real places, and sometimes purely imaginary."<sup>2</sup> An example of this is *Mirabilis Station II* (2011–12), a painting inspired by the legacy of Major Gerald Edwin Barrett-Hamilton (1871–1914), a British naturalist who died on the desolate island of South Georgia while leading an expedition to investigate whale and sea fisheries in the Antarctic. This painting, for Taaffe, becomes an evocative rendering, a reverie even, of the life and memory of Barrett-Hamilton and his doomed arctic voyage. In *Mirabilis Station II*, geographical and historical facts coalesce into a "hieractic visual narrative,"<sup>3</sup> one that, as in all of Taaffe's works, melds an expansive imagination with both a real and imagined sense of place. Set against a pale background laced with tracings in icy grays and light blues, the painting portrays a matrix of seemingly totemic figures, between and behind which are vibrant, optically charged, and almost hallucinogenic starbursts or spiked forms. This is Taaffe's imagined rendition of the "austere, enchanting, forbidding, and sublime"<sup>4</sup> arctic landscape and Barrett-Hamilton's journey through it. As in all of Taaffe's works, *Mirabilis Station II* draws on a wealth of historical and cultural sources. In addition to the historical figure of Barrett-Hamilton, among the many other sources of inspiration in the painting are a film by Jean Renoir (1894–1979) titled *The River* (1951); the work of American artist Agnes Martin (1912–2004); and the music of composer Ralph Vaughn Williams (1872–1958), all of whom significantly influenced the coloration and emotional timbre of the work.<sup>5</sup>



▲ *Aspidium, Asplenium, Pteris I*, 2011

Oil pigment on canvas

39 x 63 ½ inches

© Philip Taaffe; courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

Beyond the rich cultural history of mankind, Taaffe's depth of knowledge and interests extend into the realm of the natural sciences. Among the myriad sources of inspiration for *Mirabilis Station II* are beetles. What may seem like totemic forms with archaic markings in the painting are in fact references to the carapaces or outer shells of different varieties of South African beetles, an allusion to both to what Taaffe imagined that Barrett-Hamilton might have encountered during his time there, and also to Charles Darwin, who collected beetles. Another inspiration was the book *On Growth and Form* by D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson (1860–1948), a biologist, mathematician, and Greek scholar. The thesis of the book—that biological form can reflect physical and mathematical principles—relates to a major interest of Taaffe's: how, throughout history and across civilizations, natural forms have served as a basis of decorative forms. The natural sciences, botany in particular, have been abiding interests throughout Taaffe's oeuvre. Several of the paintings in this exhibition, *Strata Asplenium* (2014), for example, with their lush portrayal of ferns, reveal not only his interest in biological life forms, but a profound fascination with and respect for nature and the natural world. With titles that suggest arcane species, distant pasts, or transference from one point to another (as *Asuka Passage* does), Taaffe's paintings become vehicles for the viewer to ruminate upon and to imagine other places and other worlds as well.

In this respect, Taaffe's pictures stand as portals, entryways into other geographical places, other eras, and other dimensions of cognition, as one art historian has aptly remarked. "Philip Taaffe's work is a visual quest. His paintings move forward and back through the timelines of mankind and of geological periods . . . excavating scientific and cultural riches."<sup>6</sup> This journeying is seemingly not just to past civilizations, but to evolutionary stages of life itself, alluding to the great mysteries of nature—as unfathomable as that may be. It's interesting to note that Taaffe's choice of natural history subjects are often images of ferns; simple sea organisms, such as algae and seaweed; as well as insects, all of which are among the oldest continuing species on the planet. Additionally, many of his works call attention to the beauty of and his fascination with extinct species of plants, marine life, and insects.



▲ *Strata Asplenium*, 2014  
Mixed media on canvas  
64 ¼ x 55 ⅞ inches  
© Philip Taaffe; courtesy of the artist and  
Luhring Augustine, New York

Taaffe's work takes us on a visual and metaphoric journey "that integrates the decorative with the narrative, the natural with the man-made, the ancient with the modern—intertwining cultural lineages and histories to create something authentically new from interwoven sources."<sup>7</sup> But there's more. These paintings journey not only through and across vast expanses of human history and knowledge, but through the fluid and ever-permeable membrane of the mind and soul. Many of Taaffe's paintings are luminous, both literally and figuratively. Their latticed surfaces beckon us to delve further . . . to explore . . . and to venture into territories beyond.

Margo Ann Crutchfield  
Curator at Large

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Paul Laster, "Philip Taaffe, Recent Work," *Time Out New York*, May 28, 2013, p. 39.
- <sup>2</sup> Taaffe quoted from his letter written to Michael Nesbitt, a descendant of Edwin Barrett-Hamilton, dated 2012.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Taaffe's description in his letter to Michael Nesbitt of how Ralph Vaughn William's *Sinfonia Antarctica* affected and influenced the creation of *Mirabilis Station II*.
- <sup>5</sup> Taaffe quoted in his letter written to Michael Nesbitt.
- <sup>6</sup> Kiki Jai Raj, *Introduction to Philip Taaffe: Recent Paintings and Drawings*, Baldwin Gallery exhibition publication, 2012.
- <sup>7</sup> Luhring Augustine press release in conjunction with the artist's Bushwick exhibition in 2015.

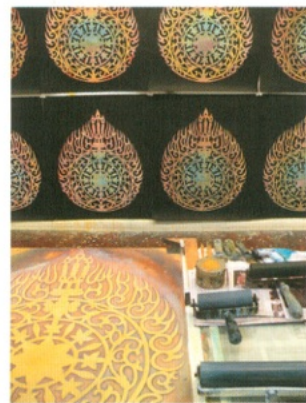
## About the Artist

Born in 1955 in Elizabeth, New Jersey, Philip Taaffe studied at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York (1974–1977) and has traveled widely in the Middle East, India, South America, and Morocco. He has been included in numerous important museum exhibitions, including the Carnegie International, two Sydney Biennials, and three Whitney Biennials. His work has been the subject of several museum surveys, including IVAM Centre del Carme, Valencia (2000); the Galleria Civica, Trento (2001); the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg (2008); and the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (2011).

His work is in numerous public collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the San Francisco Museum of Art; the Kemper Museum of Art, Kansas City; and the Reina Sofia, Madrid.

Taaffe lives and works in Connecticut and New York City.

Rizzoli Publications, New York is preparing a major monograph on Taaffe's work. For a complete catalogue of Taaffe's paintings, critical texts, and extensive bibliography see [www.philiptaaffe.info](http://www.philiptaaffe.info).



▲ *Asuka Passage*, 2005-2006 in progress  
Studio image, detail of stenciling process  
Photo by Raymond Foye

## Works in the Exhibition

All works courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York except where otherwise noted

*Aspidium, Pteris, Sage*, 2014

Mixed media on canvas

55 ½ x 65 ¼ inches

*Double Acrosticum (Deep Magenta)*, 2014

Mixed media on canvas

76 ¼ x 55 ⅛ inches

Private collection

*Strata Asplenium*, 2014

Mixed media on canvas

64 ¼ x 55 ⅛ inches

*Ostuni*, 2013

Mixed media on canvas

96 ½ x 45 inches

*Mirabilis Station II*, 2011–12

Mixed media on linen

72 ¼ x 90 inches

*Composition with Ornamental*

*Fragments IV*, 2011

Mixed media on panel mounted on wood

32 x 24 inches

*Larger Ornamental Fragments II*, 2011

Mixed media on panel mounted on wood

30 x 40 inches

Private Collection, Washington, D.C.

*Asuka Passage*, 2005–06

Mixed media on linen

116 ¾ x 100 ⅝ inches

*Pharos*, 2001

Mixed media on canvas

111 ½ x 40 ½ inches

*Porte Amur*, 2001

Mixed media on canvas

104 x 90 inches

Private collection

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Lauren Wittels at Luhring Augustine for facilitating the loan of these paintings, and Raymond Foye for his invaluable assistance in bringing this exhibition to fruition. We are also most grateful to Melissa Lazarov and Gagosian Gallery for facilitating the loan of *Porte Amur*, and to Richard Edwards and Baldwin Gallery for facilitating the loan of *Larger Composition with Ornamental Fragments II*.

All images © Philip Taaffe

Exhibition brochure © Center for the Arts at Virginia Tech

### Also on view

**Stephen Vitiello: *A Scattering Across the Leaves*, 2015**

Sound installation in collaboration with Kasey Fowler-Finn

September 3–13, 2015

Cube

***Beyond Real: Still Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

September 3–November 15, 2015

Gerry Bannan, Ori Gersht, David Halliday, Jennifer L. Hand,

Laura Letinsky, Tim O’Kane, Agniet Snoep

Miles C. Horton Jr. Gallery

Sherwood Payne Quillen ’71 Reception Gallery

**Odili Donald Odita: *Bridge*, 2014**

Wall installation

Grand Lobby

### Meet the Artist: Philip Taaffe

October 15, 6 PM, Ruth C. Horton Gallery



For more information about this and future exhibitions, visit [www.artscenter.vt.edu](http://www.artscenter.vt.edu).



## Gallery Hours

Tuesday–Friday, 10 AM–6 PM

Saturday and Sunday, 10 AM–4 PM

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Moss Arts Center

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Curated by Margo Ann Crutchfield

Curator at Large