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ART

*Alchemy & Inquiry*

by Noah Dillon



Fred Tomaselli, *The Dust Blows Forward, The Dust Blows Back*, photo collage, acrylic, resin on board, 24 x 24 inches, 2011. Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai Photo: Erma Estwick.

In his 1902 treatise, *A General Theory of Magic*, Marcel Mauss observed that magicians of every kind have always worked in the wilderness, away from their society. Although the Bronx isn't exactly the hinterlands, it *feels* removed from the bustle of SoHo or Chelsea. At Wave Hill Glyndor Gallery, compatriot artists Philip Taaffe, Fred Tomaselli, and Terry Winters present a mystical landscape with blooming, efflorescent paintings

and prints. *Alchemy & Inquiry*, organized by Raymond Foye and Jennifer McGregor, runs through June 19.

*Alchemy* reveals art's hidden confluence of Hermeticism and science, a history recounted in Peter Lamborn Wilson's catalogue essay. Like the estate's gardens, the artists draw heavily from both mystical and empirical traditions, which were once inseparable. Aristotle laid much of the groundwork for both natural history and medieval mysticism. Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* developed the Aristotelian taxonomy and included passages on healing plants, the power of magic, and information about pigments. The early Renaissance philosopher Giordano Bruno formulated the Palace of Memory, a sophisticated mnemonic catalogue for the classification and study of the material world. Bruno also wrote extensively on the science of magic and was eventually executed as a heretic.

In their eras, those men (and others) made revolutionary leaps in both mysticism and naturalism. But by the 18th century, Enlightenment thinkers began modernity's inauguration, replacing ritual with rationalism. Carl Linnaeus's taxonomy superseded Pliny and Aristotle, while Bruno's Hermetic knowledge was nearly erased from history. Medicinal plants have been outlawed and/or replaced by synthetic salts; mysticism displaced by mechanization.

Taaffe, Tomaselli, and Winters toured Wave Hill in the fall of 2010. They produced work in response to their visit and have each been given one of Glyndor Gallery's three rooms. Once a house, the gallery's three rooms are flooded with natural light from large windows; its antique floors glow warmly. Outside, a sloping terrace leads to gardens and the Palisades. The site-specific installation is rooted in Glyndor's architecture and Wave Hill's swelling botanical gardens. The result is a set of enchanting spaces, each distinct but interwoven. Verdant flora run from canvas to conservatory and back.

Philip Taaffe's rich and crisp paintings produce a dense collage of vegetal and aquatic structures. A tableau of corals, polyps, and ferns droop and glide, their placidity offset by bright, bursting hues. His fusion of botanical illustration, abstraction, and craft is

bubbling with life: an acrylic soup of marbled paper, decals, and funky, juicy shapes reminiscent of Chris Martin. Two large paintings, “Opuntia Variegatus” (2010) and “Cereus Chrysocentrus” (2011) melt the room’s walls. Large lemony shapes float on cellular fields of cornflower blue or salmon. Ultramarine starbursts pierce the dilating, pinched ellipses.

Taaffe reveals the vibrant soul of sedentary organisms. The reticulated polyps of “After Alcyonaria I- IV” (2011) flush in waves of color, becoming increasingly bright and bold as they approach the canvas’s edge. Each collaged “Alcyonaria” reef centers around a circular branch, a mythic tree of life on a shallow ocean floor. In fact, their archetypal shape confirms their prominence: these corals are among the oldest multi-cellular organisms. Taaffe’s kaleidoscopes pay homage to our biological predecessors, playing at taxonomies with Linnaeus’s precision and Pliny’s inventiveness.

Fred Tomaselli’s acrylic and resin paintings are more overtly spiritual. Like psychedelic artist Alex Grey, Tomaselli is deeply indebted to entheobotany (the study of sacred plants) and appears to appropriate equally from the Haight and National Geographic. “The Dust Blows Forward, The Dust Blows Back” (2011), takes its name from a Captain Beefheart tune. A fire-rimmed blue jay emits eyeballs, sperm, and red swirls into a constricting black background. That work and “Dahlia” (2011) are built from monochromatic photo-collages bounded by acrylic outlines. Other works are more playful and less labored, especially the electrified photogram series “Bloom” (2011).

“Sept. 15, 2005 (Half Page)” (2010), is beautifully sober. A front-page photo in the *New York Times* shows victims of Iraq’s civil war, overlaid with a silkscreened floral pattern. The print’s preponderance of black and green seems an implicit nod to Sufism, a plea for the transcendence of peaceable Islamic mysticism over the technological violence of sectarian warfare.

Tomaselli is whimsical, too. Colorful, collaged clips of windbreakers and handbags substitute the silhouettes of four sets of birds lifted from the *Sibley Guide to Birds*. Here, Orioles and Meadowlarks model their plumage on fashion instead of the other

way around. In “Greater Pewee, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Western Wood-Pewee” (2004), a flock’s plumage has become buttoned or zippered in bright yellows and reds, sharp black hems running down the wing.

Terry Winters’s room is the most luscious and affecting in the show. His prints and paintings in oil or gouache reach towards sacred geometries, ancient ruins, and natural science. “Pollen” (2011), a suite of nine embossed prints, looks like pollen grains studied under the unveiling eye of an electron microscope. Deep pthalo green pigment pressed into spongy paper reveals macroscopic mandalas and discreet particles. They appear dusted with ash, a reference to the poet Novalis’s “All ashes are flower pollen—Heaven is the calyx.”

Tomaselli and Taaffe describe magical states; Winters invites us into one. He is by turns solemn or joyous, but always earnest. His brush marks are swift, vivacious, considered, and cumulate as whole worlds rather than flat images. White gouache builds up like calcite concretions. His four “Hexagram” paintings (2010–2011) resonate with ancient power. Composed in gouache, acrylic, and graphite, each is dominated by a six-pointed star. Black and white leaves thread in and out of the background. Skeletal graphite marks take various shapes and prominences. They hollow out rushing caverns, build henges and runes, accumulate as geologic strata, and burrow into the paper, leaving only vaporous trails. The four paintings face one another, evidence of rituals, now forming the cardinal points of a sacred space.

Finally, the room is dominated by “Wave Hill” (2010). With its glowing knots in mint and periwinkle and piney “Novalis Green,” it radiates over the black marble hearth and amber floors. It entrances one into phantasms of rolling pastures and psychotropic chrysanthemums. Herbaceous daubs of oil paint shimmer and dance like stalks of lavender in the wind. Fluttering layers of polygons breathe, filling the room or receding into psychic space. In Winters’s paintings, a schema like Bruno’s Palace of Memory opens up connections between personal reminiscence and a material index of the world.

While walking around the gardens, surrounded by poppies and mushrooms and solanaceae, I fell asleep under a towering European Copper Beech. The sun played colorful patterns through my closed eyelids. Wave Hill is a glorious and strange spot for mysticism: the estate was once owned by a robber baron and is avant-garde.” The heritage site is an excursion, formerly aristocratic and now egalitarian. In his recent book on the history of ornamental gardens, Wade Graham remarks that American gardens reveal the mystical, scientific, fraternal, and slightly deviant character of American democracy. The Eternal avant-garde must share some of those tendencies as well.

“All forgotten plants, and fad plants: Come forth you motley troop. Be fruitful,” beckons Dale Pendell in his epic alchemical poem, *Pharmako/Poeia*. A motley and powerful intersection at Wave Hill, *Alchemy & Inquiry* bears sweet fruit.

[Alchemy & Inquiry: Philip Taaffe, Fred Tomaselli, Terry Winters](#)

Wave Hill Glyndor Gallery

April 3–June 19, 2011