

Interview: STEFANOS DASKALAKIS

The well-known painter talks to “TO VIMA” newspaper about the necessity for art and the truth of painting (TO VIMA Sunday edition, 07/06/2020)

“ART IS AN ANSWER TO THE VOID”

[Photo Caption] Stefanos Daskalakis in his studio photographed by Stavros Andriotis

Interview with Marilena Astrapellou

Stefanos Daskalakis is among those painters who produce a limited number of works and therefore has had relatively few exhibitions: *“It is difficult for me to amass a stock of paintings because for me each one demands a great deal of time, meanwhile I have to sell them to make a living. Maybe I will have a retrospective exhibition at some point”* he said when we spoke for this interview. From 1982 when he was preparing his first exhibition in Athens (at the Syllogi Gallery) up until today he has had a total of six solo exhibitions – the last one was held in December 2013- January 2014 at the Benaki Museum in Athens. Each individual exhibition verifies – as the celebrated painter Yannis Tsarouchis wrote about him in the brochure accompanying his debut solo exhibition – *“I think you’re on a good path because you’re trying to see and to work and to render what you see respecting the rules of the art of painting that have existed for centuries and that I hope will continue to exist for the good of humanity. Rules are not shapes and patterns for which it is natural and preferable that they change, but something far deeper and more difficult to explain.”* Stefanos Daskalakis never disappointed the expectations of his outstanding teachers. Neither his professor at the Athens School of Fine Arts, Georgos Mavroïdis, nor his mentor at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Leonardo Cremonini. But most importantly he did not betray himself because he persisted in painting even though art was changing its medium, expression and facets.

What psychological state did you find yourself in during the lockdown (Spring 2020)?

Light plays a critical role in painting. Usually as soon as the weather gets warmer, I open the balcony doors and windows of my studio and I start painting by daylight. I thought this year I would manage to do two rather large paintings while the good weather lasted, until the end of September – early October. I had figured out how I wanted the model to pose. I was very eager to get started. But you know how it goes with painting. You want to do a particular thing, but this thing changes as you move forward. The very practice of painting itself leads to other directions, takes the initial ideas into other forms that we had not foreseen. It is for this reason we paint: to allow for the resurgence of things whose existence we ignored. But then the pandemic came and disrupted my plans. Obligatorily, during the lockdown period I worked on other things. The painting projects I was referring to earlier I can finally start now albeit with a huge delay. But that doesn't bother me. I'm in a positive frame of mind. I'm in the mood to work because I've learned over the years that often we succeed in our undertakings not despite the obstacles but because of them.

Were you able to take advantage of the lockdown in some way? Do you feel it had an impact on your painting?

In the painting process things come from far afield. And they mature very slowly. Probably what is happening now, we'll see its effect on art much later on. Painting does not reflect current affairs, nor is it influenced by the news. To talk about it properly you need to get some distance. In a retrospective exhibition for Poussin there was a painting representing a landscape in a thunderstorm. The tumult raged fiercely everywhere except for a lake at the center of the painting wherein the water was perfectly still. In the wall text next to the painting the curator of the exhibition explained that the lake was "*the eye of the painter that remains imperturbable.*" What will leave its mark however is while we took certain things for granted and considered ourselves to be invulnerable, suddenly the pandemic came like a terrible shock. It shook our certitude that we control everything. It dispelled the illusion of our omnipotence compared with nature who as it

happens bared her teeth. We were all humbled. Yet this is also how the world found its corporality and grandeur once again. It gave us back the capacity for wonder. A landscape, a sea once again rouses the imagination. The world is not merely images and information – it exists in a physical way. Which is good for painting because it is an art of material and touch. This is what we got out of it.

What do you think this experience proved about the necessity of art?

It really struck me how everyone felt the need to watch films, listen to music and I don't believe it was just out of a desire for entertainment. People spent a lot of time alone with themselves. When the clamor of everyday relations suddenly subsides, in the silence that ensues fears and questions rise to the surface and this is when we feel the need for art. I watched Andrea Bocelli on the screen sing to an empty piazza in front of Milan's Duomo. Beyond his deeply felt interpretation what was so moving was the utter silence before him and the surrounding emptiness. Art is an answer to the void."

What compels you to paint?

A very particular familiarity with things. A tactile rapport with the world. In the dull sheen of an object I feel the hand that touched it. How a face I am looking at reflects the light makes me feel a closeness with a 17th-century painter or the painting of ancient Greece and Rome. Often I let my mind wander in the studio and for a long time I observe the space, the light and the surfaces. It doesn't take much for the folds in a fabric, the little dark patches from within an open drawer or the room next door to take on an evocative power. Sometimes certain images surge up suddenly in my imagination and these are also welcome visions. Of course, how all this becomes painting is another story altogether. It's not as if you wait to be especially moved in order to start painting. I work in the studio every day in a constant struggle with the materials/substance of painting. It takes me a great deal of time to finish a painting and often my endurance gets tested. I hope it is not in vain.

Van Gogh said a good painting is tantamount to a good deed. What is your opinion?

In a letter dating from February 1890 Van Gogh mentioned Gauguin saying this of him: *“that friend [Gauguin] who likes to make one feel that a good painting should be the equivalent of a good deed, not that he says so, but anyway it is difficult to spend time with him without thinking of a certain moral responsibility.”* Really painting is essentially an ethical stance, in the sense that your work will take shape according to what you ask of your life and what you believe has value. How you position yourself in the face of reality. Of course, Van Gogh did not mean that painting should be didactic. In another one of his letters Van Gogh wrote *“Art is man added to nature.”* With his painting he does not teach or moralize but humanizes. For example, his *“Potato Eaters”* do not stir pity in us. He instead shows their grandeur. His cypresses, his fields acquire an ethical dimension.

When is a painting “true” and when can it arouse intense feelings in the viewer?

How can a work of art from Africa created for ritual purposes move someone who lives in a metropolis in the West? How can religious art like the Virgin Mary with Jesus from the 14th century touch a contemporary man who is completely estranged from religion? It seems that there exist some deeper strata in the human psyche that run across cultures and epochs. This is what a work of art must touch. For this to happen a form of psychic availability is necessary. You must be astonished by the sight of an apple on a table. The same thing must have happened with the compositions seen at Pompeii and Herculaneum that still speak to us, or the Byzantine painter who saw a woman holding a child and felt as if he were beholding a unique scene. However, all these sensations, these stirrings, if they do not take shape, do not elevate to a pictorial form they will not endure and will be lost. Here language is necessary, the language of painting which means technique and a connection with tradition, that *“solidarity between the living and the dead”* as Seferis called it.

Do you think the art market will be influenced by the pandemic?

After ten years of economic crisis (in Greece from 2010-2020), the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic befell us which will set us way back and this at the very moment when we had just begun hoping again. Because art depends on the economy. The purchase of a painting is not an essential expenditure and it is something you can postpone. Nonetheless, we should not overlook the fact that the passions that possess painters possess collectors and art lovers just as ardently. Art is a need for them. That is why I am optimistic.