

the luster of the hidden encounters with the work of Stefanos Daskalakis

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Seven years ago, on the occasion of his exhibition at the Athens Gallery, I wrote a short text about the painting of Stefanos Daskalakis. It was my first contact with his figures. At that time, jogging my memory, I saw projected before my eyes the paths the artist pursued in his quest for art.

“In Daskalakis’ previous work, human beings were absent. Their absence was mysterious, as if someone were hunting them down. `Leaving their imprints and departing abruptly for some unknown reason. In the space remains half-eaten food scattered here and there, tables not laid, utensils strewn on the ground. The people were leaving just moments before the painter’s arrival – as if their meeting were cancelled at the last minute. When the artist arrived he painted their traces like an ingenious criminologist from the fingerprint department who believes that the poetry and precision of painting uncovers more convincingly the truth of evidence. With intensity his gaze deems even the smallest object significant and he renders in images the loneliness and sadness of the gathering that ended abruptly, actually composing an essay on absence. Which pathways did Daskalakis follow to bring him to the women he now paints? Had clandestine meetings transpired in the years before? They emerge from a dark back-

ground and stand like monuments to everyday life, raised on a small pedestal.

The ritual of absence in the precedent works prepared the ground for the now-stylized symphonic presence of the human figure. With unrivalled painted myth-making Daskalakis places us in the mythological world of women who appear to break out of the anguish of existence and the unfulfilled demand for an authentic life. When you draw closer to the works, you can see how the light flays them.

We find the lessons of the Great Masters from centuries ago condensed in his figures, simultaneously with the contemporary pursuits and drastic expression of the 21st century. His paintings become part of the history of art in Greece and an active stimulus for present and future painting in our country. Daskalakis wrote at one time: “I paint with the consciousness that the act of painting involves a responsibility for the future. Our present is the ‘tradition’ of the future. Of course, the real ‘message’ we send is the one our successors will want to find. We are utterly ‘at the mercy of their discernment.’”

In the years that followed, I visited him in his studio late in the afternoon after he’d finished painting for the

day and was usually cleaning his paintbrushes. The model had already left by then but I glimpsed something of her presence that the painter had imprinted on the canvas.

Somewhat diffidently Daskalakis started painting men too. I myself had the chance to pose for my own portrait for seven days. And so I had the experience of his looking at me in order to paint me. We listened to classical music and barely talked at all. But when he spoke I had the impression that he didn't take his eyes off me. He let me find the position for my pose rather than intervening with instructions, guided very little without pressure or many words. Each one of these days I sensed how much inner force he had despite his outer gentleness and calm. It is my belief that no model has ever understood while sitting for a portrait what exactly Daskalakis was seeing and composing. Inner narration, a painter's difficult acrobatics in which you understand that you participate yet without realizing precisely how. Looking at my portrait some four years later, I understand something about the central nucleus of his gaze. It's that which he's never been able to express verbally. We hear the painter "strictly" speaking

when we look at his portrait over and over again. While the portrait is always the same, I have the impression as I see it over time that it changes and ages along with me. It always feels like we're looking at each other and how today I am something that the portrait surpasses because everyday life does not affect my painted self. Apart from that, I appear to be staring ahead towards the route I'll be taking. But the night before last, when I threw out my old gabardine, shirt and cap that I wore for the pose, I was gripped by sudden emotion. On my relatively frequent visits to the studio – always after his day's work was done – I took an amateurish camera with me. I didn't want my visits to be professionally recorded. I preferred they be fluid images, half-seen, awkward that do not reveal everything but are instead slightly blurry and clumsy. Camera stills that resemble notes on something that I was still unaware of where it would wind up. Inside this particular studio of Stefanos' which is a space steeped in the life and the art of the painter, the photos I shot look to me more real. When I took pictures of Daskalakis, his friends and his works, I learned more about his paintings. I'm not sure why, but from very early on I could better understand faces and people from behind the camera lens.



And so when I spoke to him about his paintings, I baptized them with the models' real names. I would say: Myrto, Ioanna, Andrea, Thanassis, Leonidas... Besides the fact that Daskalakis is a philosophical painter and that when he speaks you understand something about the depth of his work, I became conscious that his knowledge of questions on art cannot be easily transmitted, because it is necessary for you, the viewer, to personally make your own composition. In other words, it is a personal adventure. Eight years after first meeting Stefanos, I now feel that I've somehow touched upon his mystery.

In Stefanos' painting, the model is not merely an external pretext for the painter to create his inner revelation. Daskalakis' painting doesn't materialize in absentia – without the participation of the person who sits before his canvas. Model and painter in a creative interaction for countless days discovering one another through a process of expectation, repose, silence and above all an exercise in the gaze and a battle with the materials. At one point Stefanos Daskalakis wrote: “They are all works from life. Painting from life is necessarily a painstaking process. It is as slow for the painter as it is for

the model who's posing. The model is not someone whom you ask to play a “role” that you impose. On the contrary, the painter must give him the time to find by himself the unique role that is worth the effort and which is the model himself, to take a position that suits him, and to find his own expression. From this moment on, and if the painter has the maturity to accept the reality that is taking shape in front of him, the adventure of painting can begin – a long trajectory of different approaches, hesitations, reversals and destruction... Often when I'm painting I have the feeling that what I'm doing is in some way dictated by the models sitting in front of me so that their world – through me, through painting – takes on an objective reality.”

When a painting is finished something is brought to light that is not perceptible in the model's everyday life which is what makes the work glow and elevates it – as real people transform into painted “heroes” admitted into the universe of Stefanos Daskalakis' painting, naturalized in his imaginary republic, that comprehends something of the darkness and light of the existence of each and every one of us.



A middle-class woman, “standing in awe” before the mystery of her transcription on the canvas, the beauty of a young girl who is shattered and whom you feel continually falling over, barely able to hold her head up while the painter searches for her downcast gaze, the dignity of Ioanna whom Daskalakis places on a pedestal like a queen, in street clothes that seem to have transformed into a goddess’s imaginary garments. You feel time dancing over the body and clothes of young Leonidas. The spiritualization of the painter’s daily companions who maintain at the same their material substance. The incandescent blue eyes of an extremely sensual girl with her particularly expressive hands in motion. She radiates her presence seated amidst scattered articles of clothing and surrounded by jewellery, shoes. Yet in the end, you feel that the red skirt she’s wearing pierces a hole through the canvas and our gaze. Three faces-views of the same girl in three different works of varying dimensions. Daskalakis does not sever ties with the reality of his era. The girl is a recognizable youth of our day who in the painting offers her beauty to the tender, knowing eye of the painter who earnestly wishes that her image stay forever just as it is today, just as he now perceives it himself, with his paint-

brush, the light and colors. Like a message-document of an erotic feminine presence to the future. He wants to keep her alive, not only her physique and facial expression but also the accessories she wears – these are not funeral gifts to be sealed in the grave for later excavation, but animate ornaments, tokens of a young woman from the beginning of the 21st century.

Daskalakis almost always paints clothed models. The poetry of clothing in his painting could easily constitute the subject of a vast study. Clothes have the same expressive character as countenances, the gaze and the flesh. Clothing suits the individuality of a person extraordinarily well, his bearing and the expression portrayed. The folds are rhythmically orchestrated, mutely setting off the interior musicality of the work. And this brings to mind something of the folds of drapery in antique statues. Daskalakis paints people of all ages, the world in our times in a sweeping spectrum, with traits specific to each generation. Clothing fashions for different age groups accentuate the particularities of the individuals who wear them but also the expressive capacity of clothes themselves, for every season of the year. The hairstyle of each sitter is also revealing and complements



the clothes and decisively characterizes each individual, thus enabling the painter to render in his work the fluidity of hair, like the young girl in jeans who looks at him so candidly and trustingly. The collector who bought this work said to Daskalakis: “These kids will build a better Greece.”

In some of the paintings the feeling that something is happening offstage creates a dynamic because the model sees something that we cannot, which compels the viewer to speculate and to look for traces of some narrative intention which is however always allegorical, with many interpretations and eventualities. As if the moment we see depicted in the painting cannot be situated in a singular event that generated it but is instead a behavior-symbol that repeats in the same manner in response to different stimuli. Illustrative of this point is the work depicting a girl in a short skirt who is expecting something from what is going on in the wings. She’s standing upright with her feet joined, poised in dignified anticipation. She is posed on a clumsily thrown rug, offhandedly cast on the ground, maybe for an actor’s audition and now she politely and eagerly awaits the answer. At the center of this prodigious

picture are her hands with fingers laced tightly together in expectation. The painter enlarges the cluster of joints of her folded hands almost expressionistically. The seated couple – among the rare works portraying two people – seems to be awaiting news from outside the painting and the artist depicts the pair at a critical moment, seconds before that which is expected appears or is heard. An open-ended narration that never becomes concrete. Maybe because two people more easily create the impression of a kind of narrativity. Aside from the masterfully painted clothing in this same work, there is perhaps the finest pictorial representation of shoes in Greek painting. Four sneakers ready to be worn walking down the road of life.

Furniture – the chairs and rug in the studio – are eyewitnesses to the metamorphoses. Simple folding chairs but mainly neoclassic furniture from a somewhat older epoch and reminiscent of a former glamour. As if the symbolical imprinting of figures had begun long ago, even before the painter was born, following a procedure that others practiced before him. The completely controlled artificial light of the studio – the principles of lighting consistently observed – creates variations in



the appearance of things that in a novel way recalls the restrained sorrow of the objects like we find in Lambros Porphiras' poem "Lacrimae rerum." People come and go while the pieces of furniture support them by remaining the same and everlasting – offering the final composition their texture and their shape, their form and their silence.

Daskalakis' rapidly-executed works seem to flap in the air. Contrary to his usual large-scale paintings that demand many weeks if not months to reach completion – as Daskalakis never knows how much time he will spend on this fluid painting process because the outcome is always uncertain – in the quickly-painted pieces where the painter decides ahead of time to consecrate anywhere from 5 to 10 hours and see "whatever comes of it," we often encounter incomparably captivating results, such as Andrea, in profile with a cigarette, or Thanassis in an orange Lacoste shirt. Yet in all the arts, on occasion a rapid approach accompanied by or perhaps born of compressed intensity and decisiveness – on the part of both the painter and the model – results in a transparent reality that moves through time unfinished. Movement like travelling one

towards the other, until existence is solidly confirmed. As if he didn't want to take on material weight in order to fly more easily. Half-finished presences where interstices were left for the light of poetry to pass through. In some of Daskalakis' works we can discern in the background a half-destroyed painting "that didn't turn out." Here where the relationship between the painter and his model and his materials went awry. As if old failures in the background of new images engender the unforeseen work, the new effort. It so happened that I have seen segments of completely defaced works. An eye, a mouth, a nose, an ear, an amputated hand, a shoed foot. Like so many ex-votos that specifically identify the part of the body that is ailing for the patron saint to heal. Many of those lacerated parts of Daskalakis' destroyed paintings were true masterpieces. He should probably preserve them in their own right. I can imagine an edition with all of them because together they evoke a distinct sensation that resembles the one that comes over us when we behold fragments salvaged from ancient ruins.

I am looking at the two specific paintings where he depicts his studio. In one the furniture mysteriously

dominates and people have taken their leave. And in the other, the studio is all but dilapidated. In other words, the space where human transformations occur is no Eden. It is subject to the ravages of terrestrial time while the personalities who are portrayed transcend, battle time and reveal their inner core, the invisible. “Therein me glows the thing which I ignore, but it glows despite” says Elytis. That invisible world is what art reveals, painting in particular.

I’ve entered a second time into the sanctuary of his studio while Stefanos was in the throes of painting. This happened unobtrusively but with a camera for a television program. I can’t say why Elytis comes to mind when I remember that day I watched Daskalakis painting... “All right now, let’s live colors” or it felt like the painter “was listening to sounds coming from the colors.”

Something profoundly ceremonial with pauses, rhythms and protracted immobility, slowly dragging or with pointed intensity – it was a kind of performance that wouldn’t interest the viewer of the final work but when you get the chance to see it from up close, you feel yourself to be in the antechamber of poetry, in the room-

studio where the true poet dwells. And this resembles a studio of liberation, spirituality and emotions. The last impression of that day in question was the sight of a forlorn portrait resting against the wall: “Sorrow beautifies because we resemble it.”

The people depicted do not resemble the frozen frame we watch in the cinema but are shown as normally living in the dimension of art where the instant dilates in time. Another day when I saw the paintings altogether I had the impression of a peculiar world that was nevertheless familiar – you might even say that they drop the masks we wear to face life in the savage quotidian. You could go further and say that people were created by a different god, on other moral grounds, with childishness and wisdom that resembles how children feel who live inside adults and don’t know how to hide.

In a certain way, the same thing happens in role playing on the theatre’s stage, in the cinema, in opera and in novels. With the difference that the role is predetermined in these art forms, interpretation of a preexisting text while here the painter is the writer, stage and costume designer for something he’s waiting to come to life.

Models come up to the studio as if they wished to “bear witness” before the court of the future, where, unlike the trade unionists with their economic demands and current claims, they appeal instead for the soul which could form the basis for a future revolution.

I imagine the people who pose leaving and losing themselves in the streets of Athens having left their other visible self behind in the studio on Remoundou Street. These same models now realize that they carry it inside themselves – the living sign of another true life while getting lost in the so-called uniformity of the crowd.

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