

Painting as image and as matter

Ever since the 1970s, painting, and especially representational painting, has periodically created dominant trends in contemporary art thus renewing and strengthening its position among the other modes of expression in the visual arts. The past decade has seen a similar burgeoning of interest in painting. Issues such as the new role of painting and its counter-proposal to the intense conceptualism prevailing in art are matters of concern to the field of contemporary art. Within this context, the work of Stephanos Daskalakis has become timely. But apart from his choice of this particular medium, there is an additional, independent interest that is centred on the way the artist works. Daskalakis is one of the few painters who work from a live model, be it a portrait, a human figure or a still life. In short, he uses a traditional method of painting that very few contemporary artists employ systematically.

In his work, the observation and significance of a tangible and present reality during the act of painting is a prerequisite and part of the creative process. Setting up the model in the studio and the appropriate staging of the picture also require the physical involvement of the artist.

Daskalakis believes that his practice of painting from a live model may constitute a form of resistance to the exaggerated conceptualisation characteristic not only of contemporary art, but of life in general. In a period that he describes as excessively “intellectual”, he upholds a type of painting and ways of working that activate and cultivate the senses above all. His painting is not confined to a visual result but also provides a tactile stimulus. In his interesting, thoughtful views on art, Daskalakis frequently returns to the idea of the “material entity of painting”, to painting as an object and not only as a picture. As early as 1987, he noted in the catalogue of his solo exhibition (at the Larissa Municipal Art Gallery – G.I. Katsigras Museum) that “perhaps the visual arts should be less of the eye and more of the touch”. In fact, he describes the glance as “touching the objects and feeling the light sitting on the surfaces of things in a physical way”.

The successive layers of paint in his works, especially the later ones, as well as his expressionist idiom reflect this emphasis on substance and matter. Quantities of paint

applied to the canvas build up an impasto painted surface that has “flesh” and bears the memory of the painterly act. Thus, the visual and tactile aspects of the painting co-exist.

In still lifes – images with fruit and nuts strewn on the floor are typical – the tangible component and materiality contend with the picture of decay and abandonment. Clearly influenced by the *vanitas* of Dutch painting, these works hint at the struggle for existence against the wear and tear of time.

In his nudes or full-length portraits, his recent work, skin takes on texture and an almost sculptural quality.

Despite the significance Daskalakis attaches to matter and reality, it is not his intention to represent it. The ordinary, everyday people he sees walking down the street may inspire him, but his aim is to record not reality but rather non-material elements: the personality, a mental or emotional state, but also purely painterly elements such as properties of light and colour. The physical presence functions as a kind of challenge: it sets limits and in this sense is a form of resistance, an obstacle. According to the artist, it is this resistance that produces the intensity in his painting that he so he strives for in his work. It is achieved by strong shadows, by the light that is frequently depicted entering diagonally (the artist always uses artificial rather than natural light, which changes according to the time of day) and by impasto. In some full-length portraits, the angle of vision that seems to be higher up intensifies the dramatic element and creates the impression of a vortex.

In most of his works, one has the impression of movement, of an uncertain and fluid state, of an underlying and sometimes threatening atmosphere. The dark and violent element in painting fascinates Daskalakis. Among the classical painters he admires most, he singles out Nicolas Poussin for his way of combining a state of calm with a mysterious atmosphere of underlying tension in his paintings.

Yannis Tsarouchis (who wrote a brief note in the catalogue of the Daskalakis’ first solo exhibition in 1982) was also a significant figure for him. At a time when abstract art dominated, Daskalakis regarded Tsarouchis’ devotion to the idiom of representational painting with admiration.

Together with some other representational artists of approximately the same age, Daskalakis carries on this tradition of representational painting. At the Athens School of Fine Arts, he studied in the studio of George Mavroïdes. In Paris, where he went after Lyon, he continued his studies, selecting the studio of Leonardo Cremonini, where other Greek

representational painters of his generation also studied. Daskalakis' painting was moulded in an age of a return to realism (in the sense of the term as representationality). The international trend reacting against the dominance of formalism and manifestations of art like minimalism was visible in the 1970s and counter-proposed representational painting. Early in the 1980s, when the artist returned to Greece and had his first solo exhibition, neo-expressionism was the focal point of contemporary art. In his first works of that period he painted large sacks of merchandise used, for example to store flour or rice. The theme was a pretext for Daskalakis to occupy himself with light, matter and the qualities of painting, issues that have preoccupied him unceasingly ever since. His concentration on just a few themes – interiors, still lifes, portraits and the human figure – suggests the priority he attaches to the attributes of painting rather than to thematic breadth.

Even though he is a representational painter, Daskalakis does not distinguish abstraction from representationality when he analyses the attributes of painting. The challenges and issues intrinsic to painting remain the same in both cases. A representational work includes the abstract technique because every part of the painted surface can be isolated and constitute an autonomous abstract composition. In the end, however, the value of a work is not judged by isolated details, but by the whole, and by the way in which the volumes, the dabs of paint and the material between them are bound together.

The artist's judgement that a work is complete is a critical decision that determines the final result. Although he believes in coincidences and in the possible rapid completion of a painting, Daskalakis works every painted surface persistently and painstakingly. He "tortures" the composition, lays down one layer of paint over the other, but often ends up destroying the work with his own hands whenever he deems the outcome unsatisfactory. This arduous process also explains his relatively few solo exhibitions.

A painting on which an artist has devoted hours of work is what, in Daskalakis' view, is most likely to endure, to withstand different approaches and to look interesting when seen from both close up and far away. Despite this, he believes that a work is always open. What comes to an end is not the composition but the limits and capabilities of the painter. The challenge of painting and the adventure of the act of painting are inexhaustible. The work of Stephanos Daskalakis is a constant exploration of this painterly language and an exercise of the eye in investigating the wealth contained in views of things.

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