



I am writing with September's painful photographic nostalgia of figures painted to live on the canvas a life forever in parallel. Confronted with the unexpected precision of the thoughts and words of he who painted them, I try to make my words stand up. Not to tell stories, but to see the images with an empty mind. To build with words because here the figures struggled to exist on the empty canvas. To immerse myself in the enchantment of the specific. But to also remember that what I see has honored the very materiality of the medium eroding the self-sufficiency of description with the faintest traces of chaos.

Stefanos Daskalakis belongs to those artists who love the idea of painterliness, oil, its physicality: "This is why we paint. We like the odor of turpentine. The rest is for later, once the painting has come into being." It is for this reason that his work takes form from the materials, composing the representation of the world through the very act of painting – through his gaze which results from this organically, as an outcome, and not from intentionality. Daskalakis does not do detailed preparatory drawings, rather it concerns the initial attempts toward an oil painting, in a smaller format before beginning the large-scale works.

From the outset he was interested only in the surroundings he looks upon every day and simultaneously the substance composing them. Objects, furniture, the space characterizing his first works later gave precedence to human figures but without ever ceasing to appear in Daskalakis' works. Sealed sugar sacks set upright or spread on the ground from the early '80s, with their labels pulling them out of anonymity and the past, in essence constitute his first models, with folds of burlap which distinctly bring to mind the corresponding drawings of nude figures from the same period, while peculiar still lifes with cardboard boxes of milk engage a contemporary iconography as a pretext for painting. The markedly geometric works that follow the end of this decade have as their "models" furniture and room interiors: it seems that brightly-lit interiors have posed for Daskalakis with their focal point being opened boxes and parts of furniture with open drawers or doors, as if the painter wanted to indicate their dark interior which without his gaze, the viewer would never make out. Overturned chairs and lifeless dolls in armchairs already underscore a scenic preoccupation as a strong element before this progressively dominates his work.

The theatricality of Daskalakis' painting, along with a vague sense of timelessness, is intensified in the large-

scale earthy still lifes of the early 1990s. In the darkness here we can barely discern the contents of the room, like the carpets' red splash. More importantly though, it is as if Painting itself indulged in some Dionysiac celebration of fruit strewn on the floor and the artist managed to paint the remnants in order to suggestively preserve a sense of presence. Here Daskalakis permits realism to render only what is found in the center of the optical field that his canvas delineates at the same time as his gaze does, while the periphery of the painting disintegrates into earthen darkness that swallows whatever is found in its dominion. At the same time, the penumbra sets off that which has moved into the neighboring areas of light reclaiming a constituent role in the works and as such touches the borders of abstraction. Single-tone ensembles of parched leaves mixed in with unexpected green, intact grapes and beside them crushed berries, lemons, half-eaten apples and scattered plates, abandoned cups, rusted tools are exposed in a sweeping oblique faint light casting their shadows behind them, like little planets tumbling in a lunar landscape that was born in the studio of Daskalakis.

Light – its nature and the angle from where it projects – and the color emanating from it are the dexterous regulators of Daskalakis' works. The interiors of the '80s are illuminated by fresh morning light, diffused, creating subdued and limpid colors while the penumbra of the 1990s' still lifes appears to have been born of transient jouncing candlelight that after having spread death to color, got lost in the abyss of the background. Yet, in the still lifes as much as in the full-scale portraits starting from 2000 until now, a glowing light reveals lavish expanses of color that confirm Daskalakis profoundly understands the function and power of color. Blue, in various hues, seems to reclaim the role of protagonist set against a royal red. Cooler azures converse with the warm ochers of the background or with the lush greens of the armchairs. Precious ruby sprawls over rugs – painterly pretexts – and soaks into the deep blue of the garments, resounding yellows of blouses show off jackets made of saturated blue, conferring an autonomy on it, while at the same time they deposit painterly findings of psychological tension upon the figures represented.

Contrary to the first still lifes of the 1990s where the dimly-lit colors determine the otherworldly beauty of

decay through the prism of faded memory, in posterior works, the source of light comes from a spotlight that relentlessly glares and lends the flowers and fruit of the compositions a supernatural acuteness of Flemish extraction and tonalities of poignant sharpness. In Daskalakis' full-scale portraits from the beginnings of 2000, like his more recent large-sized figures, the same pitiless light exposes the imperfections of the faces and bodies with the built-up palette-knife impastos of their gleaming flesh, endowing them however with a living truth – the light here signaling a desperate but stirring present.

That which does not interest the painter, he leaves within the almost existential abstraction of darkness outlining the sovereignty of figures that glow as protagonists on this stage of powerful juxtaposition. At the same time, however, darkness becomes a structural element of the composition and seems to pour out towards us, via an exit of light, the figures leaning intently forwards, in our direction. Perhaps in this downward slant of Daskalakis' figures, that started on the floorboards with dusty still lifes and continued afterwards in interior rooms littered with objects that roll towards the viewer, and where the

painter disclosed the until then hidden entirety of the room – in this can be localized the nature of the relation of Daskalakis' works with reality just until this rapport was determined in the full-scale portraits begun in 2000 and continued until today.

Often elevated on peculiar pedestals of wooden slats in order to diminish the optical distortion, the figures here occupy almost the entire surface of the canvas and finally are represented from a perspective that surprises the viewer as the gaze of Daskalakis falls nevertheless on the models from above – he needs to stand upright to paint them. The nature of this prominent position seems to have added frailty to the awkwardness of the models with the often unexpected shoes, standing thus under scrutiny at the painter's mercy, just as he too is at their mercy: the ultimate coupling of psychological and painterly intensity. Here a necessity of painting – of the medium itself – has given a psychological dimension to the portraits through the viscera of the work. The place of the figure within the painting space is borderline precisely because it is organic and for this reason the figures are ascribed a dimension of existential solitude.

In his portraits Daskalakis is not interested in the space behind and around the figure he paints apart from the extent that an empty chair or the color of a rug, the decoration on furniture have something to exchange with the human figure he is painting. The usually female figures are not rendered following any prototype, neither imaginary nor mental and for this reason they are not stylized, idealized or dematerialized. Here the painter sees with his eyes and he trusts them completely: women who are fatigued, stoical, distressed or dreamy, with or without consciousness of their bodies, of their flesh, in bloom or faded; feral young men, couples estranged in their union. Touching the floor or as near to it as possible, these works portraying almost life-sized figures appear to contain live bodily presences in each and every space they are to be found – with figures encaged within the two dimensions of the canvas that barely contains them. Then the wood boards of the painted floor comprise optical extensions of the real space within the painterly space and vice versa. The real image – and all this implies – is thus united with its painted representation which acquired existence, through the painter, within reality. The painted models thus become existing bodily presences that hover be-

tween painting and reality – in our midst: “Often when I’m painting I have the feeling that what I’m doing is in some way dictated by the models who are standing before me so that their world – through me, through painting – takes on an objective existence.”

Daskalakis is one of the rare painters today who paints exclusively from live models and never from memory (imagination) or photography. His studio, his floor markings for the models’ feet like on a theatre set, the staging and posing, all constitute the starting point of an entire process. The artist consciously follows this creative course because his first concern is that the result of his painterly efforts is not due to a mental process but because the model forces him into a real impasse: “You have it, flesh and bone, before your eyes, so you can’t escape mentally.” Through a physical practice, visual observation reveals, as if by surprise, the answer every time – another perspective on the person sitting in front of him: “It’s hard to imagine how enthralling I find these ordinary people who require very little to be shifted from their quotidian into another dimension that’s mythical, metaphysical.”

Daskalakis ends up with figures of monumental stature. On one hand, the large-scale and dramatic perspective from which they are depicted, along with the seemingly simple preoccupation of faithfully rendering the artist's vision, make this truth so true that it becomes unreal. Thus the figures are thrust with a supernatural intensity towards us, uniting the painted with the real dimension. And on the other hand, the monumentality of these very figures results from the fact that Daskalakis achieves by painterly means – with that “very little” that is so very much – to seize and render his models in a state of interior life that excludes them from our world thus consigning them beyond the familiar and the ordinary. They have already entered the domain of myth towards which the painting of Daskalakis always aspires.

It is to this unknown interior life that the painter seems to refer when he states that for every model who poses for him: “I want to see who this Other is.” His models almost never look the painter directly in the eye hence neither do they look at us when we take the painter's place before the canvas once he leaves. However, the eyes of the subjects he paints do not cross between them even when he paints a couple where they are represented to-

gether – existence is always solitary. Even when he paints faces of friends or those of his own family – his wife and his son – the person Daskalakis beholds becomes someone whom he starts to discover from anew through the portrait process. Even when in his self-portraits this other is his own self whom he has to discover with his outward-looking gaze and reveal with his paintbrush: meeting the Self behind his outward appearance.

The work with the title *Figure*, Daskalakis' very recent full-scale portrait which refers to Cavafy, marks a painterly and metaphorical turning point. For the first time in this series of works, the background is not dark but illuminated by abundant light. Here not only the contents of the space surrounding the model are brought out but, especially in *Angeliki with striped skirt* – the portrait created immediately after, his latest to date – the shadow of the figure is revealed, falling behind it like a parallel presence, its counterpart. More specifically though in the portrait whose inspiration is the poet from Alexandria, Daskalakis seems to have painted by means of a particularly Tsarouchian and specific pensive male figure, not the likeness of Cavafy but rather the idea of Cavafy in a metaphorical portrait but never a

conceptual one: the metaphor of his thoughts on Cavafy as an image that borrows another figure as envelope in order to become incarnate, just where one would expect that for a historical personage, Daskalakis would have had recourse to a photograph in order to render that which the great photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson called the “inner silence” of a portrait.

Daskalakis never paints from photographs, yet paradoxically photography has often proven to be a source of inspiration for his work. Particularly here in the full-scale portraits he began producing in 2000 up until the present, aside from the Heptanese School of painters of the 19th century and the naivety of their models' clumsiness as well as the perplexity of these painters in their efforts at imitating the European painting of the period, regarding the gaze of Daskalakis an important role was also played by certain photographic portraits imprinted in a twofold way by the harshness of the expressive introversion of Diane Arbus along with the simultaneously narrative and abstract frontality of August Sander. This same double “play between the abstract and the specific” as Daskalakis describes it, is what interests him, in painterly ways, in his own work, as

well: “To be able to read a work from varying distances and multiple times.”

His objective is always that the surface of a painting works as a whole although when one isolates any given section, it should work autonomously as a separate composition. Something of the like signifies by definition that Daskalakis creates his figures through abstraction based in the force of his very materials, oils and their comportment, that is to say their self-referentiality. Furniture, clothing or the models' flesh are “built” by spatula or gestural brushstrokes in oil impastos of varying tonality, one alongside the other, which combined create an overall pictorial outcome that can be viewed from a distance as well as from extremely close up: vision is invited to become sometimes specific sometimes abstract – that which Tetsis, to whom Stefanos owes in large part the audacity of the colored gesticulations, calls “stripping” the work. Earlier in the 1980s but in the still lifes of the '90s as well, his work was not characterized by the density of matter. To the contrary, formerly the surface was flat, often covered in transparent glazes and paints dripping down the canvas. Even in Daskalakis' first full-size portraits that he presented in 2006, the

paste formed by oil paint was not yet as thick as it would become in the works dating after 2007. Notably though in the works of the last two or three years, in certain places the impastos are so dense that they often make the painting stand out in relief, with an actual physical substance.

Daskalakis' most recent works cannot really be grasped when viewed from photographic reproductions except if one has the real work in front of him and in particular when he views it from the side to ascertain the existence of a third dimension: in some places the impasto is so thick that it is hereafter a structural element of the work and by definition cannot be imprinted photographically. However, the fixation with matter here is not something that originated in mental resolve on the artist's part but from his very vision: some of the models he studies elicit it while others do not. "Nitsa" is rather evenly painted while "Natalia's" mane, "Leonida's" wild mop of hair and "Angeliki's" unblemished brow, or even the carved decoration on the back of the wooden chair, concentrate the impasto at the center of the painting in thick layers, which literally sticks out from the surface of the canvas towards the viewer's space and acquires its

own existence, independently of that which is recorded in the framework of the painting's composition, while conversely the periphery remains relatively smooth. The figures of Daskalakis traverse the canvas with their entire bodies, in most cases absolutely perpendicular or in a diagonal position which alone creates intensity in the apprehension of the work and converses with the unruly pigment of oil paints, determining the dramatic quality of the light as it reflects upon it.

Daskalakis' painting is not pleasant, much less comforting. Its content, its form and its material imbricate towards a painting that charges the viewer but not in the sentimental sense. Because of the pronounced realism of his works, frequently one experiences the desire to see the real-original image from which he departed but just as quickly one understands that in the end, and nevertheless, it is of no importance. Daskalakis' painting "flays" the eye and the hand and the soul of the person who faces it, and compels him, if he wants to see, to comprehend how the realistic representation of the world surrounding us can simultaneously be what is most unrealistic – because juxtapositions of opposites in art engender poetic intensity without which a work cannot exist. Daskalakis

seems to have applied in all his work – interiors, still lifes, human figures – a “painting of the gaze” in order that he find in the mandatory recording of that which he sees before him a pretext for painting: “Freedom, when it concerns any type of freedom, leads the painter to a compulsion for self-expression. So maybe this is why I turned to painting from life. Apart from the other reasons, it provides the conscience and any of its utilitarian and moral demands with the perfect alibi.” Setting his own boundaries, the artist thus frees himself to strike out on paths of creation as yet unknown.

His perseverance in working with models, animate or inanimate, within the confines of his studio and usually with artificial lighting belies not adherence to likeness but ultimately intimates the extent to which Daskalakis comes up against an inner reality – his own and his model’s – with the gaze cast onto the outside world in order to bring it back inside by way of observation and the first shapeless brushstroke on his canvas. Here a three-way course is under way: from observation to recording through abstraction, from depiction to figuration, and back to abstraction due to the concentration on matter itself, thus making the realistic rendering un-

real. The immense struggle he strives to overcome every time with each one of his works and that culminates in his portraits – the core of this presence – is ultimately managing to see and to render the natural as nonnatural.

All of Daskalakis’ work is the product of what he calls “a long trajectory of different approaches, hesitations, reversals and destructions” that he endures like the “Man of Sorrows” – in extreme humility before the model. Battles won and dearly paid for after repeated erasings of every effort at their creation on the same surface, attempts gradually deposited by Daskalakis on the final work which thus bears its “memory” on it, on its own body – human figure and canvas: the work is at the same time the memory of the feat of its coming into being. His works contain all the literal and figurative strata of the adventure required of the complex and time-consuming procedure Daskalakis undertakes every time in order to convey what he calls the “flesh and depth of painting.” Daskalakis wants to leave open the possibility of continuing this painting adventure in the work and it is for this reason that there always remain unfinished elements on the canvases. Counter to immobility, in favor of a work that is always alive

because inscribed on it are the traces of the abyss from which it was born.

The work of any real painter is necessarily essential but also, without fail, optimistic because it means that it has convincingly managed not only to hold its own before its formidable history but also to stand up to itself. Daskalakis' figures are both victorious and not – in a genre of painting that today tries to exist by its own means without resorting to facile solutions of the times that demand it betray its very nature: “All this diminishes painting.” Here the “passion for matter,” that “suffering flesh” of the canvas as Daskalakis refers to it – compose the familiar space of his painting from where he draws the force of self-referentiality that modernity has offered in order to win the battle of creation, but within painting and not exterior to it.

Daskalakis paints with full consciousness of the weight of the Masters whom he so admires. If in his works he refers to all those he feels compose his painterly family, it is because for someone who loves Painting it goes without saying that he will pay tribute to their memory by an intrinsic “understanding”, in other words, once

again only via the medium of painting itself: to Titian, Poussin and Claude Lorrain for myth, to Caravaggio for theatre, to Chardin for the transparency of matter, Vermeer for the spirit in light, the Flemish still lifes for the enchantment of detail, Rembrandt for death and decay, and Tsarouchis for perhaps all of the above. But Stefanos Daskalakis paints now, in Athens, in the studio at Remoundou Street, and everything starts there. By way of his gaze and his materials, he succeeds, without expressionistic effusion, to bring about an aesthetic emotion that for this reason is a spiritual emotion. At the same time, his love for the matter of painting constitutes for him a motive to surpass it. Each and every one of his works is the celebratory confirmation of a scarred victory over chaos: “That I can answer back to the void.”

The figures which have incarnated here for evermore the memory of this confrontation are not anonymous. They are these people, mortal figures, specific individuals, fallen victors. Daskalakis painted them with compassion at the dear price of life – liberation from the body through the body itself. As in the death of someone beloved, whose dead body matters as much as it no longer does.