

# Chaos Conductor

## Impressions of the artist Christo Daskaltsis and his work

The canvas is unframed, 100x80cm. Left of centre, I think I can see a face. Deep set eyes peer over my right shoulder. The forehead is high and unlined, the nose that of an old man, the mouth fixed and grave.

The top, right corner of the painting is turbulent. Gathering clouds or bunched muscle tissue, the suggestion of skin pulled taut over ribs. For a moment, a series of quick flecks below look like scars, the kind I imagine shotgun pellets leave on soft flesh.

And yet the work is not dark or forbidding. Large swathes of the canvas are wonderfully smooth, like mist. Oddly hopeful and reassuring. The painting is monochrome, the wildly different elements brought to life through light and shade. And there is something precarious about the whole – which makes me worry for it – as if it only holds its balance through an ongoing act of will.

In part, this balancing act relies on a soft vertical which rises nearly to the halfway point, where it meets a horizontal running in a diagonal line from left to right. But by accident or design? It's not easy to believe this image has been composed in the traditional sense of the word. I've been staring at it for ten minutes now. I'm still not quite sure what I'm looking at, and turn to the artist for help.

Christo Daskaltsis, born in 1969 in Dusseldorf and a resident of Berlin since 2002, looks delighted. He's seen this reaction to his work before, but it remains a source of pleasure.

"People think they're looking at a photograph of the moon, or of dunes in the desert." He quotes a piece on New York based artist Asger Carlsen: "his creative efforts aim at ... a sort of hyper sculpture that leaves the viewer in perpetual doubt whether what she sees are analogue depictions of real objects or products of synthetic photoshop design."

For the record, Daskaltsis does not work with or from photos. There is no digital wizardry involved in the creation of his works. He is a painter, and obviously in love with the medium: "this work, and all the works in this room, I made on canvas with a single layer of monochrome paint."

It doesn't seem possible. I approach the painting, close enough to see the roughened weave of the canvas. The eyes continue to look over my shoulder. The clouds and scars look peaceful at this distance. I see the hundreds of tones which separate the lightest and darkest elements, making the painting even more dramatic. It's not depth, exactly. I have a distinct and unnerving impression; the surface is making an effort to accommodate my curiosity. It's only when I stand alongside the painting, one cheek pressed against the wall, that I'm fully convinced – a perfectly smooth surface, a single layer of paint. Traces of paint on the stretcher allow me to identify a sky blue acrylic.

Daskaltsis sparkles when I mention the work's balance – which I find genuinely breath-taking – and seems to accept this compliment on the painting's behalf; a reaction which reminds of something Umberto Eco once said: “a good book always knows more than its writer.”

A week later, I go to watch Daskaltsis at work in his studio on the outskirts of Berlin. He has warned me not to expect too much. “It's a very mechanical process. The only creative decision I make is when to stop.”

He is welcoming when I arrive, but impatient to start work. And tense, for someone about to embark on a ‘mechanical process’.

“I do get nervous,” he admits. “The paintings can't look constructed. The successful ones look as if they have constructed themselves.”

For his next show, Daskaltsis is working on sheets of aluminium instead of canvas. He selects one from a stack against the wall and lies it flat on the ground in a corner of his studio. He mixes a white oil paint with varnish until it forms a smooth paste, takes a brush and applies this in a thin, even layer to the aluminium sheet.

He spends five minutes pacing, as if afraid to begin, then takes a bottle of turpentine. “Be kind,” he murmurs, before splashing a few ounces into a bowl. He walks round two sides of the metal sheet, arm out-stretched, letting drops fall where they will.

He picks up a long-handled broom, stands with his toes against the aluminium, and takes a deep breath. He reaches forward and pulls the broom in a straight line across the fluid surface, then moves to the right and repeats – strong, decisive strokes – until he reaches the edge. He moves round and brushes across these first strokes. Back and forth between these two sides, always pulling the brush towards him, top to bottom, left to right. Again and again and again. He pauses occasionally to add more turpentine, but his eyes never leave the surface, fixed on the emerging shadows.

Ever since coming face to face with Daskalstis' work, I've been trying to think of an adequate word to describe depth's opposite. Typically, painters create their effects through the application of layers of paint. Daskalstis turns this process on its head. He uses the turpentine and heavy brush to remove pigment, leading to the confusion people often feel when they stand in front of his work.

To properly capture the effect this creates, I need the language of sculpture, not painting. Where a sculptor attempts to discover the perfect form hidden within a piece of wood or block of marble, Daskalstis does the same with a single layer of paint. His work is a rebellion against the existence of surface. Only the layers are real, the things you put on and the things you take off. The fragility of his work is born in the tension between surface and the painting it conceals, or appears to conceal. His work confronts with the unsettling idea that depth is nothing more than a trick of the mind.

The canvas lies on the floor. From my position in a corner of the studio, I have a poor view of the surface, a better view of the artist. I don't want to move for fear of interrupting him. I have the impression that he is listening to the paint as it slides across the aluminium. If this is a mechanical process, then only in the sense that dance is mechanical. An hour has passed already. His eyes are half closed, the face expressionless. It's clear that he's completely forgotten me. The world has disappeared. He's escaped, and I feel a sudden stab of jealousy. I watch, half mesmerised, and review what I know of the artist.

When Daskalstis was 17 years old, his high school art teacher in Dusseldorf sent samples of his work to the Academie des Beaux Art in Paris. She did this without his knowledge, only informing him that he'd been offered a scholarship two weeks before he was expected in the French capital.

Daskalstis spent six years at the Academie, and remembers chafing against the rigid insistence on technique. "For two years, I drew stones with grey pencils. Then I drew butterflies with coloured pencils. This was torture for me. If I paint a butterfly, so that anyone can see it's a butterfly, I have to be exact. I have to suppress my feelings. This is why I've always been an abstract painter. I'm interested in the materials, not in creating illusions."

Highly regarded by his professors, Daskalstis was still happiest away from the classroom, roaming the streets, looking for pieces of found wood – the door of a discarded cupboard or driftwood on a trip to the coast. He would squeeze as many as thirty tubes of oil paint onto his finds, working at the surface for hours, sculpting it until the paint was centimetres thick. "I

followed my instinct,” he says, “it was just doing something – la, la, la – the professors always liked my work. They called me a chaos conductor. I was fearless then. Now, I’m often afraid. If I’m in the wrong mood, I start to fight the painting, and I always lose. I’m the only person who can decide if what I make is a success or a failure.”

Two weeks before he was due to graduate, Daskalasis left Paris and the Academie. Partly, this was rebellion against the idea that art is something which can be measured against academic criteria. Partly, it was frustration. The artist felt unequal to the task of expressing his ideas and feelings. He returned to Dusseldorf and his first love, music.

For three years, he trained and studied to win a place at the prestigious Robert Schumann Institut. Once again, he was praised for his feeling. Once again, he brought his studies to an abrupt end, convinced that flaws in his technique would prevent him from making a career as a concert pianist.

Daskalasis spent 10 years working in fashion and design, first as art director for a fashion agency in Düsseldorf, then moving to Berlin and masterminding the relaunch of magazine and radio station Blu (previously Sergej).

It wasn’t until 2006 that Daskalasis returned to painting. Three months earlier, his older sister had died of cancer, leaving a husband and 7 year-old daughter behind. He made himself hard, a rock for his parents, niece and brother-in-law to lean on; painting was a lifeline, a safe place where he could give vent to his anger and grief. Initially, Daskalasis only worked with white paint, applying thick layers to the canvas, scraping them away again, searching for “the painting behind the painting”. He tells me he that he can spend hours studying paint, how it moves across the canvas, mixes and congeals, the subtle fluctuations in colour and texture as it dries.

In the studio, his movements are becoming less fluid. I look at my watch; five hours have passed. From the moment he applies the turpentine, Daskalasis has between six and eight hours before the paint begins to dry and crack. So far today, he has applied almost a litre of turpentine and must have brushed the surface at least two and a half thousand times.

He closes his eyes and takes a step back. An expression of pain twists his features before he looks, cautiously. More often than not, according to his own criteria, he loses this race against time and the canvas, or aluminium sheet, is put aside to be painted over (or cleaned) and reused at some point in the future.

Today, he looks content. The surface of the metal is fluid. It will have to lie on the floor overnight; tomorrow, he will hang it. I suspect it's only then that he'll know for sure. Counter-intuitively, he will hang the painting upside down from where he's been standing to work on it; the oil paint he has used for this piece is a darker colour than the aluminium – had it been lighter, the painting would be hung the other way round.

Daskalasis' approach is defined by several more of these self-imposed controls, so many that I've begun keeping a mental list.

One layer and one colour. "Actually," he adds, "preferably none at all. White is best. It's neutral, and doesn't lead the viewer towards particular emotions."

No titles. Daskalasis christens each work with the date on which it was completed.

Price. Daskalasis prices his work according to size.

And, as he has already said, the process of creation is mechanical: "the only creative act is knowing when to stop."

It sounds more like a set of rules than a technique. "If you're just following a process so mechanical anyone could replicate it, then what's the point?" I'm aware I sound petulant – I love his paintings and want him to take more credit for having made them.

He looks embarrassed for me. I'm missing something important, so obvious he can't bring himself to say it.

I return to the paintings, their mystery and fragile balance. The eerie, inverted perspective; effects that don't recede into the distance, but step forward to meet the viewer. The paintings are quietly hopeful. Almost shy, as if wary of being rebuked for naivety, and I feel suddenly protective.

Daskalasis looks delighted when I mention this. He feels the same way, and tells me how much he enjoys being reunited with one of his paintings after time apart. "It's like seeing an old friend. I always want to ask, 'are they looking after you?' I see the mood I was in, whether I was feeling confident or uncertain. It's never perfect; I see parts of the canvas where I got it right, and others where I gave up too soon."

And, finally, I understand what he won't tell me.

The rules – elaborate rituals by which the artist tries to efface himself from his work – are an attempt to circumvent the ego, to abdicate the right of ownership and interpretation.

Crucially, Daskalasis is not conceding this right to the viewer, but to the work itself. This is the goal he has been aiming for over years of trial and error, of days spent staring at drying canvases, gradually learning the unique qualities of paint. He does not want to control these qualities; he wants to give them life. This is what Daskalasis means when he talks about the success or failure of a work: *Does it live?* For him, this is the meaning of the word 'creation' – to make something within enough life-force that it creates its own context. Something that lives and breathes, independently of both artist and viewer.