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Oral history interview with Nassos Daphnis,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Nassos Daphnis on April 9, 1968. The interview was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: Paul Cummings talking to Nassos Daphnis April 9. You were born in Greece--right?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In 1814. How do you pronounce the town you were born in?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, the town has two names. The old name is called Lavetseva. It's a Slavic name. But the Turks changed the name when they occupied Greece. The very old name was Krockeai. And then the Turks or the Slavs, I don't know which, changed it to Levetseva. But after the liberation of Greece it got the old name back again and now it's called Krockeai. But if somebody goes to Greece they can't find the place readily; it's called by two names.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: But Krockeai is the real name, the old name. It is near Sparta in the south. Sparta is about 30 kilometers from Krockeai. It's situated in a very, very beautiful hilly--I mean there are different hills, one after the other, and it overlooks the valley.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's country--it's not a beach and it's not on the ocean?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: No, no. You can see the ocean from there which is, oh, about 30 or 35 kilometers (which is about 25 miles) direct to the sea.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it's really an inland place.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: It's inland, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is it a large town? Small town?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, it must be about 5,000 now, 5 to 6,000. I don't think it's any more than that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was it that large when you were born, when you grew up there?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: I think it was about 3,000 at that time. Towns don't grow very much in Greece. They just stay like that for a long time. As a matter of fact, as long as I can remember Greece never grew. The whole country has a population of about seven-and-a-half to eight million people from way back.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, what happens is the people migrate so much. I mean as soon as somebody grows they...at least formerly they were not able to make a living. So they all left. But now I think in recent years with some of the industry that goes into Greece they might be abler to stay. But everybody that I knew at that time, my own friends, and everyone else, most of them have left.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it just stays the same. A few people stay and the rest leave.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: A few people stay and the rest go. So in that way we don't have any population explosion like they have in India or in China or even here. I mean, my God, I remember when I came here the population of the United States was 140 million people. And look at what it is now, almost 200 million. See the difference; it's just amazing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Do you come from a large family?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: I have two brothers and a sister. There are four in the family. And now we are all here in this country. My brother in Boston used to publish the *Greek-American News*, a newspaper which he founded. But he sold it just a few years ago. Now he's in the printing business. My older brother Joseph came just about two years ago from Greece.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And you have one sister?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: A sister.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And she's here too?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes, she's married here.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you know, I have no idea of what Greece at the time of World War I was like. What was it like living in a town like that and growing up? What did you do?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, when you're born in some place you don't know anything else except what you have. And you enjoy what you have. Because that's the way to do it anyway.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because that's what there is.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: But I tell you my boyhood was very pleasant. My father was in this country when I was a child. And so I grew up with my mother, brothers, and sister. And our growing up, younger years were pleasant. We went to grammar school there and to junior high before I came here to this country.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did your father do there?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, he was in the restaurant business just like most of the Greeks. He used to tell me a lot of stories. For them that was the only way they could work with not knowing the language very well. I mean if you learn a few things and are able to converse or give the orders--for instance, how many dishes can you have in a restaurant? You can learn in no time. And in that way you don't have to know the language too well in order to get along.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting because there are so many Greeks in restaurants.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, that's it, you see. And then the other field that the Greeks have gone into is the florist business. Which is where I started to work when I came to this country. My uncle had a flower shop in 28th Street in Lexington. And as soon as I came here I was working with the flowers, you see. So I used to arrange the flowers and I used to make the designs and I used to decorate the window. And in that way my interest was more or less into the making of things from the beginning.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And visual.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: And visual. Everything was just arranging and putting things together, you know, like the paintings or the construction I'm doing today. All these elements you get together and unify them into one visual image. I mean the same thing was happening with the...now I realize that it was the same thing that was happening then.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But then it was flowers and now it's...?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Now I'm using colors as flowers, I mean the colors of the flowers became something else. They became a flat plane, for instance, in color paintings. You can associate those two quite easily.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. That's fascinating. When did you realize that?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Just now. I never thought of that before. I just thought of it when I went back, say, 30 or 35 years ago, even more, 40 years ago when I was doing that. I said, my God, I was doing those thing way back then. I was doing what I'm doing now on the table over there where you see all those things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Different colors just fitting together and I unify them, and make them into a design or image. I was doing the same thing when I was working with the flowers and putting them in the window. I had an exhibit right there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's marvelous! Was there a reason why you came to this country in 1930?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: There was a reason. My father always wanted to bring me to this country--well, as we say, for better opportunities. Because in Greece no matter what you do it's limited. I mean what you can do in a village? There are very limited things that you can do there. There isn't very much you can do unless you work in the fields or have a little trade, become something, a carpenter or artisan.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Craftsman.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Craftsman of some kind. But nothing beyond that. So he was very anxious because he knew in America what opportunities one can have and he wanted his children to come. And he was an American citizen. The fortunate thing is that he became an American citizen in 1903 before we were born. And we became American citizens automatically. Even though we were born in Greece, we were American citizens because he was an American citizen before we were born.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But your mother was Greek, though?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. But it didn't make any difference.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: But there was a law then in Greece that you could not come to this country after...I think the age limit was 18 or 20 or something like that. And my brother was getting to be that age--you see he was 18 then, my older brother--and we had to really do it that year or we wouldn't have been able to come. He would have had to go into the Greek Army. And, as soon as you do that, you lose all your American rights.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Then you became a citizen of the other country.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Even though Greece recognized us as citizens also because we were born there. But actually we were American citizens.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But isn't Greek citizenship recognized there--once you have it you always have it or something? Or is that not true?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: If you were born there you are always a Greek citizen. But you can adopt another country also. But Greece will always recognize you as a Greek citizen when you go there, you see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: But what I want to say is this: at that time there was also an American law that an American citizen who had dependents in Greece or any other country could only bring them in a group as a whole family, not individually. So the whole family had to come here at one time. So we all packed up one nice day and came over here in 1930.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right at the top of the Depression.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. Really a bad time to come. But if we just missed it by a year or something like that, the chances were that we wouldn't have been able to come later. So we had to do it then. So we all came. And, as I was saying, as soon as we came here, my first job was to go to my uncle's flower shop and work beginning as a delivery boy and then starting to learn the trade and arrange flowers and decorate windows.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the flower business like in the 30's?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: It wasn't too good. Even though my uncle had a tremendous number of rich customers as a clientele, even they were really not spending money in those years. I remember, my God, sometimes in the course of a whole day maybe only one customer would walk into the store and buy something, maybe five dollars' worth of things. That was it for a whole day. It was just fantastic.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And flowers are so perishable.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It must have been a very delicate time.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. It was really bad.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did you go to school when you came here? Or had you finished your education by that time?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: No. I wanted to go to school. I wanted to go to day school. But I couldn't do it because I had to work in order to earn a living. So I went to night school to learn English, mainly English. And then I took a course or two in mechanical drawing. But the primary reason was to learn English. I might just as well tell you this because I've been telling it to everybody, something that happened in school which is interesting. Well, we came here in November. And at the time of George Washington's birthday which is in February--what is it? 12th

or 22nd?

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's the 22nd I think.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, the teacher asked us to write a composition on George Washington. And since I had been here only 4 or months, I didn't know anything at all to write. So I took a postage stamp where I could see the image of George Washington and drew a big picture on my paper where I was supposed to write the composition, a pencil drawing of George Washington's face, and gave it to the teacher. And she was really delighted with it. And I got the first prize for doing that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's marvelous!

NASSOS DAPHNIS: I was afraid that she might not like it or that she might be irritated because I didn't write something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Had you made drawings before?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: I was drawing the plants in the flower shop all the time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: I was interested in drawing from the beginning. Even before I came here I was involved with carving wood in Greece or something like that. Even though I was never exposed actually to any artistic pictures or anything like that other than the icons in the churches. I mean I never saw any work of art until we came here, just the icons. That was it. But I was just carving things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of things would you carve?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, just some little images in wood and I used to have a stamp and I would stamp on our books, you know, all kinds of things. And the teacher used to get mad about it and, you know, punished me and all kinds of things. But, you know, children will draw those things no matter what.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So when did you start drawing? At what age would you guess?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, about the age of 20.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, I mean start drawing in school.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: In school? Well, that happened way back. Probably around ten maybe; ten or twelve maybe. But when I came here after I was working in the flower shop for a while I met Michael Lekakis. Do you know him? He's a painter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sure.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: And he was working in a wholesale florists selling ferns and all kinds of things. And when I was walking from the store over to the wholesale market to buy some greens, I used to go to Michael all the time because I would talk to him in Greek, you see, and get everything I wanted without any trouble. And one time I brought him some of the drawings I was doing on plants and told him that I was interested in drawing and was copying them. And I showed him some of my drawings. And he said, "I am having a life class at my studio on Wednesday. Would you like to come?" I said, "Sure." So I went there and I met a few other artists at that time, Steve Cusumano and a few others.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you remember any of the others?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Any of the other artists that were there?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Not that I remember offhand. But from then on, you see, I started drawing from the figure. And then I went out to paint with Steve Cusumano a couple of times--outdoors. And that was it. I have never gone outdoors to paint again. If I go out, I sort of take whatever I see. I mean I sort of take it within and then do my own interpretation when I get back.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There was no instruction in that drawing class, was there?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There was just the model and you did what you wanted to do?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Just anybody could learn whatever they wanted to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long did you go to that?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, maybe for a year or two.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, so it was quite a period of time to that class?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: About once a week, about?

NASSO DAPHNIS: Yes, just about that. But, you see, then right after that I started to paint on my own those primitive paintings that I did in the beginning, you see. And for 3 or 4 years I did quite a few paintings. As I said, not from outdoors at all; just in the studio. And in 1938 I exhibited one of the paintings at the Independents. I don't know if you know of them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: All the Independents used to...anybody could exhibit anything they wanted for five dollars; that is, if you paid five dollars you could exhibit something. So I just exhibited one of the paintings. Which is now at the Baltimore Museum.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? That's marvelous.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: And then after a week or so I got a letter from Emily Francis. She used to have the Contemporary Arts Gallery. She was on 57th Street at that time, near Sixth Avenue.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Upstairs.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Upstairs, one flight up. She said that she liked the painting and she wanted to see some more paintings. So I went over to see her. And she came to the studio and saw the paintings. And she gave me a show in that fall of 1938. Of primitive paintings. Of course I was astonished because I never expected it. I mean here I was, you know, I had not gone to school, I mean for painting, and was just painting on my own. And here I am having a show already.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, in 1938 you were only 2\_?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Twenty-four.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Twenty-four, which is very young anyway.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, yes, from that point of view, yes. Well, that show was a complete success because most all the paintings were sold at that time. And the reviews were just marvelous. I mean I couldn't expect anything better. And I just couldn't believe it, because, you know, from the stories in the lives of the artists, they have to struggle before they are recognized and get any kind of....And it just was overwhelming to have success at that early age. But then after that, you see, I wasn't satisfied with what I was doing and started to change after that. Because I got exposed to other things going to museums and to galleries and so on and so forth. And living in New York I no longer liked a naive life any more.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. I want to ask you one other thing before we get into that. What was the mechanical drawing that you studied? You said you had gone to school and studied mechanical drawing at one point.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, at one time I was interested very much in engineering. Actually if I had had money and could go to school, I probably wouldn't be an artist today.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You'd be an engineer?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: I'd be an engineer or something else, a scientist or something like that. It intrigues me very much to find out the mysteries of things in a physical way rather than aesthetics which I got into later.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But your plants and things are scientific in a way, aren't they?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: The plants?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: The ones I'm doing now it's completely scientific. So now I'm doing both. But I had to find out

everything on my own, even the tree peonies, the crosses of the tree peonies that I have been doing for 25 years. Everything I have learned has been through my own efforts. Because there is something there that is not written to begin with. It's something beyond.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see. It's all unknown experiment.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: It's all unknown fields that you have to explore in order to find out what is happening. Nobody else has done it. I'm the first one that has really gone into that field, to the specific thing that far into the genetics in order to find out what's happening to this particular plant. Now I have gone to the third and fourth generation of hybrids, which nobody else has ever done. The only person who has gone to the second generation of hybrids is Professor Saunders from Clinton, New York. And of course I have used his two plants of the second generation to go to my third and fourth generations. But nobody else has ever done this.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long did you go that that school--do you remember the school where you studied mechanical drawing?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Oh, just about a year or so. I went to the Stuyvesant Evening School in New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And you worked in the florist shop then for how long would you think?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I think I was in my uncle's flower shop for 4 or 5 years maybe. And then I used to get other jobs. I started to work as a bus boy. And then later on as a waiter in different restaurants just to earn some money in order to keep on painting. As a matter of fact, at one time I used to work down at Rockaway Beach just weekends--Saturdays and Sundays--to earn about ten or fifteen dollars for two days and the other five days I used to paint, you see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was a lot of money in those days.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Oh, yes. Ten or fifteen dollars would keep you for a whole week.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Well, what started you to paint? How did you start painting? You'd been making drawings and things.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Mainly on my own. I was interested...well, I had ideas, I had drawings, and I just got a set of paints and started to paint without any instruction or anybody actually pushing me to go into painting. It was really my own initiative, I think.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You said the early paintings were primitive. What were the images like?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, the images had to do mainly with Greece and mythological and religious subjects. There were some from Greek mythology and some from Christianity, religious things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have a very religious upbringing?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: No, I used to go to church maybe just like everybody else but nothing very strict.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And the schools were all public schools in Greece?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So the images in the paintings then were mythological?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. And also there were some landscapes and things which were done with certain primitive....The only painting that the Albright has now was painted in 1938. It was just some women washing clothes by the brook, which has nothing to do with mythology or religion.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But those were all memories of things you had seen when you were younger?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: They were just memories.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting. You did a kind of whole little picture history of your youth, in other words?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what are the things that you remember, you know, like the visual things you remember about growing up in Greece, or the sounds, or the colors, or light?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, as a child, as I said before, I mean you're not aware of those things because you don't

know what exists in other places. You know, you just accept.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You don't have comparisons.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: There are no comparisons. But the great comparison that I did make after I went to visit Greece, after I'd been away for about 30 years, in 1952, then I would see the difference. A lot of things: the light, colors, forms, all kinds of things. Because then I had something to compare with. But in my youth I just accepted everything as part of life, as part of the environment.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's what it was. How long did you follow the primitive painting activity? Was that from the time you started painting in--what? About 1935 or so?

NASSOS CUMMINGS: From 1935 to 1938 and 1939 I did primitive paintings. And then in 1939 I started to change. They started to become a little bit...they had a surrealist kind of element coming into the primitive style.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? I haven't seen photographs of any of those. How did that happen?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, you see, primitive painting more or less...my paintings were just like dreams anyway, you see. But they were done in such a way, without any technical knowledge whatsoever, they became primitive paintings. But they were still dreams. You know what I mean?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. Kind of dreams of childhood?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Dreams of childhood. Dreams of this and that. But actually they weren't so sophisticated, so technically executed, in order to become something else than primitive paintings. So they were primitive paintings but still they were dreams, you see. But, after working for quite a few years, my skills sort of developed to more than what I was doing a few years before. And the paintings became more skillful. So they lost the primitive flavor and they were going over to Surrealism, so to speak, in 1939, 1940, 1941, 1942. Until the war. Then I went into the Army in 1942.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you know any other artists in New York besides Lekakis and the other few you mentioned? Had you met more by that time?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. Not very many. I wasn't really exposed to many artists. I used to go to galleries and to the museums to see exhibitions; but not too many artists. I mean I used to know them but not to be good friends so to speak.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Say hello in the street and that kind of casual thing. Were there any exhibitions that you remember prior to going into the Army that were important artistic things for you in either the galleries or the museums?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I remember the show which is still very vivid in my mind; the one the Museum of Modern Art had, the Van Gogh show. I think it was in a very small little place on 50th Street.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In the Hecksher Building.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. A very tiny little place. And I went over there and saw Van Gogh's paintings during those years. They really excited me so much because I had never seen Van Gogh's paintings before. That show I still remember today.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the quality do you think that was so effective?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Of Van Gogh's painting?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, first of all I liked his *Potato Eaters* and his *Shoes* and things like that, besides the *Sunflowers* and the other things that he did. And then the color was very vivid and inspiring. Then I think they had a primitive show later on when they moved from there, I think, to the basement of the Rockefeller Center or someplace for a year or two before they got into the new building. They had a whole primitive show of all the French primitives and some of the American primitives. I still remember that. There's a book on it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. That's hazy for me. I don't remember it.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Those are the shows I think I still remember from those years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you got interested in your tree peonies very early, didn't you? I mean it was in the 1930's, wasn't it?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: 1939 was the first time when I saw tree peonies. The reason for that is in 1938 in my show Mr. and Mrs. Gratwick (who had the tree peonies) came to New York and saw this show, my exhibition, and they bought the first painting that I ever sold. They bought it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's terrific.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, in those years I used to know also Stefan Bourgeois. I don't know if you ever met him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But the dealer....

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. And then of course Gordon Washburn who was at the Albright at that time was a very good friend of the Gratwicks; and he still is today. Stefan Bourgeois wrote the introduction to my first show. And of course Gordon Washburn and Bourgeois were very good friends. And Washburn told the Gratwicks to come down and see this show. So through all these things, the Gratwicks came down, they bought the painting. And then the following year they invited me up to their place for a week or so in the spring.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did they live?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: They lived near Rochester, New York, between Rochester and Buffalo, near Batavia, New York in the Genesee Valley. It's a nice, beautiful place. So that was when I first saw the tree peonies and then I got interested in them. And I tried to paint them. I did a lot of pastels and washes in 1939, 1940, 1941--three years. Then in 1942 I went into the Army. And then I got out in 1945. And in 1946 I started to cross the tree peonies. You see, after I painted--I don't know--maybe 30 or 40 paintings of them, I thought that I should more or less develop the flower itself rather than paint the existing one.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I want to ask you one thing before we continue. Where did you meet Bourgeois?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: I met Bourgeois...his wife Maria Theresa was one of the six adopted daughters of Isadora Duncan. And she had a school of classical dancing. She had about seven or eight Greek girls dancing with her and she called them the Heliconyats, you see. And Lekakis' two sisters were in the group. So we used to go over there every Saturday where they were practicing and observe the whole dance. I mean they used to dance all these different kinds of dances. And Stefan Bourgeois was playing the piano. And the whole thing was just going on and on and on. We became very good friends with Bourgeois in those years. That's how I met him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's marvelous.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Through the dance, through Lekakis' sisters and then the dancing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think it was that struck you about the tree peony that got you so involved with it that you wanted to start making drawings?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, you see, the flower is a very unusual flower; there is something that you do not usually see. It's not like the regular herbaceous peony which is, you know...has no form or gesture at all on the petals. I mean it's just a bunch of flowers with no character, but in the tree peony every variety, every flower has its own individual characteristics, not only in the shape of the petals but also the color, the way it presents itself and so on and so forth. The tree peony has been in existence for more than a thousand years, a thousand two hundred years. The Chinese first started to grow it and develop it. And the Japanese took it over. And the Japanese worked for about, oh, maybe seven to eight hundred years working on and developing different varieties of one species.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: But the Japanese have really done a tremendous job of doing something to the individual varieties that you cannot just improve on. You know, it's almost perfect as far as the plant and flower is concerned. But the only thing that was missing from the color range of all this was the yellow. There was no yellow gene in that species at all to create yellow flowers. And in 1880 some French missionaries who were going through north Korea saw a little plant with a yellow flower on it the size of a little anemone this big. And they examined it and they thought it might be related to the tree peony that they knew from China or Japan. So they took it. And sure enough it was the wild plant of the original tree peony that the Chinese had been developing for almost a thousand years. And that was the only one that had the yellow genes in it. They took it over to France and there were two people who tried to cross that little wild plant with the already cultivated tree peony, two French hybridizers. Well, they managed to produce about 7 or 8 hybrids of that cross. But their mistake was of using the Chinese type of tree peony which has a double flower, quite heavy and the wild plant

which these missionaries brought the France which is a single small flower with a weak stem. The stem is very, very weak. It doesn't hold itself up, way up, and the result was that they did manage to get a yellow color transfer from the wild one to the cultivated ones, but they got a very big flower, yellow color in it, but a weak stem. The result was that the flower just went under the foliage, just like a big head of cabbage, just going right down to the ground, you see. Well, actually they didn't produce anything worthwhile with all their efforts. Then the other man who really did quite good work was professor Saunders from Clinton, New York. He selected one plant--he used the single Japanese type in which the flower is not as heavy as the Chinese and he crossed them and he got about seventy first generation hybrids at once. Out of those there are about 20 or 25 that are really excellent plants and flowers with good stems and so on and so forth. But, you see, the F-1's, the first generation hybrids, are completely sterile; they do not produce seeds.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: They're just like the neuters.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's the end of the line.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, it's the end of the line because what happened is that you get two parents, let's say, that are so far away in relation to one another, like, say, the donkey and the horse. I mean even though they might be related in the family line way back and they can cross each other, but then the offspring...the reproductive cells will be so much disturbed that they wouldn't be compatible with one another in order to reproduce. The same thing happens with plants. The lutea, which is the wild plant, by being away from the cultivated one, which has been cultivated and changed for thousands of years, everything, the structure of the plant, the cells have changed so much that when they finally come together the offspring is so disturbed that the reproductive elements just don't produce; they're not fertile. So now Saunders just by chance had found two seeds on his F-1's. Sometimes--nobody knows how in nature that can occur--but there were two seeds that were fertile. He grew those two plants, the F-2's. He thought after he grew them that with those two F-2's the fertility would come into them because every time you go another generation the order of reproduction sets in again because there's no compatibility to the fertility. But those two F-2's did not set seeds. And Saunders was getting old; he was getting to be about eighty at that time so he wasn't interested in trying to experiment further. So he gave us his collection of F-2's, to the Gratwicks and to me, in order to work on it. So when I came back from the Army in 1945, 1946, I saw the plants and I got interested in exploring the possibilities of creating stability in the F-1's and going beyond the work of Saunders. So that's how I started to get interested and involved in this project which I'm still doing now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do the Gratwicks grow plants?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, before the tree peony, he was growing rare plants, anything rare that he could get hold of he just liked to grow. And the tree peony of course was one kind. But the other plants, now he has them there just for a hobby. But the tree peonies are the ones that we work on more than anything else.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting. Well, let's see, you went into the Army in 1942, right? I want to go back to the chronology here. So you didn't have a chance to meet--or did you--any of the European artists who came here during the war? People like Mondrian or the Surrealists?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: No, I was away most of the time so I didn't meet anybody.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do in the Army?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, in the Army at the beginning....Before we go into that, can I continue a little bit on the tree peony because there's something else that I'd like to say?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, sure.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Now the tree peonies that we produced in those years are the F-1's and some of those we are putting on the market today. We named them according to what the flower itself suggested to us. For instance, sometimes we give them mythological names, sometimes numerical ones, sometimes we gave them names of painters. Now we have one named Gauguin, for instance, and we have one named Redon, and one Marie Laurencin. Those are the names of the painters that we have used for the flowers. Then we have some Greek names, like Chromos, Demeter, Artemis, Persephone, Persepolis, Tria (which means three); you know, that kind of names that we gave to the new hybrids that we are creating now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What were the qualities that gave you the idea of the painter's names and the flowers? What was it in a flower that reminded you of Gauguin, for example?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, if words could more or less give the image of the flower, it would be wonderful, but it's

not that easy. But anyway the Gauguin flower, first of all it's a multi-color flower. The inside of the petal is fiery red with streaks of yellow going through it from the base up. Then on the back of it is yellow with red streaks going through it. And its very fiery flowers almost like a blazing sun with the kind of color that reminds me of the colors Gauguin employs, the South Seas flowers that you get in the South Seas climate. Now Redon is completely different. Redon is almost like a pastel, kind of very pale pink with very blue streaks going into it just like the quality of Redon's pastels that he gets in his flowers. And Marie Laurencin is quite feminine like the soft colors in her paintings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And how about Greek names? Because that's an entirely different kind of attitude, in a way, isn't it?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. Well, for instance, Demeter is the goddess of earth in Greek mythology. And the flower is a very, very full flower. It looks like a very fertile flower with a lot of petals going around and around in a circle, like the petals are more or less dancing around like a Greek dance, sort of very festive kind of quality that you get from it. And that quality is the one that represents more or less the image Demeter represents and the flower you think about when you see something like that. I mean those are the kind of relationships that we try to associate between the names and the flower, something that would be fitted to the image more or less. I mean every one of the names...you might have to wait 4 or 5 years or maybe longer in order to find the appropriate name for the flower. For instance, the Tria, which is three in Greek (one, two, three)--now that plant not only was the third plant that was crossed, also it has three flowers on each stem, you see, in succession; so the primary flower blooms and then the secondary and the third flower. Which is very unusual for these plants. Any of the other plants don't do that; this is the only one that does it. So what other name could you give it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fascinating. Anyway, we'll come back to that again. Let's see, where were we? Oh, we were talking about the Army for a second. What did you do--because you were--what-- you were in the Army-- you were in Italy?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. Well, at the beginning I went into the infantry. I got my basic training there. Then I sort of didn't like the infantry. It was kind of tough. I was trying to get out of there. I made a lot of applications and so on stating that I was an artist and I have other qualifications and maybe they could use me in other fields, in another way. So finally I got attached to the engineers battalion of the division. And then I started to do maps. And then finally camouflage. I did quite a bit over here in this country and then after we went to Italy I did relief maps for the general staff. Before they did any of the big offensives and we were standing still, for instance, on the Italian Front they had to study the terrain and the objectives and so on. They had to have something visual in order for them to make their plans. So at one time I had to do a relief map of an area below Rome, oh, about as big as this room here, which is, say, 20 x 20 feet; as big as that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, boy!

NASSOS DAPHNIS: And I had to do it in scale not only horizontally but vertically too. Everything had to be built up, mountains and valleys and so on. And then, you see, the generals, the division and corps headquarters used to come and make their plans on the top of that map, what they were going to do. If they break one line they're going from the A line to the B line or hill 235 to Hill 236. And every unit had to be placed on there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was a giant puzzle.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: And they moved from objective to objective. So that was one job I was doing there. And then, of course, the camouflage. I used to go up in these small planes and observe the terrain and suggest things to do in order to conceal our operations. So that was my job in Italy. Which I didn't mind. It was quite good. I didn't have to be on the front line. I didn't fight.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were in the Army--what--4 years?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Three and a half.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And so you had no painting or drawing or anything during that time:

NASSOS DAPHNIS: No. I didn't do any paintings at all during the War. Because...well, I was against the War anyway, to begin with. And I said who knows if I'm going to come out alive and what's the use of painting anyway. And one time in Italy I met somebody who became a very good friend of mine, John Athos. He's an English professor at Ann Arbor University. He was with the G-2, the Intelligence. We met there. And I told him about what I had been doing and all that. He was interested. I mean he was interested in the arts too besides English literature. And he pushed me into making a few drawings. So I did make just about 5 or 10 drawings during the whole campaign. That's all I did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of drawings were they?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, they were Surrealistic drawings which later on I transferred to paintings when I came out of the Army. They were all these dead trees. After the Italian campaign there was all this torn landscape all over the place from the bombs and shells and so on. Or maybe olive trees. You know, olive trees intrigued me very much because they're just like human beings the way they grow. This is one tree that is very different from other trees in the way it grows to begin with.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I don't think I've seen one.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Olive trees?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, when they grow and they get old they seem to separate from the center. Even if the center of the tree gets bad it doesn't die because it doesn't depend for food and nutrition from the center of the tree like other trees do. They develop rings each year. In the olive trees you don't find the rings at all because they get all the food from the outside. And even if you cut the tree right in half, split it right in half, you never kill it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: From the two sides will keep growing?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. And that's what they do to begin with and sometimes in old orchards you can see a tree split in four. One goes this way and one goes that way and the other goes the other way. And they all seem to walk away from each other. They seem just to walk away. And in the center where the original tree was planted there's nothing there. Well, that is why the olive tree lives so long. It doesn't rot. There are two trees actually that live that long--the olive tree and the redwoods here in California. The redwoods for another reason. And the olive trees because of that quality.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long does an olive tree live then?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, there's an olive tree in Jerusalem that they say Christ used to preach under. So it must be more than a long time. And also there's an olive tree in Athens that they have all surrounded so that nothing happens to it that Plato used to go to and have a class. So they call it the Plato olive tree.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's an old olive tree.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. So that shows you how long an olive tree can live.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fascinating. After the War you came back to New York, right?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And what did you do? Because for a couple of years in 1949 you went to Europe on the GI Bill. Did you do something before that?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, from 1945 to 1949 I was painting. And I think those were the years when I used to have a job on weekends working as a waiter. Or was it that time? Either I was doing that or I used to have a job decorating a window for a florist in the morning from eight to eleven or something like that, just decorating the window in the morning. And then in the afternoon I used to paint. I'd make enough money just to live on so I could paint the rest of the day. And I had a show at the Contemporary Arts in 1937 and in 1949 I think. Yes. But those shows didn't go as well as the 1938 show. You see, they changed; they became something else. They were either torn down trees or shells. The summers I used to spend up in Rockport, Massachusetts and I did a lot of sea life and things like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What got you going to Rockport? How did you start?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, a few others...by that time I met Stamos and we had a studio together on 26th Street, that is, a loft divided in two. And he was going up there. I don't know...there were others going up there and I don't know if it was Stamos or somebody else who suggested it who was going there before. But I remember going up there right after the War through 1949.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was in the summers?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Just summers, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you work up there?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: I did a lot of work, just watercolors.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What decided you to take the GI Bill and go to Europe?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I figured that was the only way to do it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But did you want to go back to Europe at this point?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I wanted to go back. I wanted to go to France and other countries that I hadn't seen. Even in Italy in the War you couldn't see all you wanted to see. As a matter of fact in Italy at one time when I was doing the camouflage thing I was supposed to fly above and inspect an area between Lucca and Florence below the Arno. The pilot got his orders to go to a certain area and I was to observe the area and then come back. And I figured out we were so close to Florence and I said, my God, if something happens I won't be able to see Florence. So I told him to fly over to Florence, which was still enemy territory; which I wasn't allowed to do. But I wanted to see Florence from the air.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did it look like?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Oh, it looked beautiful. Of course I had seen pictures of it before that but I just wanted to see the real thing. So when I got back they said you shouldn't have done that because if something had happened you would have been in a fix. I said, okay, I won't do that again.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's marvelous.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: But, you see, I wanted to go to France after the War and visit other countries. And if I stayed here I wouldn't be able to use the GI Bill. I had to go to school on it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: And over there in France, you see, I could sign into a school and not even attend school. Just do my own painting and live there and collect the money, and paint on my own.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long were you in Europe at that point?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Let's see. 1949 to 1952, so it's about 3 1/2 years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And did you travel through France and Italy? You went to Greece and anywhere else?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: I went to Greece and Turkey with two friends. We got a little car and we drove from Paris down to the south of France, then to Italy, we went to Trieste and then went through Yugoslavia to Greece in the little car. And going through Yugoslavia at that time was the greatest experience we ever had.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? In what way?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, because there were no roads, nothing. We just had to drive through the fields in order to get someplace. It took us six days to cross the country. It was just amazing. And we didn't know how to ask for things. In southern Yugoslavia it was easy because there were Macedonians or people who could speak Greek so we could do all right. And in the northern part near Italy they could speak some Italian and it was all right. But in the other parts the Slavic language was spoken and we used sign language.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you know Italian?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: I know some. I understand it anyway.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Any other languages?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Some French.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do in Paris in those days?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I had a one-man show there at the Colette Allendy Galerie.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that happen? They're usually so cool about giving exhibitions to people.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, this woman...I don't know...she just liked what I was doing then. And at that time the things I was doing were just all kinds of shapes, organic shapes with textures on it. Just like moon craters, all these...I was doing a lot of ink drawings too, a lot of textures and colorings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were they abstract images?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: They had no recognizable images at all. They were just organic forms.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were they kind of early abstract pictures? Because the surrealist things sounded as if they still had kind of realistic images.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes, but then you see, right after that in 1948, 1949, all the recognizable images disappeared and became just amorphous shapes with a lot of textures, surface textures.

PAUL CUMMINGS: With the biomorphic shapes?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. And those are the ones that I showed in Paris when I got there. But then after that, you see, in France I stayed that winter. And in the spring we traveled to Italy and then to Greece. And I came back to Italy in the fall and stayed in Italy that winter. Then is when my work actually changed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was the year of--what?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: 1951.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Let me get one other thing. Who were the people you met in Paris? Did you meet a lot of the painters there, Americans, Europeans, or anyone?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I met Giacometti, Brazinos. I met a few other people at the Salon de Mai. I exhibited at the Salon de Mai one time. I met Manessier, I think, and some other French painters, Soulages, I think. And of course a lot of the GI's over there. They were all over the place.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there many Americans there who are painters who you still see?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: You mean Americans that I still see here from over there?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: The ones that I remember are Sidney Geist; Calcagno was there. There were quite a few Americans.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I don't remember very many Americans having exhibitions there.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: As a matter of fact, no.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's why I was curious about how you got the show with the gallery; how it happened.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. I think I got this show over there in the early 1950's; it was either February or March.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was it a successful show for you?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: No, I didn't sell anything as far as that goes. But this man who wrote the catalogue--Agan. I don't know if you know him. He still writes for Art International. He wrote a beautiful preface for the catalogue. I still remember a phrase that he has in the beginning of the catalogue. He said that "if there is one word that will define Nassos Daphnis that is not that of a painter or a poet but that of an explorateur." And then he goes on and on and on and says all kinds of things. I think he did a good job of writing. And the thing that amazes me; in America you had to pay for all that. I mean if you ask somebody to write something in your catalogue you have to pay the person; you pay for the gallery, you pay for this and that. But I didn't have to pay him at all. He just volunteered to write the preface.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did you meet him?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: I didn't meet him. I never saw him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: oh, really?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: He just saw the paintings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In the gallery?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. It was just strange. I think at the time he saw the paintings he volunteered to write the thing. It was wintertime and he went down to the south of France. He was ill, I think. That's probably why I didn't meet him at the show.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there any exhibitions that you saw in France at that time that interested you?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, there were a lot of shows all over the place, like at the Maeght Gallery. The Carrere Gallery used to be there. There were a lot of galleries on the Left Bank. There were shows going on all the time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You saw lots of things?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: I used to go and see shows quite a bit.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There was some mention I think in the Albright-Knox catalogue about Herban.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Oh! Well, I never met him. I saw his paintings there. But I never met him. I used to like his paintings quite a bit at that time. But I didn't fully appreciate or understand the way he uses certain elements of shapes and colors. But he intrigued me because of the flat shapes that he used, geometric shapes and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was it like going back to Greece?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, as I was saying before, that was when I really got to compare certain qualities of the landscape, or of the light, and other things that I faced when I went back to Greece. Mainly it was the intensity of the light and the clearness, the crystal-like quality, the dazzling, I mean the intensity of the light that is there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why is that I wonder?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I tried to find out scientifically why it does that. And I think the reason for that is it's not the light actually that is cast on an object, it's the reflected light that comes right back at you.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The colors are solid colors.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, the thing is that they're all white so that everything that comes in it just bounces right back at you. There's nothing there to absorb the light. There isn't much vegetation. Any tree or any vegetative area will absorb most of the light and you never get the reflection back because everything will be dawn in. You don't get that dazzling....

PAUL CUMMINGS: Like mirrors.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Like mirrors coming right at you, you see. But in Greece you have this dry landscape. And also the stones have a sort of glasslike quality, marble or whatever, that just comes right back. And then on top of that you have all those houses painted white in many places. It's really fantastic.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And it's very dry, too.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. And there was when I really visualized...I mean I could not see any textures on the shapes. I would see everything flat, for instance, because the dazzling quality that everything had and the form would just disappear. For instance, you would just see a house as a house but not as little stones put together, the whole thing was one form with nothing in between. And from then on I guess I eliminated all the textures on my painting and started painting flat.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And was that started in Rome? Or did you do that while You were in Greece?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: No, I didn't do any painting while I was traveling. I did that in Florence. And that was the year of 1951. The first painting at the Albright was done in 1951. That was done that year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's the beginning and that just developed...?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: That's the beginning of the flat shapes, flat forms. And then after that I did a systematic reduction, so to speak, of color and forms. I started to introduce the straight line. I eliminated organic shapes. I tried to eliminate all the secondary colors. And then I limited myself to only primary colors after that. And tried to create problems for myself and tried to solve them with the minimum elements that I could use and actually develop something that you would call a painting or a work of art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Also you did a series of black and white paintings. In 1952?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: In 1952...black and white paintings?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Maybe I got the date wrong.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Geometric paintings?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I don't remember that. It just said in the catalogue that there was a series of black and white paintings. Well, maybe that was later.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes, because the black and whites that I did were in 1955 and 1956. There were quite a few. As a matter of fact, I did some white on white in 1956. White on white and black and white, quite a few of them. The first white on white that I did was in 1955 or 1956. I don't remember exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had a color plane theory that they mention. What actually was that?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I started to use that, started to work on it in 1955 when I got to realize what color actually meant to me as pure energy and how it can exist and in what kind of a plane can certain colors exist in space. So I started to analyze, I started to vibrate different colors. And I got down to a kind of theory which is my own and placed each color in certain imaginary planes or in space just for my own use, so to speak. And I have employed that sort of theory for all the later paintings from 1955 on. And I find that for me it works and I create all the space between the different colors if I use them correctly. That's why sometimes you see a flat plane next to one another even though they meet at a certain point. And one will go into space and the other will come out from the space because of the right placement of one color to the other.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That is involved with the degrees of a hundred that you have...?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. Well, that is just a numerical division which facilitates more or less the mind to imagine in what position one might appear to the other, sort of to make it easier to visualize.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. It's easier to talk about.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. If you know that the whole space is divided into a hundred equal planes and if I say that the red appears on plane 45, you can already visualize where the red might appear.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, approximately.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: I mean it's not going to be right in front of you.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: And it's not going to be at the end. It's almost in the middle.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: So it's kind of a way of visualizing something in space.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. And you still use these ideas today in your work?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have they changed--the ideas? Or your usage of the ideas?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: You mean the idea of the plane theory? Or the ideas in the paintings?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, the two. The plane theory--has that changed? Or has your way of using it changed?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: The way of using it in my latest paintings--I'm not too aware of the theory as it applies to the previous paintings. But the relationship between one color and the other where it appears--for instance, I mean these colors over here, say, the yellow will appear between--I have a light red over here which is a different thing, between the light red and the white. And the black will always be between the two reds. And the blue will be between the white and the red. So that sequence I have used in most of the paintings that were done from 1967 on; 1967 and 1968. The last show was all of that sequence. Each color has to appear between the other two colors next to it. In this painting that I'm doing now, for instance, with one design I can make six paintings with one design by shifting the color from one to the other I can use six elements, for instance, black and white and four other colors; I can shift them over from one to the other. I can make six of them; the same design but six different paintings. And they all work because of the sequence and the order that appears from the first one to the six others.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you're really then trying to get the relationship of the design to the painting? It's really more one design and a series of color problems rather than a series of new developing designs?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You joined the American Abstract Artists which was very influenced by Mondrian and that group. Were you interested in Mondrian? Did you study his work?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: In the early 50's I was interested in Mondrian's theories and paintings. I liked very much his paintings. I was always intrigued with his paintings. But you look at the paintings and you like them, you like the colors and all that but you yourself just don't like to get involved with the same problems, you see. You don't want to imitate. You just want to find your own problems. And that's where it stopped actually. I tried to find out what he contributed, what he produced, but not actually to stay there. I tried to go beyond what he had done in the same way as with the tree peonies and Saunders. I mean he stopped with the second generation of hybrids and I like to go beyond it. I did the same thing with Mondrian. I mean I like what he did but for me it wasn't a solution to the whole problem. I just wanted to find out problems in order to solve them myself. That's the influence that Mondrian had on my work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are there other--to use the term geometric painters--that have interested you, or Neo-plastic painters? Or don't you even feel a part of that? You know, geometric abstraction is kind of one term that people use. Neo-plastic is another. Do they have meanings for you?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I don't know. Everybody has different names for all of these things which to me don't mean very much. Names always identify certain aspects or elements but it's not the whole story. I think Reinhardt contributed quite a bit. I like his things. I don't know who else I might mention.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, there were people like Diller and Glarner.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes, Diller and Glarner. But, you see, I like them but I don't think they had fully developed, fully explored. They stayed in one element and then they stopped at a certain point. They haven't fully explored all the possibilities. They dealt with a problem and they stayed with the one problem. For instance, Glarner...Diller later on in his life I think tried to go beyond what he started, with sculptures with formica and all those things that he did. Later he tried to break away from his early things. Of course Glarner is sick now I think and I don't know if he paints or anything.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, he's very bad.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: But I don't think Glarner tried to go beyond a certain point.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No. He really did develop that one idea and then just pushed it back and forth.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: I think that's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you belonged to the American Abstract Artists for a long time?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: I guess about ten years maybe. I'm not very active in it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You send a painting every year for the show sort of thing?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: That's about it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One thing I was going to ask you: How do you title your paintings? I notice some of them have numbers and some have numbers and letters. I was wondering what that means?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: The numbers: the first number represents the sequence of the number of the painting done in a certain year. For instance, that one over there--#21-60? It is the 21st painting done in 1960.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Aha!

NASSOS DAPHNIS: The next one is 28-60 over there; that is the 28th painting done in 1960. Now any time you see a letter next to a number sometimes it might represent the material that was used in the construction. For instance, when I used masonite I put "M" in front. Or letters might represent the kind of paint that I used. Maybe on some of them you see "Aqt;" this means Aquatek. Or "Px" means it's Plexiglas. So if I see a number and see "Px" next to it I know it's Plexiglas; it's not a painting. It's not on canvas; it's something else.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: It more or less helps me and probably helps other people to visualize the type of work when one is talking about it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you haven't titled anything for years beyond the code system, have you?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: That's the last painting that I put a--abstract painting, geometric painting--that was exhibited in the Carnegie International in 1956, I think.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What's that? *Forward But Beyond*.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: *Forward But Beyond*. After that I just numbered them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What started the numbering?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, you just can't name abstract paintings, geometric paintings. How can you do it? How can you put an image, I mean a meaningful word which represents a painting? That I can't see. Can you?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, some people use arbitrary city names or Indian names or words.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, they're no more meaningful than numbers. And a number is more useful actually because it tells you the year, it gives you the number of paintings that were done, and which came first, I mean the 21st or the 22nd. Otherwise you have to keep books and books and books.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It makes it easy for the art historian. It tells him a number of things.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Absolutely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, most of the things you do now are sprayed--right? Do you spray the paint on now?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. I started spraying as far back as 1958. Yes, in 1958 I started spraying. Before that I used to use a roller and before that the almighty brush.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They hardly sell brushes any more. There are so many other ways. How did you do the early paintings? You know, how did you arrive at your color?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Which period do you mean-- the geometric paintings?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. You know, was that a color problem? Or a design problem? Or do they go together?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I used all kinds of things. Sometimes I'd just color tapes. Other times I'd use cutout paper and make the designs and shift them around in order to come to a position where everything is meaningful and pleasing to me, and then I started putting paint on the canvas afterwards. But nothing was done directly on the canvas at the beginning.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it was always really working out the idea and then doing it on the canvas?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So the canvas is kind of the final exposition?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You started using acrylics very early?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I was one of the first ones maybe to use acrylics in 1958, 1957. In 1957 I started using them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you come across those?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I think through Lenny Bocour. He made Magma. I used to use Magma. And he told me about the colors. And I said I'll try some. Because what I wanted at the time--when I used to paint with oil it took such a long time to dry from one area to the other and I couldn't use tapes to cover one area for a long time before I could start using the area next to it. And then I had to do everything by brush. And it took me a hell of a long time to paint a single painting. It used to take me two or three months to finish one painting. I used to produce about 5 or 6 paintings a year. And I said, well, there must be...I have to find another way of either painting faster or find new materials or something. So that's how the acrylics, I mean the Magma, came into being. He told me about it and I used it. And it would dry quickly and the next day I used to be able to use the already painted surface and work on it, you see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had for a long time an interest in new materials? Because you had used epoxy paints which you told me about before (and which we'll talk about again), and the plastics, and you did wood relief things at one time. That's wood, isn't it?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: That's nova ply. It's a type of composition which is just attached together. It's wonderful because it doesn't warp, it doesn't absorb any moisture, it's completely straight when you get it. Well, the thing that intrigues me is that it's not the material for its own sake. It's what I can get from the material, what qualities

the material has that I can use, you see. Like Plexiglas. When I used Plexiglas way back in 1962, it intrigued me because of the color vibration, that the light energizes the color when it just comes through it, depending on the intensity of the light and the degree of vibration that you get to the color. I mean that intrigued me, not actually the Plexiglas. I didn't use it just because it was Plexiglas. But all the other things I used, the materials I mean, they have to have certain qualities for me to be able to explore in order to use them. Otherwise I just discard them. I just don't use them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The thing that's always interested me about some of the Plexi pieces of yours I've seen is that they don't look like Plexiglas.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: They look like paintings?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, but so many people use Plexiglas, you know, and the first thing you see is...well, it's Plexiglas; and there's some quality in the way you use it where you don't get that feeling about it. I don't know really what it is, but I mean after you look at it you know that it's Plexiglas but it doesn't, at least for me, strike me as Plexiglas.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, that's the important thing; that one should lose the...when you look at it not to be aware of the material at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: To the images?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: When you are able to do that I think you achieve something, I mean use the material but still not see it; to see the other qualities enhanced in the material. I think that's what people should be striving for. As you said, when you look at things and you see the Plexiglas before you see what's going on in the Plexiglas, that's not very good.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. How did you get involved with Leo Castelli? You've been associated with him since 1959 which was quite early after the gallery opened.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I'm almost the oldest member in the gallery except for Rauschenberg and Johns. They are the two that were before me, just a year before me, I think. I had my first show there in 1959; I showed the 1958 paintings. Well, the story of getting in there is very interesting. I came back from Europe in 1952 and, for approximately ten years--not actually ten years--but from 1952 up until 1958 each time I painted, let's say, 10 or 15 paintings, I used to go to all the galleries, start from the top and go all the way down to the bottom and try to interest somebody in my paintings. In those years Abstract Expressionism was way up high and nobody would see any geometric paintings at all. And I just couldn't find anybody who would show my things. And then, you see, I used to get so discouraged. And then I wouldn't go back again for about two years maybe until I had complete another batch of paintings. Then I would attempt to go again and I'd get the same reaction. And I was getting disgusted with everybody at that time. In 1958 I think Leo opened the gallery in the same building where he is now but upstairs on the third floor. And I went to see a couple of shows there. And I liked the quality of the painters that he had there and the way that they were shown and all that. And then it dawned on me that this might be a good gallery to be associated with. And I talked to him. I had some transparencies at the time which I showed him--all these geometric things. He showed some interest in them. I asked him if he'd like to see them. He said, "Yes, sometime I'll come down to see them." And he said, "Write your name in the book there and put next to it 'PM'." At that time it never dawned on me what "PM" would represent to him. But later on I figured out that it meant Piet Mondrian.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's funny.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: I didn't hear from him for a long time. So I went back there again. And I saw his wife Ileana--his ex-wife--and I told her about it, that he said he was coming down to see my paintings. She said, "Well, I'll come down." So she came down with her present husband Michel. And they liked the paintings very much. She said she would talk to Leo about it. That was around April I think. April passed. May passed. Around May 20 or something like that I was getting ready to go up to the Gratiwicks for the tree peonies because that's the time when they bloom and I had to do the crossings. I was packing my valise to go up. The telephone rings and it was Leo on the phone. He said, "I would like to come down and see your paintings." I said, "When?" He said, "Tomorrow if it's possible." I said, "I'm leaving tomorrow. I'm going out of town. I'm going for the flowers; I have some work to do." He said, "When are you coming back?" I said, "Well, in a couple of weeks." So he said, "Call me when you come back so I'll come down and see the paintings." So we hung up. And then suddenly it dawned on me that I could postpone the trip. I thought here I've been waiting for ten years to get somebody down here to see the paintings and here I am just chasing them away. So I called back again, got him on the phone and I said, "I can postpone my trip for another day and, if you would like to come tomorrow, it will be fine." So he came down the next day about five o'clock. And he liked the paintings. He said, "Okay, we'll get together in the fall and I'll give you a show." And that was it. In the fall when I came back from the country we got together and we set up a date. And I think we had the show in 1959 in February or March. And I've been with him ever since.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you ever involved with the Club?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: No. I went a couple of times when they had the Club on Eighth Street. And then after that they moved and they were all over the place and I never really got involved with them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are there many painters now who you see frequently?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Not many. I really don't see very many other than the group in the Gallery. We see each other once in a while here and there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. You still see people like Lekakis and Stamos?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: But even those people I don't see too often.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Lekakis lives around here, doesn't he?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: He lives on 28th Street.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you been to Europe since that time in the 50's?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: No, I haven't gone back since 1952.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No more traveling?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I'd like to. My wife would like to go to Greece. She hasn't visited Greece yet. So she's after me all the time. We were supposed to go this summer but we postponed it. We might go next year. I'd like to go down to the Islands and really explore the Islands quite well. I have gone to Crete but not really to the Aegean Islands like Mykonos and all those places.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you been married a long time?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Since 1956.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Your daughter looks very young.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes, she's about eight and a half, nine years old.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you have other children?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: And the boy is six-and-a-half. That's it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You just had a big show at Albright-Knox--right? Did you go up for it to see what it was like?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that your first retrospective?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: My first big show, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you think of walking in and looking around and seeing everything?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, it took a lot of work in order to get it together, you know; going through a lot of paintings in order to choose, and just choose enough of each period to make it interesting and make it flow from one period to the other without...and see the development from one style to the other. But the show looked just marvelous. Because the big galleries there were freshly painted, each wing of the museum, big ceilings about 20 feet high. Those things just float in space. It was just marvelous.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you were very happy with it? I know some painters, you know, say they looked around and said, "Oh, my God!"

NASSOS DAPHNIS: No, it really looked very exciting. I mean to see them together like that is really--you can see how the whole thing evolved from one period to the other.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How would you describe that evolution? I mean the basic ideas behind your work as it's evolved from, say, 1951? Did you say when that show starts?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. Well, there are periods in my work when it gets to be as simple as possible, I mean up to the point where there are only two elements involved in the whole thing and nothing else. At times it comes to

be almost one element, even monochromatic, but there's just another little element what will play with the two elements. And then after it comes to that point it starts to get more involved and more complicated to the point that it's too complicated. And then it starts to get simplified again.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It has cycles.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Cycles. It goes in and out, in and out. Those I'm doing now are quite...they're not too complicated but they are complicated. There are many elements involved in one area. Actually the ones that I have in mind to do now will be simpler and more relaxed, more space, and they work that way to me just like big waves from one to the other. To me that's understandable because that's the way life is; sometimes it's simple, sometimes it's complicated. And you have to accept both elements, both factors.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Your color has always been pure colors. And some years ago you started using epoxy paint.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you use anything else now?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Everything is epoxy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That really works the best?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, it's the best. Because when I used to use the acrylics I used to have a lot of damage done to the surface, I mean every little scratch and everything that touches it, sometimes even fingermarks will show on it. And it's very hard to eliminate it. But with this one here, in order to damage a painting you'd really have to have a nail just going right through it to damage the surface. No dirt or anything like that can soil it at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find that the color quality is much stronger than the acrylic?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: The color quality is much more intense than the acrylics. Which I like. I was looking for that. As a matter of fact I was looking for something to supplement the Plexiglas because the vibrant colors that I used to get in Plexiglas and because of the damage factor that I used to get in Plexiglas....

PAUL CUMMINGS: It scratches.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Not only scratches. The breakage. I used to send things out to shows and they'd come back all broken up and everything. I was looking for a solution. I was really looking for something where I could get the quality of the color on a much more durable surface. And I think the epoxy solves this problem at this time. That's why I'm so interested in it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you start making the three-dimensional pieces?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: They were started in 1952 from the Plexiglas. Before the three-dimensional I started to raise the surface to make it a relief painting. In 1961 they were projected from the surface with certain planes coming out about an inch or two inches from the plane, or the canvas. So that started it, you see, the plane projection coming out and then to the three-dimensional in 1962.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find a great deal of difference in the way you think when you make a sculpture or a painting? Or are they totally unrelated?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: The colors I used--I mean, for instance, on this one here, are exactly as I would have used for a painting. But on the others I just choose the colors which I think each form will work better with that particular color. I use it mainly as a three-dimensional image rather than a two-dimensional.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. What would you say that the central area of interest for you is in what you're doing--the main theme that runs through the ideas in your work?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, it's difficult. But I think what I'm trying to do actually is to unify certain elements that I'm using. Now color to me has a substance, you see. And a certain substance generates a certain energy and, according to the amount of energy that the substance gives out, it has to be controlled by another one. That kind of play and controlled element I'm trying to master.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Like so much blue or so much yellow...?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. But you don't only have the quantity of each color or the substance of each color contains but also the placing. I mean you have two elements, you have what one color gives out in its position

what it appears to in space in relation to another element. So you have that kind of a suggestion which you have to put together things which are vibrant, which are alive, and control them at the same time, and unite them to make them exist as one unit with all these elements that you're working with. I think that's what my primary objective is. If I could be able to do that I would be satisfied.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's interesting. Because, as I'm remembering some of the paintings, even the sculpture, the shapes have always been single things like a rectangle with lines or panels or circles, squares, parts like the current thing there; you've never.... In the recent show there are all those big panels and circles.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've always used very, very simple geometric shapes, I think. Are there very complicated ones? I don't know of any.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, the thing is...I mean the simpler the thing is the harder it is to control, to put together. Because, if you only have two elements to deal with, everything has to be so precise, so evaluated in order to really make it work together and unify things. But if you have ten, for instance, if you see a weakness in one corner you put something else up there and just get it back.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Adjust a little bit.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, you just adjust it. But you cannot adjust a big thing, for instance. Either the big thing has to work or it doesn't work. It's one thing or the other. So you really have to make it work.

END OF INTERVIEW

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