



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Nassos Daphnis,
1964 September 6

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Nassos Daphnis on September 6, 1964. The interview was conducted at Nassos Daphnis' home in Provincetown by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Nassos Daphnis in Provincetown on September 6, 1964. Mr. Daphnis, you've been showing your paintings and construction in the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York since 19..?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: '58.

DOROTHY SECKLER: ...1958, and I wondered if you would begin by describing the range of some of this work that has been recently seen there.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: For the past two years I did some constructions done on Plexiglas which is a new material that is used...that I have used. I did that because I felt that if I used the three-dimensional element I could more or less enhance the viewer with the element of the color on the sculpture form, on the three-dimensional form. But lately I found that the Plexiglas was very easily damaged and in order to overcome that difficulty I tried to find other material which would be more durable for my purpose. And now I'm using wood and masonite which later will be painted with epoxy paint. Epoxy paint is a new paint which has been discovered lately and it's a high gloss paint with a very durable surface.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I thought it might help to get back to the first things at Castelli, the paintings that as I recall were bands, simple horizontal bands, but perhaps I'm wrong...?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes, there are bands of color, or a field of color which I used to do that year. Of course, there's a certain procedure or sequence which I have used the colors in and there's a theory that I have more or less developed after all these years and which I still follow. And that is that I believe that the color exists in space in a certain order, in a planal order, and the black, because of the concentrated substance, appears to me in a frontal plane most of the time and then after that comes the blue and then red and then yellow and then the white which is the infinity. And in that order I've been using the colors in my paintings. Now on the flat surface you get the illusion of the space that way, but in the constructions you also have the illusion plus the physical sense of space.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Some of the constructions actually are capable of being revolved and you could see through part of the Plexiglas from one plane to another plane.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes, that was the idea of using mainly the Plexiglas because of the transparent quality it has and also the translucent quality of the colored Plexiglas is another element which I wanted to explore, that is, the light activating the color. It's just like an energy, another element, an energy activating the color according to the amount of light cast on the color.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The constructions often had the shapes of parts of diamonds or triangular shapes, as I recall. Is that right?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes, both the triangular shape and also the vertical or horizontal line which is very evident.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was the shape arrived at in terms of how much color area of a certain type you wanted or was it arrived at independently of the color, or both at once I suppose is the answer?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, yes, the shape came to be as another element other than the horizontal or the vertical. I thought at one time to introduce another shape in order to make more of a...tried to solve other problems with another shape more than anything else actually.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, is there anything else you'd like to say before we leave the work that you've been doing recently? As I think back to those early banded paintings, there was a great deal of white and I think...were they white on white too sometimes?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes....

DOROTHY SECKLER: So that color wasn't the only...well, white, of course, is a color in your sense of infinity too.

Is that the answer there?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, yes, that's the answer but sometimes a projected surface will cast off enough white which gives you a different plane right there so you have the sense of space within the variation of planes of white you see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So this was always consistently a spatial art from your point of view although the shapes were entirely flat?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. The important thing for me was to place the color in its proper plane, which I feel is the only way that a color can exist. Otherwise, I mean if you put it in another plane it loses its identity actually, it becomes...it's just like taking a fish out of the water and putting it to live on land. I mean it amounts to that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: For instance, if you had a series of bands of reds and blues and the red band has to be a certain width in proportion to the blue in order to maintain its identity in space against the pull of the blue, would that be partly an example?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, yes, that is the main function of the bands or the colors. They have to live together. I mean they have to be compatible with one another. If they're not, they sort of fight or destroy themselves and become nothing. I mean they destroy themselves. But the main thing is to try to unite the elements and create a unit which will exist on its own accord, on its own--have a life of its own.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So you're not...I'm pursuing this a little bit because it might be that some people would assume that you're just working for a kind of color harmony in a sense, that you can create a harmony of colors and still it wouldn't have this presence that you're after, this sense of being a complete thing, where it has to become more than just a pleasant harmony; it's something else?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: No, no, no, that's just...I mean that's only a small element in the whole thing. The most important thing is to unify the elements and make them exist on their own, unify themselves and live their own particular life.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And they're usually colors that have a pretty strong opposite character. They're not--you seldom, as I recall, would have gone from just a blue to a green? I had a sense that they were usually strongly...they were colors that had a good bit of tension between them.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I use mainly the opposing colors, I mean in order to create more tensions.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's what I wanted you to say.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. Because to use, say, green and blue, it's a very, very easy color to use. I mean there's no...they don't fight...there's no fight and it's easy to control. But the main part is to use opposing colors and try to control the tensions at the same time. In this way you create the excitement and also you activate the planes or the surface of this space that you're dealing with.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That, I think, covers it very beautifully; the sense of the activation of the colors is what I wanted us to get in there. To go back to the beginnings that led up to this development--of course you were born in Greece, and when...what year did you come to this country?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: I came in 1930 when I was 16 years old.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then when you came I understand you had not yet become an artist and you were involved for a while in growing flowers. Would you like to talk about that a little bit?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I was working in a flower shop at that time and I got interested in flowers and growing plants and so on and any time that I had to spare I started to draw the plants at the store. Then at night I went to school to learn English and then.... I'll tell you a little story which is fascinating and I have told many times to other people: at one time the teacher at night school told us to write a composition on George Washington and my English then was very poor; I couldn't write two words about him. I had a little stem in my pocket so I took it out and drew his face on a piece of paper and then I gave it to the teacher. Well, the teacher was so delighted that I got the prize, you see, and it gave me so much courage in order to continue to draw. I mean it showed that you don't have to say things, you can always do things with your hands and be just as successful.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's a wonderful story. Well then, after that you had a little encouragement from a fellow artist, I believe, that brought you to drawing from the model, was that what happened?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. Then after a year or so I met Michael Dekakis, the sculptor, who became a good friend of mine and he encouraged me to draw. He invited me to his studio where he had a model and we drew from the

model, and that was more or less my beginning as an artist. I mean I got more and more interested and continued to paint after that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now your subjects at this time were...would you like to talk a little bit about the kind of...?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, at that time I wasn't aware of what was going on. I didn't know any other painters. I didn't know what the other painters were painting and I had visited the museums maybe one or twice but I hadn't seen any painters at all. I started to paint on my own without any schooling and the subjects that I painted then were more or less either memories of Greece or fantasies or from mythology or so on. They were very naive and were very spontaneously painted, sort of, well, amateurish, I should say, I mean without any technical skill or anything of that sort.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And yet some of these have found their way into collections of museums.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, as a matter of fact, I mean after four years I had my first one-man show and the show was completely sold out and I was so skeptical about it because of reading stories about artists starving and all that. I was successful from the beginning; I thought there was something wrong with them.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Where was that first one-man show?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: That was at the contemporary Arts on 57th Street.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This was in the 1940's, I take it? Was it the war then that brought about a change in your work following this primitive stage?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Around 1940--the war... No, actually after the war was the tremendous change that took place. I went into the Army in 1942 and during the time that I spent in the Army I did not paint anything, but the thing is that I was exposed to the places--in Italy, for instance when I was in the Army, I went to see a lot of the Renaissance art and I got acquainted with other types of work. And when I came out from the Army the devastation and the effects of the war had a great effect in the next step that I painted.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The subjects were very often subjects of devastation--of plants and trees. Would you like to describe them a little bit?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, there were trees, for instance, after we went through a battle and after the guns had devastated an area you could go through it and you couldn't see a tree alive, I mean all the trees would be all broken up and lying on the ground and all the leaves torn apart and everything and that had a great effect on me. And when I came out from the war I mean they were so vivid in my mind and I thought I'll paint them just for a record to stay and other people will see them afterwards.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So there were these stunted and convoluted, convulsive-shaped tree trunks and...?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes, I tried to make them even more dramatic than they actually were. Of course they were all in my mind and I didn't do any sketching at all. What I saw, whatever I felt at the time and whatever I could visualize I painted.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And there were ravens in the trees very often and dark...?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: There were ravens, vultures, just waiting for something to eat, yes, some bodies lying down, or something.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you have a chance to exhibit these postwar paintings in New York?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes, in 1947 I had my second exhibition at the Contemporary Arts again and they were well-received but, of course, I didn't have any success in selling, I know that because of the subject I think.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did that discourage you or send you on to a new kind of subject?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, then I thought I was really painting when I didn't sell.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you know some artists by this time? Were you less isolated?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: By this time I got to know quite a few of the other artists, yes. Going to Rockport, the summer colony, there I got to know quite a few of the artists.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you had seen some surrealist work too, I think at this point and had some interest in it?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes, I saw some surrealist painting exhibitions in New York which probably had some effect on my work at that time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did you get to your interest in the undersea subjects that seem to be the next phase?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, in the summers I used to go to Rockport by the sea and seeing all the sea life and being near the sea I got to know certain sea forms and I painted some of them.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was your palette like at this point? What kind of color were you using in these deep sea form things? And what medium was it?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, they're oils and watercolors, mainly blues, greens and the sea colors, sort of. Not very vivid colors or primary colors that I introduced in my latest work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And they were obviously quite organic forms generally speaking?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: They were organic forms, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And that led rather naturally into the next phase in which you were abstracting such forms.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. They were very abstract forms afterwards but after a while I felt that the surface of the plane wasn't important to show any structure or any agitation of the surface and I wanted the surface to be more quiet, and whatever happens should happen within the form rather than on the surface or eliminate the--what do you call...

DOROTHY SECKLER: Texture?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: ...the texture.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you did a number of watercolors at this stage, I believe?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes, the watercolors, I did quite a few watercolors.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did you happen to begin to think more about doing things abstractly? That must have been quite a step to take after having been so much involved with subject matter for many years? Do you remember what gave you the impetus to do that, to take that step?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, it was a gradual thing and it was a very natural step for me to follow, I thought, because as the years went on I got more and more interested in color and in form as form, and not being involved with any emotional qualities of the individual and I wanted to work with the color as form, as form and color, and nothing else. And that's what I was interested in then at that time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The first abstractions then were rather organic forms, very...would you like to describe them a little bit? I'm sure you can do it better than I can. Such as the one we were just looking at over the dinner table.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Oh, well, that kind was still the undersea forms that you could see, very fluorescent colors and all kinds of textures and shapes. But after that stage I got to paint the organic forms, but flat forms.

DOROTHY SECKLER: They're completely flat?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Completely flat.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now what year would that have been?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: That was 1950. That was the time when I went to Europe. At that time I went to France and then Italy and then Greece. I toured around. I think the important factor in this case was that, when I revisited Greece in 1950, in the summer of 1950, there was the tremendous light; it was summertime and the light was so intense that all the forms sort of became so flat. I saw everything flat; there was no texture or no nothing, and I think that was the primary reason why I thought the surface should be flat rather than with texture.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, that was a very important turning point. Then did you have a show when you came back and had made a series of paintings or these flat organic forms?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, when I came back it was a very curious situation because nobody wanted to show my things. I went to quite a few dealers and everybody was saying that, well, they didn't think that they could use my things at the time. So I would go back to the studio and paint for a couple more years and visit again the

dealers and I would hear the same story, and that went on and on and on for, oh, about 8 or 9 years.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How were you supporting yourself during this time?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I used to get part-time jobs, say, week-end jobs or sometimes I'd do frames or photographs. I would photograph works of art or paintings or a piece of sculpture for artists and that was the way I could support myself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you work...were you working on flowers at that time, on breeding...?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: After the war I started breeding flowers, yes; but there was no money from that. That angle was just a purely experimental adventure and I was doing it just for the pleasure of it, just for the sake of creating something new in that work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you already at that time interested in producing the tree peony?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. I started, right after the war. As a matter of fact, in 1946 I started cross-breeding the tree peonies and I'm still doing this today.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You weren't doing this in New York City though, were you?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: No. That work is done near Batavia, New York, which is between Rochester and Buffalo in upstate New York. It's an experimental nursery in which I have a chance to do this work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So that you went on then for a period of, oh, about 8 years having a very rough time...?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But continuing with flat organic forms? Or during this time were you beginning to shift toward the more geometric...?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: No, at this time the...the organic forms stop in 1951. And then I began painting the geometric forms completely flat or I was dealing mainly with the vertical and horizontal line or shapes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That was a big step again and I wondered if you could remember any of the influences or things that you saw or friendships that you had or anything that pushed you again in that direction?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Again that came about because I felt the organic forms or the color forms were too romantic for me and I wanted to eliminate that element from my work too. I wanted to be more rigid and have more opposing elements to deal with rather than the easygoing or the fluid element within the form which goes one into the other with no opposition. So I wanted to oppose the elements rather and then combine them together again; you see, I wanted them to fight and then control them at the same time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. That's beautifully put. So that this was mainly vertical and horizontal from that point on, a series of interlocking bands. How would you describe those paintings of those years?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, they weren't bands at that time; they were squares, oblongs and then the line tied them together or opposing them and things like that. The bands came a little later.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So this brings us into the period of the middle 50's about?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: That's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How was your color at that point? Were you working with primary color now?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Only primary colors. When I started working in geometric I only used primary colors, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: They seem to you to go together. Would you like to elaborate on that a little bit because we do take it for granted but after all it was quite a thing to constantly keep moving toward these simplified and yet basic elements.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, my primary objective was to eliminate all the unnecessary things and concentrate only on the essential elements, either form or color, the form I got just the vertical, horizontal line, and then the primary colors. I systematically eliminate all the others and try to make it harder for myself in order to control the elements because the less you have the more difficult it is to control things and to make something out of them to begin with.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you at all influenced by Mondrian in any of this?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I love Mondrian's work and...well, I don't know if I can say that I have been influenced by him.

[END OF SIDE 1 - END OF TAPE]

[TAPE 2]

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Nassos Daphnis in Provincetown on September 6, 1974 continuing an interview dealing with various stages in Mr. Daphnis's work. Our earlier discussion had brought us up to the point of about 1956 when your work entered a new phase. Would you like to describe that and then talk a little bit perhaps at the same time about, you know, the changes in your life? For one thing, you came to Provincetown around that time, I gather?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes, in 1953 I came to Provincetown for the first time. There I met quite a few artists and I exhibited here in Gallery 256 with some of the artists. At that time I was painting the ones with--I don't know how you describe them--they're bands, interlocking or superimposing bands which I think is the closest that I ever came to being influenced by Mondrian, don't you think so, at this point?

DOROTHY SECKLER: It would seem so, yes.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. But after that I went even further than that. I wanted to enlarge the field of color and to me there was too much activity happening, too many small areas that were activated. I wanted to enlarge the area and have a larger impact rather than small happenings all over the place.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You however were working this way for a year or so?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: About a couple of years, I believe. A year or so, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And then when did you begin simplifying them into simply the horizontal or the vertical?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: That was 1957 I believe where the areas became larger and larger and sometimes almost the whole canvas was one area of color, one field of color, and maybe there would be, say, a black line splitting the field at the point where the tension was created.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you were developing further and further your idea about the scale of intensities of color relations...

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Of the color relations, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: ...making it a more precise series of relationships?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes, and at that time I came to realize the full understanding of the color existing in space. Then I realized that the black, because of the heaviness of the substance, which, by the way, absorbs all the light possible, is the frontal plane of the picture plane; it's just like the atmosphere. The heaviness of the atmosphere is closest to us because of the concentrated molecules which are closer to earth than as you go in the deepest space. The black has that quality. The black is the most concentrated substance of the colors so it has to be the closest to us, the closest to the earth; then the other colors, because of the lesser concentration of substance, will go deeper into space. And that's how I happened to realize the existence of different colors and different planes in space.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So that when you made a canvas in which the red, let's say, was covering, let's say, 80 percent of the canvas and perhaps divided by a black, this was not a matter of making a decorative division for the effect of pattern but rather to set up a spatial change of plane within the color?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: A change of plane, and also to superimpose all the energy which the red was transmitting to us. I wanted to stop it; I wanted to stop it with another element, you see, and then hold it where it belongs. That was my object in that case, not with any decorative aspect at all or anything of that sort; I mean that has nothing to do with my conception of working.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. And I remember there were others in which there might be a very strong band of red and then a very strong band of blue but in a different proportion, of course.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes. Again the proportion is created according to the energies of one color or the others which superimpose each other. You know what I mean? It's that kind of a situation that has to exist. I mean if something just runs away from you, you have to have something to control it, to bring it back and hold it where you want it to exist or to be. And if you are able to do that then you have something alive, something which exists right then and there and also the pulse which is created between one trying to get away and the other

one trying to hold it in place and that activity which is created between the two elements is the one that I will call a painting or any object that it breeds because of the pulse between the one and the other which is created either at the plane or in space.

DOROTHY SECKLER: There's always a dialectical interplay.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: It has to do that. It has to be an active quality, an active...

DOROTHY SECKLER: Dynamism?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes, between the two. If they both are standing still then the decorative element plays its part, you see. It's not alive any more; it's just pleasing to the eye, and that's it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You remarked before that even with two different whites you could set up such a series of polarities.

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Yes, but to a lesser degree; I mean it's a more calm attitude between the elements, say, it's not a stormy element, it's just on a nice quiet day in which something exists. It's just an attitude in which you relax more or less with something rather than get existed about it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So at this point you had reduced all of your means to essentials, the vertical, the horizontal, the primary colors and their effects on each other. And how did you happen to take the step toward construction? I believe you touched on that before. Is there anything else that you'd like to say about it, how it happened?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I can't just say how it happened. Things just come. There isn't anything predetermined for what I'm going to do next. Sometimes I paint or I do these constructions, say, in a concentrated form. I might work ten pieces at one time. When I really work I have many things already digested and then they have to come out. Then I do them all at one time. After I do that I'm sort of empty and then I have to wait until something else comes. And I do them again. And when I do something I sort of explore all the possibilities either from the material that I'm working with or the idea that I'm working with. I never like to repeat it again because to me it's very, very monotonous, very boring, doing the same problems again and I always look for new problems no matter if it's with the form or material, technical material or anything of that sort. I like to explore the possibilities of the new materials all the time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In the last decade many painters have begun to experiment with sculpture and use materials that were stepping out of the canvas in various ways. You were sensing this whole general movement, feeling that actually painting need not just always be a matter of covering a square canvas?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, this is the sort of the freedom which the painter sort of got in the last few years. It's not necessary to just limit yourself within the four corners of the canvas, no body said that you have to do that. Why should you? I don't see the point of it. I mean things can be projected out; you can have the physical feeling of planes receding or projecting or whatever rather than just the illusionary effect that you have on the flat painted surface.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Can you imagine what effect, what impact you would like your works to have on the spectator? I don't know whether you stop to think about it at all but what would you expect a viewer looking at your work to...how would you expect him to respond?

NASSOS DAPHNIS: Well, I don't like them to sort of try to make out things; I mean they should look at them and accept them. Either they like them or they don't like them. But if they try to say, oh, it looks like a something or it doesn't look like anything to me, I don't think that is a very sensible thing to do. It's just like you look at a flower, for instance, and you don't question that a flower looks like another flower or looks like something else. Either you like it or you don't like it, one or the other. Because when I finish something, I feel that the thing should exist on its own accord rather than trying to be something. It's nothing that has to be. I mean it is.
[MACHINE TURNED OFF]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mr. Daphnis's work has also been shown at the Carnegie Annual, at the Whitney and in several important shows abroad. In France as early as 1950 he had a show at the Gallery Colette Allendy. In 1961 he had a show in Milan at Toni Nelli Gallery and then at the Iris Clert Gallery in Paris in 1962.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... August 12, 2005