

# **NASSOS DAPHNIS**

PAINTINGS FROM THE 50'S

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During the disorderly Sturm and Drang of the 1950's a few hardy souls coolly dissented, preferring instead to pay homage to the pure and simple, the hard-edged and constructed, the formal and reductive. Nassos Daphnis, Ad Reinhardt, Josef Albers, Ellsworth Kelly, and Leon Polk Smith, each speaking in his very different voice, announced their independence from the hegemony of freewheeling expressionism. Barnett Newman did also, in his Talmudic manner, and of course the American Abstract Artists had been in a state of restrained renunciation all along, but the first group is characterized by a blunt clarity of vision that swept aside the small-unit, small-adjustment relationalism of the A.A.A., as well as the grandiose rhetoric of painterly abstraction. Daphnis and the others made direct, legible statements in bold, intense colors neatly bound within hard edges. Their paintings could be unabashedly symmetrical, mono- or duo-chromatic, and even be reduced to contrasting two elements, yet these artists kept firm control over the kind of large, nearly wall-sized surfaces that had come to be characteristic of the New York School.

But it is only now, after a quarter of a century, that our historical perspective is beginning to encompass their collective efforts. In retrospect, one can be amazed that paintings such as these by Nassos Daphnis existed during the '50s. The fresh bold reds of 1-53 or 4-53 still seem startling. As frank as flags, as easy to read as heraldic signs, these brilliant canvases resonate with pure color and perfect geometry. Some of Daphnis' paintings from the later '50s are so radical you'd assume they'd been painted at least 10 or 15 years later. His devotion to purity predicts 60's minimalism; his systematic approach predates systemic painting. Daphnis is Daedelus in the maze of art, always exploring new ways to circumvent dead ends. One of the first painters here to use magna, then acrylics; one of the first to apply paint consistently with rollers and then by spraying, he was also precocious in the early use of plastics and epoxy in his sculptures of the '60's.

Daphnis turned to abstraction in 1951 at the age of 37 after a visit to his native Greece where the light "flattened

everything", eliminating texture and surface incident, he began his investigations into the optical properties of color and his concurrent researches into the activities of planes at this time. With a rhythm as predictable as that of the heartbeat's systole and diastole, Daphnis' austere periods — such as the early and the late fifties — alternate with periods when his work is highly complex, even complicated, as it was in the mid-fifties. He doesn't necessarily produce his best work during these more convoluted times, but during them he sows the seeds of innovation which sprout forcefully during the next season of simplicity.

It was during the mid-fifties that Daphnis developed the color theory which has been basic to the structure of all subsequent works. Daphnis believes that on an arbitrary scale of 1 to 100, denoting color planes extending back to infinity behind the picture plane, each color hovers at a particular place on the scale — black is between one and ten, and therefore closest to the picture plane, blue is given the longest range, from 10 to 70, then comes red, yellow, and white in that order, white being "without substance but expanding forever in deep space". In NY 2-56, for example, the tension results from the forward push of yellow, red, blue, and black working against the tendency of white (ostensibly here painted on top of everything) to push back into space. Obviously, color density and overlappings have a great effect on this optical push and pull, as do our associations of blue with sky, etc., but it is a measure of how ingenious his color system is that it produces consistent results.

The convolutions of the mid-decade ease out into expansive fields of pure color in the years that follow. Only two colors may hold the picture plane, while shifting back and forth along a single edge-to-edge stripe or "horizon", as happens in 3-59 or 8-59. In these radical paintings (which had no peers except Ellsworth Kelly's 1952-56 Gaza, and, quite independently, the work of Californian John McLaughlin), Daphnis found a cunning alternative to yet another cul-de-sac — Barnett Newman's aborted attempt to deal with horizontal surface divisions in 1949. In order to "work," a horizontally



divided abstraction can't be painted atmospherically, nor can greens or browns be used, because of their landscape associations, as Daphnis discovered.

Nature is not welcome in Nassos Daphnis world of pure abstraction. There is none of Kelly's adaptation of real-world motifs, or his use of chance; nor is there any biomorphism. All there is of nature is a degree of arbitrariness. His stately new triptych is a perfect example. Thanks to his ingenious invention of a gigantic compass, the arcs leap across space with perfect precision to continue their giant trajectories, and one is certain they could continue on out of the picture space on either side to infinity with just such exactitude. But the confidence such authority with mathematical/geometrical delineation engenders is subtly undermined by the off-axis bounce of the upper arc off to the left, an action which could not have been predicted on the basis of the lower, dominant arc. This unsettling behavior within the normally soothing order that geometry implies sparks life into the paintings.

Unlike other rigorous abstractionists such as Kelly, Stout or Flavin, Nassos Daphnis doesn't sketch flowers or landscapes "on the side;" he literally creates flowers. He hybridizes exotic tree peonies, crossing rare Chinese species with hardy native varieties. His patience (it takes about two and a half decades to get a new hybrid developed and marketed) combined with his skill with plants and his knowledge of botany, have once again enabled him to outsmart the forces of closure, so that the dead-end sterility of this hybrid (long considered insurmountable) has been re-routed into a long line of offspring that may extend indefinitely into the future. Similarly, in these insurgent and prophetic paintings of the 1950s, Daphnis coolly, systematically hybridized Neo-plasticism with New York scale and a new blunt forthrightness to produce a strain of geometric abstraction that has born fruit ever since.

April Kingsley  
January, 1980



1-53, 1953.  
Oil on canvas,  
57 x 43 inches.