Demosthenes Davvetas. Inside the tomato jungle [Interview mit André Masson]. In: Artforum, Oct 1987, S. (91)92-95

DEMOSTHENES DAVVETAS: Let's start with the idea of the labyrinth, an image in your work, and the picture that comes to mind as I become conscious of how one begins interviews, with something that in this case feels especially tense - the first question. With it, we're on a path, but there is no one path to follow with your work; there are so many routes one could take in the adventure of your art. There are paths within paths, paths that wind, turn, and return, and paths that let you get lost and find whole new worlds, and there is the path to the secret.
ANDRÉ MASSON: You mean [what is kept as] the secret - eroticism.
DD: There it is, alive and well in your work, from the Dionysian thematics, to the polytheistic subjects, to the sheer pleasure and desire one sees in your figures, right to the way the line lives in all your iconography - sometimes going toward the figure, sometimes escaping, always deeply filled with energy. The title of your show at the Hayward Gallery in London this summer - "André Masson: Line unleashed" - seems to be about this. Here, we are in the terrain of erotics. Is this a topography that feels like a fair map of your interests?
AM: Yes. But what is also important about eroticism is that it's what has lasted most in Surrealism. Surrealism is based on eroticism. Surrealism undertook to change life, and no, it didn't succeed, but it did perhaps introduce something new into our idea of the erotic. In any case, one cannot forget about eroticism and its importance to Surrealism, or rather to what remains of Surrealism.
Several months ago, I was talking to a beautiful Japanese lady with a face of perfect white, who was with a man I took to be her companion. I began to say, "Surrealism ran aground because it wanted to change life. It didn't change life but it did bring new elements into eroticism!" The man made a sign to the woman and they both left.
DD: The erotic is still disturbing.
AM: Yes, it grates.
DD: The writer Georges Bataille had a deep understanding of this subject.
AM: Ultimately, it was almost his only concern. Bataille was a close friend of mine, and I think his perceptions remain valid.
DD: Do you think that writing and painting give each other something when they cross paths the way, let's say, Bataille and Surrealism did? AM: The arts do communicate among themselves, but I don't see an exact relationship. Writing is such a different kind of work from painting or drawing. There can certainly be a connection in the spirit, in the mind - for example, the German Romantic painters were very close to their compatriot poets and writers. That was less true in France. We musm't forget the story about Delacroix, who was thought of as a Romantic, painting the ceiling at the Hôtel de Ville in Paris. Apparendy a gentleman approached him and said, "Monsieur Delacroix! You are the Victor Hugo of painting!" Delacroix was offended, and replied, "No sir! I am a pure Classicist!"
DD: Writers may have a kind of distanced relation-
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ship to the image, and that's why they're attracted to painters. I believe you knew Gertrude Stein?
AM: She was one of the first people I met when 1 came to Paris. She was a funny person; she detested Surrealism. Why? I never knew. When I went into Surrealism she dropped me. She no

longer wanted to see me. It had come to that.
DD: Do you think that Surrealism would have happened without psychoanalysis?
AM: No. The Surrealist painters made a lot of use of psychoanalysis, of Freud. It was all mixed together. I was interested in psychoanalysis, like many of the Surrealists; it seemed to me an im-portant art. It's a science, but also an art. Freud borrowed a lot from Greek mythology - Eros, Thanatos. Thinking more about this question of different fields of interest and how they touch one another, in Cubism there was an attempt to separate literature from painting. And fifty years ago the word "literary" was very important to certain backward and mistaken critics, who accused a painting of being "literary" when they didn't like it. I read a lot, and I was proud of making "literary" paintings. The critics didn't go for it. For a long time I was ferociously criticized - accused of putting something superfluous into painting, as if I didn't think painting was enough on its own. And then it died down naturally.
DD: Clearly we are talking about an art that goes beyond appearance and that also introduces memory.
Your presence in America during World War II played an important role in American painting. There's been discussion of your influence on Jackson Pollock.
AM: That's something that is being said currently. And it's true that Pollock visited my dealer just to see my work. That impressed me very much. I never met him; I should have. But I saw very few people when I was in the United States, and the American friends I had were mostly writers. I lived very much apart. Now I'm sorry that I didn't know him.
DD: Did your time in America influence your work? AM: Oh yes. First of all, nature has incredible vitality there. I had a little garden, and the soil was so strong that once when 1 planted some tomatoes a full 50 centimeters apart they ended up stuck together - they became double tomatoes. And the garden became such a jungle that it was my children, who were quite small, who could best crawl around to pick them all. Then a neighbor told me I should put straw under the tomatoes, and the straw rotted, of course, with the rains. There was a dreadful stink. Fortunately, one day a terrific storm carried all the tomatoes over to my neighbor's. My entire garden was at my neighbor's. Those were American prodigies!
DD: And was it this sense of nature as a strong force in our lives that directly influenced your work? AM: Definitely! The first time I went to Italy, to Florence, when I was 17, what struck me most immediately was the beauty of the light. And light is nature, or a part of nature.
DD: You bring to your work an attitude not of separation but rather of the spirit of fusion. The

ethos you address is broader than typically French. AM: For me, art has no nationality. One has to look at things from every possible side. For example, you can see the origins of French painting everywhere but in France: in Poussin it's Raphael. In Ingres it's Raphael. In Delacroix it's Rubens, who himself goes back to Veronese. So why speak of typically French art?
DD: Do you continue to paint or draw at all? AM: No. Old age has stopped me. But I'm still in-volved in art - I couldn't not be. For example, I am going to London for the show of my drawings at the Hayward. There will be some of my erotic pieces, which could create a scandal.
I have always brought censorship problems on myself because of the eroticism of my work. The last time it was when a filmmaker called Nelly Kaplan made a very good movie about my erotic drawings. There's always someone ready to censor these things. We've seen it happen recently here. A French minister has just suppressed five magazines as obscene. Whatever possessed him? And why is it, by the way, that something that once was considered sacrilegious can

suddenly become fashionable?
DD: In antiquity, and in the Greek mythology to which you refer in your work, eroticism wasn't something evil or forbidden. On the contrary - it was a force of life. Another thing I see in your work is Heraclitus and his analogy between life and the river, which is both always and never the same. AM: I love Heraclitus very much. He's a favorite of mine. I also like Empedocles. The pre-Socratics were a great discovery for me, which I owe to Nietzsche. Anaximander...
DD: ...Anaxagoras, Thales, Pythagoras; or Democritus, who came later but is one of the school...
AM: Greek thought is universal and still viable. I don't see anything comparable. It's possible not to love Plato, but he is nevertheless a profound philosopher. I myself prefer Heraclitus. It's a matter of taste; one is as important as the other.
DD: I believe you met Martin Heidegger?
AM: I had lunch with him once. We spent an afternoon together, talking about mythology. Heidegger was very interested in Nietzsche at the time; in fact he was giving a course on Nietzsche. He was a very erudite man. More than a philosopher, he was a thinker.
DD: Is there anything you'd like to talk about that I haven't thought of asking you?
AM: I was in the war. Like many others. I was on the front for more than a year. It horrified me, absolutely horrified me. When I was wounded, a friend dragged me to the side, by a German corpse. And I said to it, "Soon 1 will be like you." At that moment I was taken over by an extraordinary relief. DD: This was during World War I?
AM: It was 1917. It was dreadful.
DD: I know you were present, in the cultural and political sense, in the Spanish Civil War.
AM: It's important to take part politically. I don't think politics are very conducive to art, but in a fascist time it's very important to know if one is

for or against. One mustn't delay about it. I made caricatures of all the fascists.
DD: What is an artist for you?
AM: An artist? Before anything else, a human being. Basically, for me, an artist is a thinker. I love intellectual artists. Leonardo da Vinci is the most important example of what an artist is: a universalist. He looked at everything, explored everything. His notebooks are prodigies of science. In the Louvre crowds stand before his *Gioconda* and no one looks at the other pictures, which are also marvelous. And Leonardo's drawings...they're something. Finally, if you were to ask me the name of a complete artist, I would say Leonardo da Vinci.
DD: What do you think of Picasso?
AM: Nothing. Too much attention was given to something, a phenomenon, that really didn't exist. I knew Matisse; he greatly interested me. On the contrary [to Picasso], he thought only about painting - he didn't think about success. I knew Picasso well too. There was a rift between him and me because I repeated one of Matisse's comments on him to a journalist. I had once asked Matisse, "And Picasso?" He replied, "No palette." That was all. For a painter, "no palette" means that he's not a colorist, that he has no color sense. And it was true. We quarreled, which I never did with Matisse.
DD: What advice would you give to a young painter today?
AM: I don't know what to say. I don't think of painting by itself - for me, painting and culture are inseparable.
DD: You mean by culture something that goes beyond the framework of art history?
AM: Yes, something large and vast.

DD: Would you like to say anything in conclusion? AM: For me there is no conclusion. Everything is always... [gestures].
DD: In progress.
AM: That's right. I consider nothing finished. If anything were finished, one would not go on. Incompleteness is a necessity for creation. When I go to Florence and see Michelangelo's marvelous sculptures of slaves, only roughly hewn but still so perfect, I tell myself, that's what completion is. It is the beginning, not the result but the beginning. DD: You've given pride of place to Eros in your work. Are you afraid of Thanatos, of death?
AM: Afraid of death? Until I was 80 I never thought about it; now that I've seen people dear to me die, I'm forced to think about it. I have to say that it's part of life. It is the only thing that's certain. It is a chapter of life, not an ending. Death is the exemplar of incompleteness. The proof is that when someone very dear to you dies, you tell yourself, I never told him that ... and it's too late.
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Demosthenes Davvetas is a writer who lives in Pans. His next book of poetry, *Le Combat d'Eros,* will be published this month by Edition Hyperion, Madrid, and by Elisabeth Kaufmann, Zurich.
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