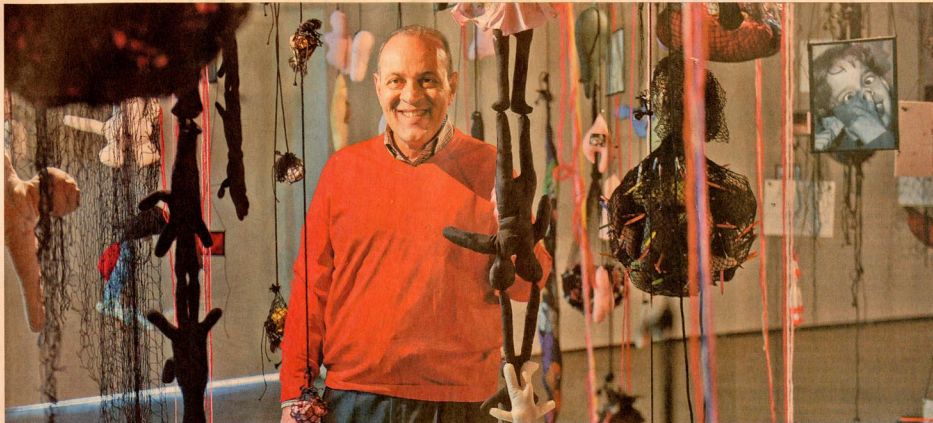


ARTS & BOOKS



The power of instinct

Greek tycoon Dimitris Daskalopoulos is a collector driven more by metaphysics than money. Rachel Spence met him in Bilbao

On a dazzling spring day in Bilbao, Dimitris Daskalopoulos should be in his element. We are taking coffee on a quiet terrace at the back of the Guggenheim museum. The sun gleams on the building's curved titanium flank behind us near the oak-peppered hills of the Basque countryside. In a few days, *The Luminous Interval*, an exhibition devoted to 60 works from the outstanding collection of the Greek entrepreneur, will be unveiled.

Although he looks tanned and immaculate in a blazer and checked shirt, Daskalopoulos is nervous. "I was awake until 4.30am last night," he tells me, as he puffs on a cigar. (There has been too much spotlight.)

With his name emblazoned beneath the title of the exhibition, Daskalopoulos can say goodbye to his reputation as "the quiet man" of contemporary art. Although he came to public attention in 1999 when he bought, for a record £1m, a 1964 limited-edition replica of Marcel Duchamp's famous 1917 "Fountain," until now his collection has been more heard about than seen.

His low profile is partly due to the preponderance of monumental installations, the most spectacular of which is probably Christoph Büchel's 450 square metre "Unplugged (Slightly Bottled)" (2006-07).

"My collection is usually in dark crates," he says sadly. Then he gives a beatific smile and tells me that, after the Guggenheim show and keeping *It Real*, a four-part series of micro-exhibitions running at London's Whitechapel Gallery until May, "almost a million and half people will have seen these works".

Despite his anonymity, Daskalopoulos wields influence. He is a member of the International Council at Tate and recently funded a curatorial post there. He is also a trustee of the Guggenheim Foundation, a position that risks complicating the renown he will garner in Bilbao.

When another prominent Greek collector, Dakis Joannou, showed his collection a year ago at the New Museum in New York, where Joannou is a trustee, the show was attacked on the grounds that a not-for-profit institution should not be boosting the prestige – and hence the value – of works belonging to its members.

Daskalopoulos sees no conflict of inter-

est. (He later tells me that although he doubts the commercial clout ascribed to museum shows – "there are too many ups and downs in the market" – he has signed an agreement promising not to sell any of the works for three years.)

"Our common goal is to bring out the better art, to preserve it and to expose it to the public," he explains, in a voice so gentle it struggles to discern the inner steel that drove him to transform his father's dairy business into Vivarta, the largest food company in Greece; before selling his stake for several hundred million euros in 2007.

"What is the test? If you come as a visitor to a museum and you leave richer and more inspired, that is a job well done," he says.

According to those criteria, *The Luminous Interval* is splendid. Unfolding over two floors of the museum's asymmetric volumes, it is a snapshot of contemporary art at its provocative, demanding, poetic best. There are rewarding encounters between artists who are rarely shown in tandem. Close to Annette Messager's oceanic waterwall entitled "Dependence/Independence" (1986), Matthew Barney's brutal concrete-and-jelly automobile carcasses take on an unexpected tenderness. Established heavyweight works add rising stars, such as Nate Lowman and Paul Chan, also stars.

Most striking is the thematic coherence. From the poignant marble bones clasped within Louise Bourgeois' "Cell IX" (1989) to the claret-soaked cavern that is Kenyan-born Wangchi Muti's spine-chilling critique of capitalism and the sculptural tribute to a fictional Lebanese bomb disposal hero by Walid Raad, a profound engagement with the human condition at its most visceral and intense sets the collection apart from other high-profile holdings.

"It's about the best human struggle," murmurs Daskalopoulos, adding that he was delighted to find his own sentiment echoed in *The Sisyphus* of God, a 1936 text by Greek philosopher Nikos Kazantzakis that also supplied the show's title. "We are hurled into this world from a darker place and we end in a darker place and we know that, yet despite that there is this thirst for creation and life."

He struggles to explain why, as the son of an Athenian dairy store owner, he

should have been drawn either to philosophy or fine art.

"My father was a worker," he says, recalling his childhood spent in a "high-rise in the centre of town". Art and books were scarce but his parents saved to send him to a good school and study languages, as testified by his eloquent, virtually accentless English. Revelation came on a trip to Munich under the wing of two "more cultured" uncles. Finding himself alone in a gallery of paintings by Rubens at the Alte Pinakothek, the 12-year-old Dimitris was mesmerised. "They had to drag me out after two hours."

His passion for contemporary art did not strike until the early 1980s, when he was past 40. "I had been to every serious museum in the world but it was all about painting, and that was not enough for me. Contemporary art was bolder, closer to our times."

His first contemporary purchase was "The Painting in the Inner Egg" (1983) by Rebecca Horn. Nearly 20 years later, although he has the "critical and theoretical" aid of his art consultant Dimitris Paleocostas, he still only buys "when something vibrates in my stomach." This reliance on instinct explains the absence of certain market darlings. He owns no work

by Takashi Murakami, just one early piece by Jeff Koons, and "four or five" early Damien Hirsts.

So is he that rare breed, an A-list collector driven more by metaphysics than money? Certainly, when he says that he avoids artists who are the "favour of the month" and "easy trophy pieces," it's hard to argue. "I can't see the people queuing up to buy Thomas Hirschhorn's 'Cavemanman'," he grins, referring to the 2001 pecking tape-plastered labyrinth currently burrowing through the Bilbao galleries.

The sun is making us thirsty and I suggest more coffee. Before I can rise, Daskalopoulos is on his way to the bar. When just one cup arrives instead of two, he nudges it to my side of the table.

Such courtesy is not the only quality to set Daskalopoulos apart from other art-world power players. He describes the custom of setting up private art foundations, for example, as "a monument to yourself that is not really compatible with me".

Instead he hopes to find an Athenian site to display his collection that will draw on both public and private energies. In his capacity as the chairman of the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises, he has constantly pressured the Greek government to embrace free enterprise. "Why of going into detail, he only says: "I am considering existing spaces and talking with existing institutions," before our conversation comes to a close and a PI assistant shepherds him away to his next appointment.

That afternoon, I see him in the Guggenheim's auditorium during a session of talks by artists with works on display. Two of them, Thomas Hirschhorn and Paul Pfeiffer, refer to having signed the artists' boycott, prompted by concern for workers' conditions, of the museum the Guggenheim is building in Abu Dhabi.

At the end of the session Daskalopoulos takes the microphone and tells the artists, politely but forcefully, that their opinions are misplaced. Although all parties handle the moment with poise, it is a reminder that in a world where boundaries – between public and private, east and west, trustee and collector – are less and less stable, the art world must tread softly if it is not to trample a mutual dream.

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