Lifestyle & Culture

Mdina's travelling donkeys

Nikki Petroni

The making of the fibreglass Maltese donkey sculptures

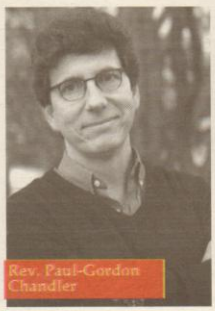
The Mdina Biennale has permitted me and all those dedicated to working on the project to encounter a diversity of artists, curators and collectors from all over the world. We have shared ideas, thoughts, feedback and even resolved logistical and financial problems together. This is why working on such a large and dynamic yet open project is so beneficial. The approach taken has allowed a constant stream of exchange between individuals from all backgrounds and levels of experience.

A lot of the artists and art organizations with whom the Mdina Biennale is collaborating also subscribe to the idea that art and culture thrive by means of continuous discussion and interchange of opinions. Many projects have evolved and expanded organically over the past year and a half, and will continue to do so even after the Biennale's official closing date in January.

One of the art organizations which the Mdina Biennale has been working closely with, and for quite a while now, is CARAVAN, an international non-profit group which aims to create contemporary cultural links between East and West. CARAVAN is described as a 'peace-building arts initiative', and their projects aim to bring cultures in dialogue with each other. They have organized exhibitions in various cities around the world; London, New York, Washington D.C., Paris, Cairo, and from November their work may also be seen in Mdina.

CARAVAN will be hosting more than one project for the Mdina Biennale. There will be a concert by Calvert Johnson (US) in November and one by Doron Kima (Iraq) in December and both will be held inside St. Paul's Cathedral. The latter is being organized in collaboration with the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra.

CARAVAN's main exhibit for the Biennale is called the Mediterranean Peace Donkey Project. For this project, a mould of a life-sized donkey was sculpted by Egyptian artist Dr. Reda Abdel Rahman based on the appearance of the Maltese donkey. Twenty-one fibreglass donkey sculptures have been produced and are currently being painted in preparation for the Biennale's opening on November 13. Each donkey represents the twenty-one countries in the Mediterranean region.


Rev. Paul-Gordon Chandler

A number of artists from the Mediterranean region and a group of Maltese artists have been engaged to work on the project. Some of the fiberglass sculptures were produced locally after the mould was shipped to Malta from Egypt a couple of months back. The Maltese, or Malta-based, artists are currently working on and implementing their designs for the donkey sculptures. These will be placed all over Mdina for two months.

The reason I have focused solely on this Mdina Biennale project in today's article is because I would like to highlight certain methods employed for its realization, methods which provide fertile ground for the development of art and culture. CARAVAN is an inherently diverse and inclusive organization, therefore their projects reflect the same principles. From the very first stages of the project, discussion has been essential. Rev. Paul-Gordon Chandler, curator of the project, and Dr. Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci, artistic director of the Mdina Biennale, have been in contact, as have several others involved in the whole process.

CARAVAN's involvement in the Mdina Biennale has developed both conceptually and technically over the past months, and each stage fostered an ever increasing sensitivity towards the context of the project's implementation. This organic growth has made the project more context-specific without losing the international nature of the initial idea. More and more people have been invited to take part in CARAVAN's activities.

Collaboration, discussion, inclusivity and dedicated research into a culture and its history are the major elements which have shaped, and are still shaping, a wonderful and exemplary project. With these four principles, art projects evolve into lasting creative relationships. This does not mean that all ran smoothly and that obstacles were not encountered, far from it. Many problems had to be resolved along the way, but they were resolved collaboratively without causing unnecessary hostility or animosity.

It is with an open mind that culture develops. I am not only referring to the ability to listen to and debate with others, but also to an intellectual openness which allows us to increase our knowledge and awareness of culture. This is not a romantic or idealized way of looking at things. Studying art and its history shows one that the most significant artists were always critically and intellectually engaged, and have themselves proposed new ways of understanding the world.

Nikki Petroni is a doctoral student in the History of Art Department, University of Malta. She is also a member of the organisational team of the Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale which will be held between 13 November 2015 and 7 January 2016. APS Bank is the main partner of the Mdina Biennale