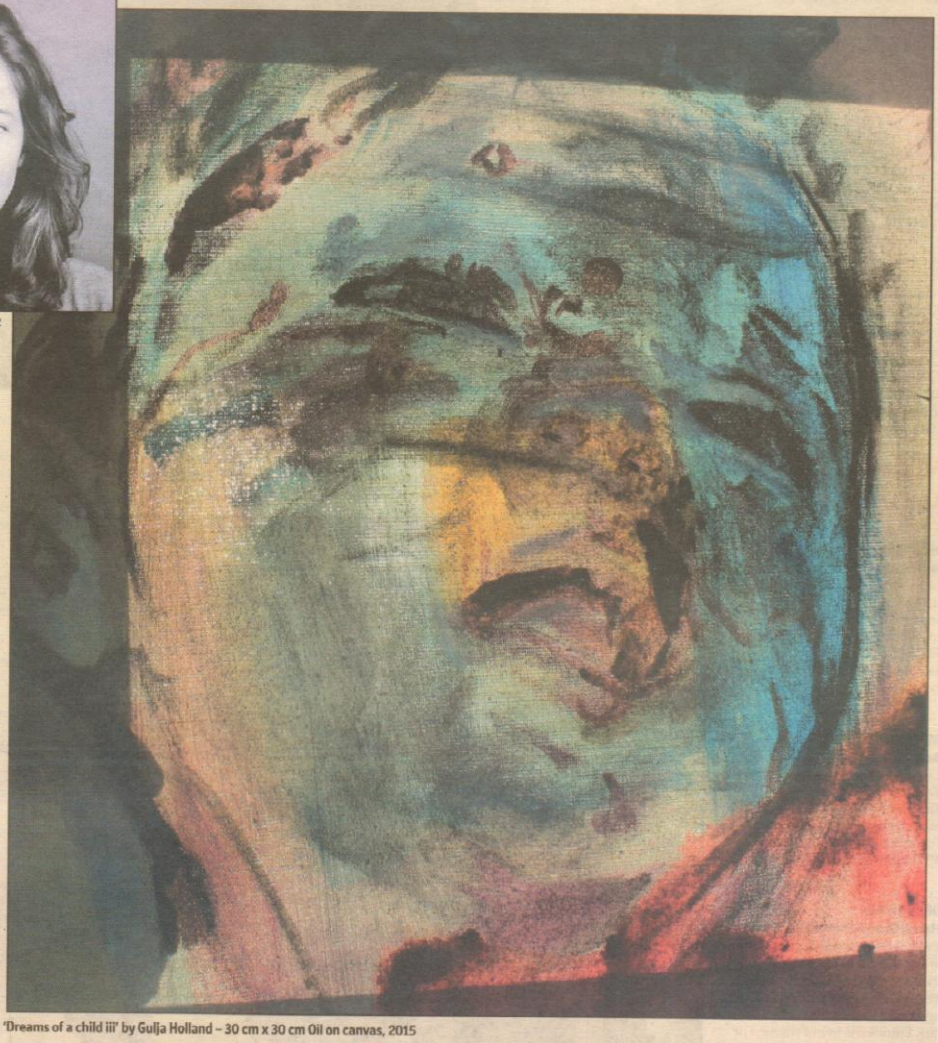
while concept of suffering

Gulja Holland • Photo by Jose Vazquez



'Dreams of a child iii' by Gulja Holland – 30 cm x 30 cm Oil on canvas, 2015

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is one and the same. Yet children are by nature innocent and loving. They symbolise purity of thought and intent, which is probably why they are so often depicted as angels in religious paintings.

I would like to think that some of my previous works also transmit a sense of the metaphysical. To me being spiritual means being compassionate and feeling connected to everything on a very deep level.

So I think that spirituality is closely linked to the act of creating in a general sense. Art has the potential to communicate the heart of the matter and to unify people. I approach my work with this intention in mind.

How has studying abroad changed your perspective on art?

Living in England for the first time away from home definitely pushed me out of my comfort zone creatively as well as socially. Experiencing an old culture superimposed with multiculturalism, and its inherent tensions, was somewhat of a culture shock and brought me up to speed with the reality of this new world.

The energy at the college was very stimulating as were all the gallery visits. I was constantly being exposed to techniques and practices which I had never seen before. Leeds College of Art has some of the best resources and workshop facilities in the UK, and we were encouraged by our tutors to explore and overlap new practices within our own.

What I was less enthusiastic about was the college's concept-driven approach to Fine Art practice. Essentially, with conceptual art, it is the idea rather than the aesthetic or craft that the artist is selling. At first I felt insecure about the fact that I didn't really want to be creating this art, which is definitely seen as most avant-garde.

It forced me to rethink my practice and evaluate whether I could create work which would be taken as seriously on canvas. It is difficult to say something new with such an old medium as so much has been done with it already. Before coming to the UK, I hadn't chosen paint so much as paint had chosen me. It's what I had used in art classes since school. That's changed since.

What do you make of the local visual arts scene? What would you change about it?

Of course I haven't been around long enough to be anything of an expert on any art scene. Yet I do think that for such a small island we have some really great talent. Today artists have more opportunities to expand themselves on an international scale, thanks to the internet. We don't look inwardly as much as we used to for inspiration perhaps. I paint almost exclusively from photography, for instance. I'm very optimistic about the local creative scene as the amount of creative opportunities for artists is definitely on the increase. I'm anxious to see it pick up some momentum though.

As critics have mentioned before Malta urgently needs a museum for both contemporary and modern art especially in light of the Valletta Capital for Culture event in 2018. While I think that while Arts Council Malta has done a commendable job in providing funds for creatives, it might be worthwhile exploring the possibility of setting up separate project funds for emerging and established artists seeing that the former need more motivating and financial help.

What's next for you?

Many more artworks and opportunities to exhibit them hopefully! I'm currently working towards a solo exhibition set to take place sometime early in 2016. The style of these works will be very different to the works currently on display. They won't be as serious and sombre and more whimsical, and primarily concerned with the aesthetic quality of colour combinations. I'll reveal more closer to the date.

The Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale runs until January 7. For more information visit mdinabiennale.org

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