# A season of Maltese modern art

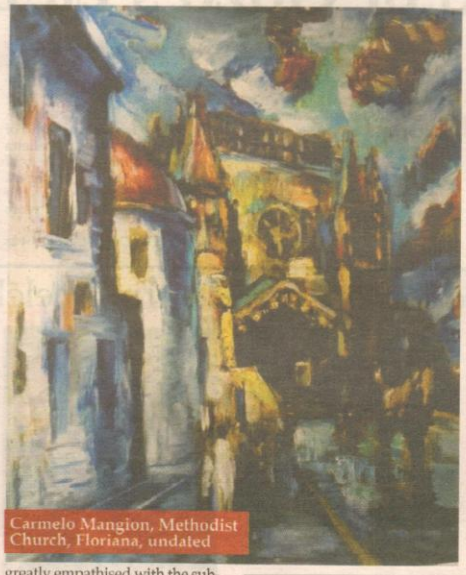
Nikki Petroni

I do not think that so many exhibitions of works by Maltese modern artists have ever been organised within the same period of time. This autumn and winter, works by Antoine Camilleri, Josef Kalleya and Carmelo Mangion will be on show within three diverse contexts and spaces. These exhibitions have been devised within particular conceptual parameters and are also driven by different objectives.

The Antoine Camilleri retrospective exhibition opened at Spazzju Kreattiv, Valletta on 9th October 2015. The exhibition, curated by Prof. Joseph Paul Cassar, marks the 10 year anniversary since the death of Camilleri in 2005. Camilleri was an artist with admirable creative energy. Any material or object was for him an artistic material to be used and manipulated by the artist for his creative experiments. Natural materials, mass-produced things, cadavers, degradable and non-degradable objects, were all tools for him to liberally make use of. Creativity was for Camilleri both a quotidian and a spiritual process. All his works deal with the subject of life and death, the synthesis of life and death within a singular vision, and the idea of preservation. Camilleri directly challenged the notion of time. He believed that art could allow people, animals and objects to become immortal. His numerous self-portraits, portraits of his family, friends and fellow artists, food and animal bones concealed in resin, are all manifestations of his defiance of time.

It is clear that this reflection on mortality was at the core of the works of all three artists. With the opening of the Mdina Biennale on November 13th, a number of Carmelo Mangion's works, which to date have never been exhibited, will be hung alongside some by Camilleri and by Josef Kalleya. This second exhibit encompasses a small number of works by all three which deal directly with the theme of Biennale; 'Christianity, Spirituality and the Other'. The Biennale, being organised under the artistic direction of Dr. Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci, is a large multinational project, therefore the works of these three Maltese modern artists will be placed in dialogue with the works of numerous contemporary artists.

Mangion's art evidently emerges from a firmly-rooted Roman Catholic religious tradition. Yet he confronts its dogmas and re-interprets a number of Biblical themes; the Deposition, The Beheading of St. John, Christ and the Adulteress, the Shipwreck of St. Paul. Not only did Mangion incite a re-thinking of those narratives which are so deeply embedded within our cultural consciousness, but so did he propose a new way of formally rendering these stories. Mangion's intense chromatic schemes, harsh black outlines and aggressive painterly execution opened up a new direction for Maltese painting. The artist



Carmelo Mangion, Methodist Church, Floriana, undated

greatly empathised with the subject matter of his paintings and also with the works of international modern masters, especially the French Paul Cézanne and Georges Rouault.

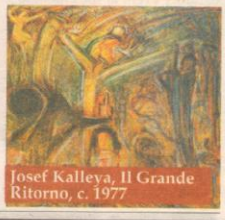
So do Kalleya's sculptures, and even his drawings, espouse analogous artistic and social concerns to those tackled fervently and incessantly by Rouault. Their symbolic definition of the clown persona is one common attribute, the clown which signifies the absurdity of modern life. Rouault and Kalleya were both profoundly Catholic in their beliefs, yet paradoxically non-Catholic in their artistic practice. Their art did not address an institutional religious community, but was imbued with universal human values. Kalleya was a profoundly philosophical-theological artist who manipulated matter in order to attain the impossibility of immateriality. His sculptures portray a visible struggle with the creation of form as a spiritual act.

A small number of his works will be on display in Mdina. However, a corresponding exhibition will be opening on December 15th at the University of Malta Valletta Campus which will deal with Kalleya's sculptural production in relation to the works of leading European sculptors: Auguste Rodin, Hans Josephsohn, Henry Moore, and others. The exhibition is part of an international academic conference taking place on the date of opening; 'Peripheral Alternatives to Rodin in Modern European Sculpture'. The conference is being organised by the Department of History of Art, University of Malta and forms part of the events programmes of the Mdina Biennale and The Strada Stretta Concept. The participants all hail from prestigious Europeans museums, institutions and universities including; Musée Rodin, Paris; Henry Moore Foundation, Leeds; Kesselhaus Josephsohn, Switzerland; Loughborough University; Sussex University, Atelijer Meštrović, Zagreb and University of Maryland University College.

These foreign academics and researchers will be travelling to Malta to debate Kalleya's works in relation to the works of those artists who shaped the character of modern European sculpture. It is with such an approach that Maltese academia may mature and widen its critical horizons. This event together with the three milestone exhibitions are exactly what Maltese art requires to nurture and cultivate an understanding of its history. I do believe that it is the first time that we will be able to see and experiencing so many dynamic and corresponding efforts within such a short time frame.

*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*

Josef Kalleya, Female Figure Representing Malta, early 1920s



Josef Kalleya, Il Grande Ritorno, c. 1977