Spirituality and Nature

How the Mdina Biennale will challenge some relevant aspects of our contemporary culture

■ Irene Biolchini

A few days ago I took part in the *Settimana del Contemporaneo*, an entire week dedicated to contemporary art held in Faenza (Italy). The week was organised by the different institutions in the area as part of the *Giornata del Contemporaneo*, organised by AMACI (AssociazioneMusei Arte Contemporanea) on 10 October.

Throughout this intense week of exhibition openings and book presentations, the different entities attempted to propose some new reflections upon contemporary art. Even though the calendar was quite heterogeneous and dedicated to different media (ceramics, photography and installation), it seemed to me possible to trace out some common aspects between the different events.

At the International Museum of Ceramics in Faenza I curated the solo exhibition of Giulia Manfredi, entitled *Ouroboros*. The exhibition was conceived as a reflection upon the recurrent elements found in the ceramics made in Faenza. Manfredi's works, resins which incorporate natural elements, were facing the ceramics, most of which were painted with designs based on nature.

The artist preferred to choose natural elements which became the main material in her works. Her process of recreation negated the idea of the *bodegon* genre as a *memento mori*, fighting the idea of death with the innate cyclical pattern of nature. At the same time the work presented by Giuseppe Ducrot, a contemporary ceramic reinterpretation of the *bodegon*, reflected upon the same idea of 'freezing' time, the still life, prior to the deterioration of the subject matter. And the still life was also at the centre of the latest project by Ontani, an open dialogue with Morandi's works entitled *Luigi Ontanilncontra Giorgio Morandi. Casamondo.NaturextramorteAntropomorfane* (DaniloMontanariEditore).

The prominent role that nature, and its decomposition, had in these different exhibitions, underlined one of the main aspects of our contemporary debate, and more particularly the relationship that our society has with the idea of death. The Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale, opening on the 13th November 2015 with the theme 'Christianity, Spirituality and the Other', is participating in this debate, being an exhibition able to deal with some of the most important and discussed trends in our contemporary debate. The research on the value of death and life and the search for a spiritual dimension led more than one artist to present works which tackle nature as their main field of action.

As in the case of Giulia Manfredi, who presented in Faenza natural elements eternally immortalised in resin, as did the Maltese Antoine Camilleri, so will Ilaria Cuccagna present a series of works directly inspired by Malta's natural environment for the Mdina Biennale. Her project, *Sic transit gloria mundi*, deals explicitly with the idea of the decomposition, of the ephemerality of this world, an idea which was also central to the *bodegon* genre and, generally speaking, of Baroque still life paintings (something which is recurrently being reflected upon in our contemporary artistic world). Dr Giuseppe SchembriBonaci, the artistic director of the Mdina Biennale, has written several papers and articles on the possible reinterpretation of the Baroque idiom, criticising the contemporary attitude of adopting only its formal component without understanding the religious, philosophical and political context that generated it. At the Mdina Biennale, artists like Ilaria Cuccagna and even the Maltese Victor Agius will try to challenge this attitude, reflecting upon the spiritual and transcendental elements of the Baroque, without embracing its formal characteristics. And they will do so by dealing directly with Baroque architecture: the style of an epoch will be challenged by our contemporary perception of religion and art. In other words, the social, political and religious power of today will be challenged by adopting today's language, and not with the superficial representation of a previous era. Conscious that, as Brecht sustained, 'new problems appear and demand new methods', the Biennale is trying to embrace a new approach, to propose a selection of artists in line with our contemporary methods and capable of giving new replies and new interpretations to today's problems.

Personally, I hope that this new attitude and these new methods can find a place here in Malta and in its public monuments, so that this new atmosphere created by the Mdina Biennale can be retained in our daily life. In this sense, Victor Agius' latest project *Hagarna* for the Art in Public Spaces Programme, with his ability to challenge monumentality whilst creating a meaningful centre for collectivity, perfectly embodies this new spirit. After the numerous debatable monuments, previously denounced even by Dr Schembri Bonaci, we all do hope to develop a new approach on the island, an approach which will be incited and sustained by the Mdina Biennale.

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