International conference on Josef Kalleya and modern European sculpture

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The argument that Maltese modern art was never as progressive or as radical as Continental European art or that of the New York scene is a myth which must be removed from our general understanding of our own art history. It is not entirely false, neither is it an unequivocal fact. We need to develop new methods of how to view and analyse Maltese modern art.

A number of academics and researchers have tried to introduce new analytical tools and philosophical positions to challenge the understanding of Maltese modern and contemporary art: Dr. Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci, Fr. Peter Serracino Inglott, Prof. Kenneth Wain, Dr. Raphael Vella, as well as some others.

The problem is that we persistently search for formal parallels between Maltese art and the art of the modern masters or of instrumental modern art movements. It blinds us from really looking into the conceptual and philosophical elements which truly changed the character of Maltese art and which determine its modern transformations. The differences between the modern art produced locally or by local artists and the modern art which dominates global art history should be studied in further depth, for I do believe that it is in these aesthetic differences that we may begin to appreciate the real value of our modern movement.

This means that placing Maltese art, from all periods, within the international context is essential. Without looking at the works of other artists working in cosmopolitan artistic centres and even in marginal settings like our own, the study of Maltese art will remain insular, both mentally and physically. A comparative approach is one which provides the fundamental tools with which to expand one's empirical knowledge and appreciation of art. It is with such knowledge that we may recognise the differences which determine the particularity of Maltese modern art, and also the non-formal, non-literate, analogies which do exist between the work of Maltese artists and that of leading artists and movements.

As part of the Department of History of Art, University of Malta's programme to establish new academic perspectives on Maltese modern art, it will be hosting an international conference on December 15 titled 'Peripheral Alternatives to Rodin in Modern European Sculpture: With particular emphasis on Josef Kalleya's art and the visual dialogues of an island scene'.

The conference will debate the development of modern sculpture, focusing on how various European sculptors tackled, challenged and appropriated the over-arching influence of the French Auguste Rodin. Rodin dominated the sculptural scene in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and modern sculptors studied his works, as did the Maltese Antonio Sciortino. Yet the aim of the conference is to analyse how sculptors from or working outside of geographical artistic centres created their own aesthetic idioms which provided alternatives to the leading path built by Rodin.

The papers of the conference speakers will represent a wide spectrum of cultural contexts and modern sculptural propositions; some coming from Paris, others from peripheral nations such as Croatia and Switzerland. By peripheral I am here referring to those artistic contexts which are by-passed by the canon of art history, and the conference intends to give the works of certain artists the same visibility as those who are established within global art historical knowledge.

Dr Sophie Biass-Fabiani, curator of the Musée Rodin in Paris, will be looking at Rodin's legacy as interpreted in the late 20th century, focusing on artists such as the Italian Lucio Fontana and the German Georg Baselitz. Dr Julia Kelly, from Loughborough University in the UK, will discuss how some sculptors proposed alternatives to prevailing European sculptural traditions by searching for artistic sources within nature. Her paper will look at the works of Alberto Giacometti, Henry Moore, Hans Arp and several others. In contrast, Dr Jon Wood, curator of research at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, will show how some sculptors moved away from, even against, nature.

In her paper, Barbara Vujanović, curator of Atelijer Meštrović, Zagreb, will analyse the artistic relationship of Rodin and the Croatian Ivan Meštrović, who was very much influenced by Rodin yet who worked to create his own distinct identity. The subject of materiality, which was central in Kalleya's work, will form part of Ulrich Meinherz's talk, curator of Kesselhaus Josephsohn in St Gallen, Switzerland, in relation to the Swiss artist Hans Josephsohn. An overview on Josef Kalleya will be delivered by Professor Joseph Paul Cassar, who is based at University of Maryland University College in the US. The final paper by, Dr Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci (University of Malta) will analyse how Kalleya confronted Rodin's work and proposed an alternative to his tradition. He will tackle conceptual elements in Kalleya's works, which will allow the participants to further appreciate the artist's work.

Everyone is invited to attend the conference and to participate in the debate which each speaker will be introducing. Registration may be completed through the conference website: *https://www.um.edu.mt/events/parnes2015*. The conference is being organised in collaboration with the Mdina Biennale, the Valletta 2018 Foundation and the Embassy of France in Malta.

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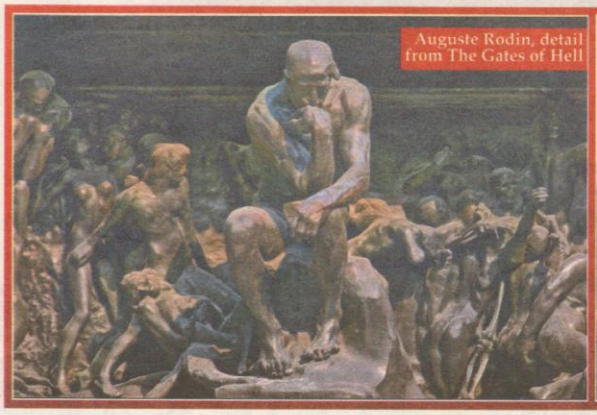
Josef Kalleya, Il Processo


Auguste Rodin, detail from The Gates of Hell

Henry Moore at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park