Searching for the *Other*

Charlene Vella gives an overview of her experience and findings at the *Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale.*

Denis Pondruel, *The severed head of Salome.*

Mdina is currently hosting a *biennale* across 12 venues. This is a *biennale* that has been revamped for the 2015/2016 edition by its artistic director Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci. It is an international exhibition consisting of over 70 exhibits by more than 100 exponents who derive from some 25 countries.

This edition of the *Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale* carries the theme of 'Christianity, Spirituality and the Other' and each work was required to contribute in some way or another to this vast, yet unifying, theme.

The biennale was then further divided into five themes, all revolving around religious belief. Some chose to think of elaborate and intriguing interpretation to these themes, while others chose a very simple notion such as Vince Briffa's *No One's Reliquary*, Sylvie de Mourville's *Epiphanies* and Alex Dalli's *Resurrection*.

As varied as the inspiration and results are, there is a general tendency towards the abstract, which is clearly due to the subject at hand, one that is hard to explain and to capture in an image.

In this diversity, the participating artists have expressed their views in a variety of media ranging from paintings and sculpture to installation and photography.

Strangely, all the ceramists are Maltese and Maltese artists also make up a large proportion of the painters.

While every participant was allowed the freedom to express their own views on the topic at hand, each project had to respect the physical boundaries of their chosen site in Mdina. None of these were neutral spaces, in themselves laden with history and art. In this way, contemporary art works hang alongside historic paintings in the Mdina Cathedral Museum, creating a dialogue between art works and artists.

This was especially the case with Mark Sagona's piece *The Annunciation, Death and the Resurrection: a conversation with Favray* in which the artist produced two abstract paintings that complement Antoine Fav-ray's 1748 *Annunciation* in an 18th-century chapel in the Mdina Cathedral Museum, which originally belonged to the old seminary of Malta.

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In instances such as this, the aim was not to compete with extant masterpieces, but for new art to provide a different perspective to the old.

It is clearly impossible for me to write about all the works on display and which I invite you to explore in person. However, one of the exhibitions that has left a great impact is the *Mediterranean Peace* Donkey.

This is a major collaborative piece in which 21, life-size fibreglass representations of donkeys – each representing a territory flanking the Mediterranean – were produced in Malta according to the design of Egyptian artist Reda Abdel Rahman. These were then painted by Maltese and Egyptian artists. The donkeys are distributed between different venues, including the Mdina Cathedral Museum, Palazzo De Piro, the Natural History Museum and Cathedral Square.

The donkey has layers of significance that have been explored by the curator, Paul Gordon Chandler, and that are adequately explained. The main aim of this exhibition is to instil a sense of compassion between the Middle East and the West, and throughout the Mediterranean in general.

It is, therefore, a very apt theme, one that advocates peace despite the conflicts currently underway.

The Mediterranean Peace Donkey Project is one of the projects coordinated by Caravan for the *biennale;* their participation included a series of concerts. Caravan is an organisation that attempts at creating a dialogue on peace across religions and cultures through art.

Ilaria Cuccagna, *Sic transit gloria mundi! Adam and Eve*

Each artist collaborating on this project chose a meaningful theme related to religion, with one of the more memorable being *Territorial Limbo* by James Micallef Grimaud, in which the traveller donkey is fleeing its native land carrying an empty throne.

The *Mdina Biennale* is itself a massive collaboration of art historians, artists, curators and more for – while the main focus is on the visual arts – it also incorporates poetry readings, concerts, symposiums, and more, making it an all-encompassing exhibition.

Moreover, the *biennale* also honours the artistic career of three of Malta's greatest 20th-century artists through a separate exhibition at the National History Museum, Vilhena Palace – Antoine Camilleri, Carmelo Mangion and Josef Kalleya, with concerts and public lectures forming part of the programme.

The *biennale* is accompanied by a fully-fledged catalogue with essays on a variety of themes, as well as a catalogue of the artworks and biographies of participating artists.

The Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale *runs until January 7. A calendar of events is available online.*

www.mdinabiennale.org

Silvia Camporesi, *Church - Romagnano al Monte (Campania).*

Victor Agius, *27:41*