Art

Windows to the soul

French artist **DENIS PONDRUEL** tells **Veronica Stivala** his concrete structures are like heads, and this is why he is letting Caravaggio's *The Beheading of St John the Baptist* inspire his creation for the 2015/16 Mdina Biennale.

You'd be forgiven for thinking Denis Pondruel's unusual structures are daguerreotype cameras perched on a tripod. The work of this French artist is curious, to say the least, but definitely intriguing in that it makes you look twice, perhaps to decipher what his unusual structures are all about.

The structures referred to here are what Pondruel terms *chambres* and *chambres avec textes*, cubic volumes presented with 'doors' and 'windows' but which are not actually rooms as their name would imply. As with a lot of Pondruel's work, these creations have a strong philosophical element to them. They invite the viewer to look into a room that isn't really one, because one can't actually enter the room: think the Penrose stairs (aka impossible staircases) made famous by Escher, stairs that lead nowhere and rooms that don't have proper doors.

These small concrete structures are the result of Pondruel's fixation with the relationship between thoughts and materials – we see physical rooms, but they are not really rooms. Some of the structures have words or phrases chosen from various texts projected onto them. They appear as fleeting thoughts, in the darkness of concrete blocks, including Maltese phrases like "*twelid mill-ġdid*".

This particular phrase appeared in one of Pondruel's *chambres* exhibited at the Swim exhibition in Vittoriosa last year. Born in 1949 in Paris, Denis Pondruel lives and works in Paris and in Friville (Picardy, France). He first crossed paths with Malta's artistic scene last year when Olivier Plique, now a member of the Mdina Biennale consultative group, commissioned the Maltese *chambre*.

Some of his rooms investigate an alternative way of representing the spiritual. At first glance they allude to subterranean tanks or complex underground passages (just like Hal Saflieni's hypogeum , an underground prehistoric burial site). Pondruel's work will return to Malta in November 2015 as part of the Mdina Biennale. Themed *Christianity, Spirituality and the Other*, spirituality naturally plays an important role in the biennale.

How will Pondruel link his art to the Biennale? Never one to be straightforward or conventional, Pondruel will let the famous Caravaggio painting *The Beheading of St John the Baptist* inspire the structure he will be building.

"You see, my structures can be compared to heads, both because they look like heads but also because they are a sort of psychological portrait, reflecting people's and my thoughts," he explains.

"The artist presents a number of interesting links between St Paul, the beginning of Christianity and water"

Pondruel says in this case he has taken things one step further in that he is dealing with the removal of a head, a beheading, a decapitation. The artist presents a number of interesting links between St Paul, the beginning of Christianity and water. Probably because of a slight language barrier from both our parts, the intriguing ideas often remain hints, rather than full explanations of Pondruel's line of thought.

Ideas include the biblical story of Salome who requested St John's head in a dish and the similarity between this and Pondruel's room. At the mention of this, Pondruel whips out a copy of philosopher Julia Kristeva's *The Severed Head*, which conveniently has a painting of St John the Baptist's head laid on a dish. The book surveys the ways in which the severed head pops up in literature, art and life, a fascinating concept which clearly has gripped Pondruel.

The artist has been known to use phrases in Maltese in his work.

One of the *chambres* exhibited by Dennis Pondreul in Swim.

Although the structure is still being crafted, plans include the room being in a pool of water. As we know, water and St John are inextricably linked namely because of baptism.

In sum, Pondruel comments: "I want this piece of work to encourage conversation. This will be an interpretation of a biblical event, it's not completely true, but I hope that I have come up with something no one has said before, a new perspective."

On the link between the Biennale and his work, Pondruel explains how interesting it is to produce work for a country in which religion is so deeply ingrained in its culture. He speaks with evident fascination of Malta's dramatic Holy Week processions and how it is practically impossible to steer clear of religion here, as opposed to France, where churches are practically tucked away in the middle of busy city streets.

Although he is not religious, Pondruel has a strong interest in religion and takes solace in the peaceful atmosphere of churches, which he likes to escape to every now and then to think and contemplate.

Denis Pondruel is one of the artists selected to participate in the Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale 2015. The Biennale will be held from November 2015 to January 2016 and includes Maltese and international artists working in different art forms.
www.mdinabiennale.org

Greenery and flowers

Succulent flower

Pauleen Micallef firmly believe that, sometimes, artists need to close up from the rest of the world and work in solitary confinement to discover their next dimension of evolution. After a hiatus of two years, Micallef is back with *Contrasts*, a collection of colourful paintings focusing on foliage and flowers.

Some of the works are based on laborously worked realism, while others are based on impressionism and expressionism. Mediums used are oils, acrylics and mixed. For the mixed-medium paintings, the paper is socked in watercolours, which are tossed around so that colours blend into each other.

For the next step, more vibrant watercolour is added. Once dry, pastel touches are added to give a fresh, spontaneous and complete finish.

Contrasts *runs at Damiano's, Sir Luigi Prezziosi Street, St Paul's Bay. Part of the proceeds will be donated to charity. For more information call 9940 3764.*

Bougainevilla