

## Art

# Seeking new perspectives

## Charlene Vella

This year's Bank of Valletta exhibition is one with a difference. The bank is seeking new perspectives, presumably to come to better terms with the contemporary art scene.

At face value, this is praiseworthy, but is quality being sacrificed to experimentation?

I must admit to being nostalgic about the previous retrospective exhibitions of established artists. These have given such an essential contribution to the history of modern art in Malta and it is a pity they are being discontinued. The beautifully produced catalogues are a must for art historians.

The exhibition board has chosen to exhibit the work of six 'new' artists. Meaningfully entitled 'Relocation - emerging artists from Malta', it is a commendable effort.

As the exhibition title makes clear, the theme is that of aspiring Maltese artists needing to relocate overseas to study Fine Arts. Relocation is unavoidable for most university students worldwide. For the aspiring artist it, and its resultant emotions, are adequately recorded by the resultant artwork.

Being away from home will make you nostalgic about even the most insignificant things. This may happen while trying to explain your homeland to foreigners and with their questions you learn to come to terms with it yourself. You begin to understand your native culture because you see it from a different angle and as reinterpreted from your current experiences in a foreign land.

None of what I'm saying is new and may be obvious, but this aspect of 'revisiting' Malta, that includes the political and religious aspects, is seen in some of the exhibitions.

Another dimension is also explored. In addition, the exhibition explores the spatial dimension. One such aspect is that of living in digs, in a limited space, for the duration of the sojourn abroad. This is a normal experience, particularly in major capital cities such as in Paris.

The 'border crossers' are Emanuel Bonnici, Gilbert Calleja, Patrick Mifsud, Teresa Sciberras, Elisa von Brockdorff and Michael

Xuereb, while the curator is Raphael Vella, who also wrote the catalogue essay in the customary BoV exhibition catalogue and the catalogue entries.

The diversity of the participants' background of study should have brought out a diversity of influences and ideas to Maltese contemporary art.

However, although they are clever, some ideas are somewhat too simplistic. Classic examples are Mifsud's *Holyland*, which consists of a map of Malta covered with juxtaposed religious images, his *If found, please return to address* (two suitcases bearing two different addresses), and Bonnici's *Non est factum*.

Von Brockdorff provides witty concepts such as *...and they lived happily ever after (II)* where seven brightly coloured (von Brockdorff's signature colours) cages house cacti that exist individually in each confined space thus restricting their growth potential.

**"Although they were clever, some ideas are somewhat too simplistic"**

Its implications are obvious despite the superficial appeal. In the same category lie Calleja's *Cocoon* and Xuereb's *Wishlist*.

Among the CVs, the one that stands out is that of Sciberras. She is also the artist who shows most potential. Her work in the show is unique and is of an appreciably good standard. This must be the third time in seven months that I am viewing her work. Sciberras is definitely a rising star to keep a keen eye on.

Sciberras's contributions to this exhibition are two sets. One is a triptych entitled *Poi piove dentro*, and the other is *What is a box?* The former has an obvious Dantesque feel to the composition and colour, as is the obvious reference to the 17th canto of *Purgatory of The Divine Comedy*.

Executed on wooden panels in paint and collage, the support's properties have been adequately exploited for added



Teresa Sciberras, *Poi piove dentro*



Patrick Mifsud, *Aghzel Ahmar Aghzel Blu*

visual effect. *What is a box?* can have infinite interpretations enhancing the visual appeal of the exhibits.

The situation of contemporary art in Malta is this: there are abstract artists (tasteful and less so), traditional artists (and by traditional I mean those who stick to the representational but which is not necessarily traditional in execution) and those who try to be ultra-radical in using installation and conceptual art.

I can appreciate exhibits in any of these categories, as long as they are in good taste and intelligently done.

*'Relocation - emerging artists from Malta' is open until July 16, at the BoV Headquarters, St Venera.*



Michael Xuereb, *Wishlist*



Elisa von Brockdorff, *...and they lived happily ever after (ii)*