

# Conversion in conversation

Lisa Gwen Baldacchino

Exactly one week has gone by since the opening reception of the Malta Contemporary Art Foundation's A New Generation collective show and I still feel spent through personal deliberation.

Curiosity and impatience getting the best of me, I ventured into the Upper Galleries of St James Cavalier the day before the new Valletta premises opened their doors to the public, and although shocked that little was set or in place for the morrow, the change to the space itself was positively welcomed and more suitable to the contemporary art genre.

Unfortunately, and I say this with a heavy heart, when it came to the show itself, the end product seemed to be more of a celebration of the "new" space and of its "new" look rather than a celebration of art or the showcasing of the "new generation's" work. So the "problem" of the space present before the conversion persists, albeit in a different guise (at least in relation to this show).

The Upper Galleries of St James consist of four distinct spaces, one of which was somewhat sacrificed for the sake of a reception/front-office area. At first, knowing that the collective show was to feature some 10 artists' works, I thought there might actually be a problem of cramming in the halls. But it was quite the contrary; although there might have been this many artists exhibiting alongside one another, it did not show. The space was left too raw, too white cube-like. The art was practically crammed into the corners on some instances, prompting viewers to question where is the art?, or point at a blank wall and derisively remark: "Did you see that work?". Such comments were painful to hear, though not totally unfounded.

Perhaps my expectations of it all were a tad high; perhaps Malta isn't ready for Mark Mangion's vision of contemporary art; or perhaps one just cannot bring a foreign prototype to an island and expect it to work within a pre-existing cultural context and historical fabric which has striven



Selina Scerri stands before her painting titled Stardust at the opening reception of A New Generation. Photo: Chris Sant Fournier

hard to resist change for centuries.

This having been said, the works on show, if taken individually, truly were a showcase of a new generation of artists.

Elisa Von Brockdorff's photographs were a revelation: the bright carnival colours having been done away with, what emerged were a pair of carefully construed compositions which betray an unbeknownst facet to this artist.

Besides Ms Von Brockdorff's photographs, I thoroughly enjoyed viewing Teresa Sciberas's bass-relief-like wall installation titled Short Cut - it is subtle yet strong, elegant and almost inconspicuous, but it is perhaps the piece which works best in its designated space.

Dustin Cauchi's video installation is also praiseworthy and works well in the appropriately

secluded area. However, there is either a problem of acoustics or sound, because little of the Maltese dialogue could be actually comprehended. Good thing English subtitles were provided.

I was also more than happy to see John Paul Azzopardi's work included in this show. When it comes to 3D works, his sculptures - which are a very intricate web of *objets trouvés* meticulously assembled together - are clad with symbolic content and have a depth of meaning that is rarely seen in someone so young.

Selina Scerri's painting has the most arresting presence of the lot. Being one of the very few paintings on show, Stardust is almost mural-like in quality with its strong drip-paint effect. Although more than a tad kitsch, she has successfully managed to portray a whimsical, fantastical scene, featuring horses/ponies, swans and butter-

flies. The extreme sugar-coated overall effect is quite mesmerising and her work is both bold in concept and execution.

Out of the 10 artists, Adrian Abela seems to have been given the most prominence in this exhibition, with a series of four works on show: three video works and a series of paintings on marble surfaces. Collectively titled Feighth, his installation is quite an apt tongue-in-cheek statement - which should nevertheless be viewed as a whole and not in parts, across separate halls.

As mentioned previously, the individual works are truly a joy to absorb, but some of the exhibit's inherent artistic merit could not be sufficiently experienced because the space seemed to be the prime concern and consequently took most of the limelight. I also feel that, to a certain extent, some background or phi-

losophy behind the works was needed. Hard-to-find captions and short artistic bios in the exhibition brochure were hardly sufficient for the interpretation and full appreciation of the works.

I end this piece on a rather unhappy note, as I question the reason or scope behind a private art foundation being housed in a national art centre. I question whether this is the solution to the lack of a proper modern and contemporary art museum, and I question whether this venture is viewed as a quick and ultimately inexpensive fix to what has definitely become a looming problem on the shoulders of the authorities.

One thing is for sure, I stepped into the MCA brimming with anticipation and excitement... but I left there feeling quite disillusioned and cold about it all.

■ *A New Generation runs till February 7.*