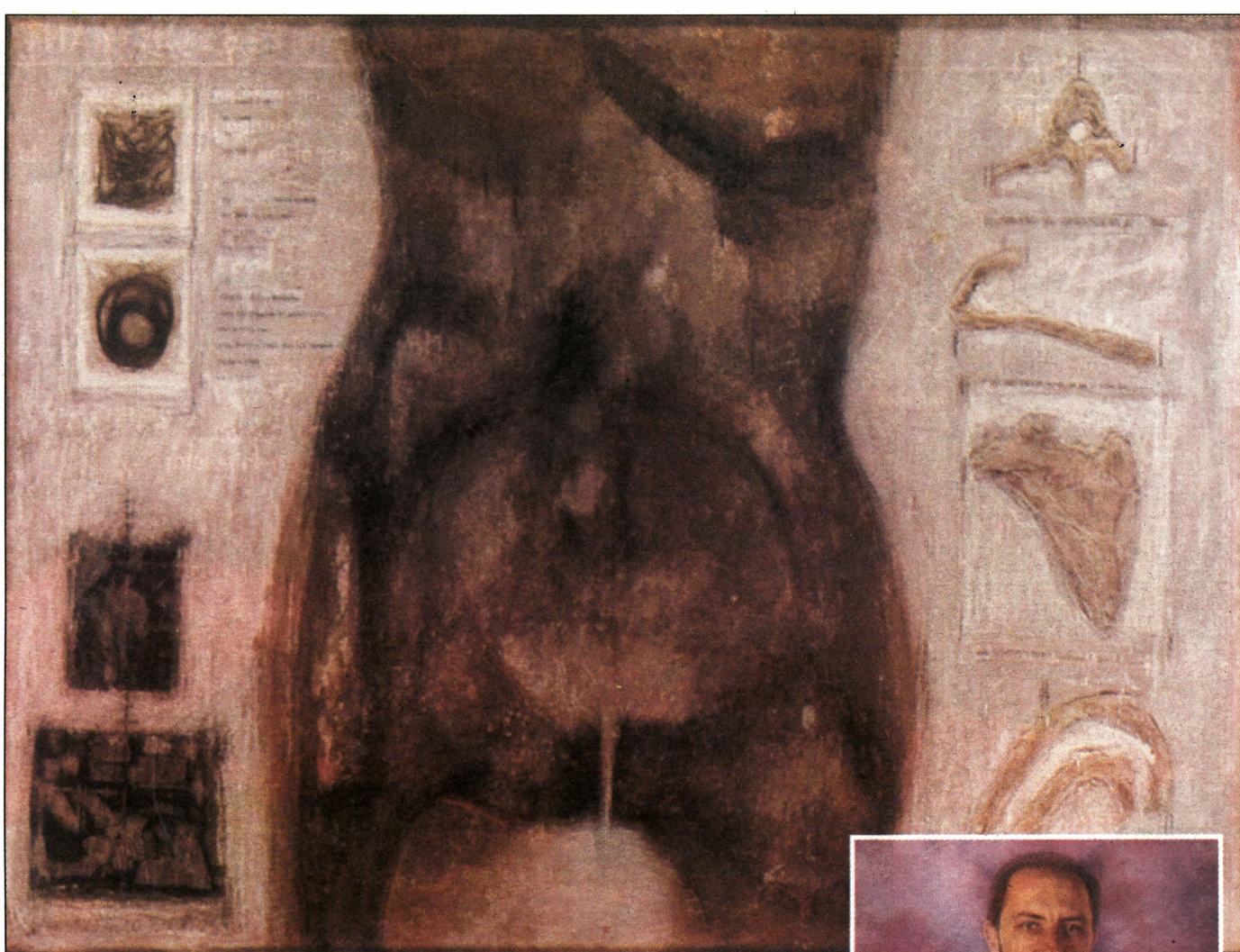


# Icons of human presence

Joseph Paul Cassar



*I have no boundaries 1* – 1998

## Matter paintings

Briffa is profoundly sensitive to the theme of existence. His “matter paintings” display scars suggesting fossils, cracks and fissures that seem to be an organic effect of an elemental process. Tiny birds are fossilised into the cement-like material that makes up the surfaced canvas.

“Body parts” is the appropriate term for Briffa’s human fragments since he emphasises the unpleasant aspects of physicality – iconic enigmatic organs depicted as a still-life.

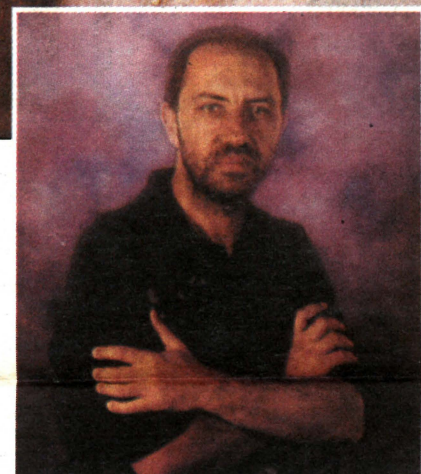
These “matter paintings” aim at spontaneous abstractions that recall the dense surfaces of Jean Dubuffet and Jean Fautier, and locally the series of “life in the soil” by Antoine Camilleri, or the tragedy of the Holocaust as can be experienced at the Yad-Vashem in Jerusalem.

Briffa retains vigour in his work through the introduction of new themes, materials, compositional structures and a vocabulary of images that tie to both everyday world and the spiritual realm. He links the worldly and the spiritual in emphasising the “surface activity” alluding to a state of process and transformation.

## Utilisation of words

Briffa, in his “human hair series” mounted in wooden cases, develops a mode of pictorial writing explored variously in letters, words and cryptic texts. His handwritten scribbles and collaged phrases are tied to his absorption in the complexities that underlie reality – the transformations that constantly occur in what we perceive as reality and the relationship of that reality to spirituality.

He sets fields around the framed hair upon which he writes and scribbles indecipherable words (at times). Such notations suggest the profoundly unknowable, as well as the familiar nervousness of ordinary doodling. Closer inspection, however, often yields recognisable words or letters as if bits of real experience were caught up in a larger network of incomprehensibility. With these tantalising clues one is faced with secret messages, ambiguities of meanings, maybe a hidden code just beyond one’s grasp.



Vince Briffa

The framed human hair gives figural presences as they are witnessed communicating through the glass. But comprehension remains beyond reach as one strains to understand what appears to be a manuscript page, complete with deletions and corrections – resembling public declarations as in graffiti.

## Human presence

The subject of the exhibition remains basically the same, but the characterisation changes. Human references occur even among the seemingly inexplicable traces that give this exhibition its enigmatic aura.

Briffa’s figures are no longer representational in the realist sense, nor are they depicted whole. Their presence is implied through body parts. These fragments evoke a whole.

The way they function is as abstract components in an overall pictorial structure which points to the sense that they are integrally tied to something larger.

They appear in a process of disintegrating – a constant state of evolution is thus conveyed.

In this exhibition, Briffa combines the contemplative and spiritual with everyday reality.

There is no doubt that Vince Briffa’s latest one-man exhibition, *Relics*, at the Contemporary Hall of the National Museum of Fine Arts merits a visit. Among the various aspects to his present collection of works, I focus on what I consider to be the most important: the X-ray paintings, the matter paintings, the utilisation of words and the overall human presence in the works.

## X-ray paintings

Dismemberment is perhaps the most immediate idea communicated by the artist in his X-ray paintings of chests, limbs, shoulders etc. The ghostly-like pictorial scheme reveals the structure of bone while soft tissues such as ligaments and tendons don’t show at all. They are an attempt to formulate an ordering system – a compositional equation where body parts function both as abstract compositional forms and as symbols. The placement of the bones is given the status of an icon.

The glowing apparitions of Briffa’s X-ray paintings convey an eerie atmosphere hinting at death; his white, agitated brush strokes over and around the images in black and subtle grey tones recall hospital bandages.

The attention given in these works to the human presence, or its absence, vibrates an energy of authentic spontaneity which becomes stylised lyricism.



*“Where have I known you before?”* mixed media, X-ray on paper on wood – 1996