



Marco Cremona's retrospective exhibition

Joseph Paul Cassar

The third retrospective exhibition organised by Bank of Valletta in its head office in Sliema is devoted to the artistic production of Marco Cremona (b.1951). The bank's commitment towards the promotion of Maltese contemporary visual expression is documented in a 92-page catalogue with commentaries by the curator of the exhibition Emmanuel Fiorentino and designed by Henri Portelli.

The exhibition has on show specimens of some of the earliest works by Marco Cremona from the late '60s, and works from his studies at the Slade School, until his present preoccupations. Some 63 works are on display through the generosity of private lenders, and these offer a clear cross-section of the artist's main experimental research.

The exhibition focuses mainly on Marco's more abstract works in which, with marvellous precision, he selects lines and contours with individuality, to play a part within the organisational whole of a composition. Like musical instruments these elements contribute their individual tone and timbre to the development of an orchestral chord.

Marco Cremona's work is never predominantly cerebral. It is an art of balance but not of detached calculation. It is an art in which sight and touch, imagination and instinct are brought together and resolved. The keynote in these abstract works remains their richness and poetic breadth.

Herbert Read in his pioneering book *The Meaning of Art*, had written: "Form, though it can be analysed into intellectual terms, balance, form and harmony, is really intuitive in origin; it is not in the actual practice of artists an intellectual product. It is rather emotion directed and defined... Frankly I do not know how we are to judge form except by the same instinct that creates it."

Marco's configurations have been achieved not rationally, but physically, as the natural and seemingly inevitable end of a self-conscious manual process. They remain works of great subtlety and complexity. The ability to give form significance by virtue of its particular placing within a given area had been a hallmark of Cremona's art from the very beginning.

We may be distracted for a while by incidents of texture and detail on the surface of the work, but in the end we perceive the entire composition as an indivisible

whole, which is impossible to translate in any other terms. He establishes a kind of counterpoint between broad bands of colour or texture and a lively display of line upon a surface of shifting and transparent hues. There is a delight in the process of manipulating complex space generally suggested by the overall rectangular divisions.

His watercolours in particular have something of the freshness of early fresco painting. Space is created by the juxtaposition of colour and outline rather than by perspective.

His work reveals his innate ability to create subtle poetic effects out of the simplest ingredients. There are passages that refer to the strong but lyrical themes, which he had inherited from his father, but Marco seeks independence and originality of expression.

In a sense there is nothing surprising about his move into relief from the paintings, because of his concern for real forms and deeper surfaces, the arrangements of inexact rectangles gently interlocked in a shallow space. Venturing into reliefs and eventually into sculpture did not require a change of direction. His panels serve him in the role of the carver's block. His creative response to his materials reveals a subconscious recognition of the essential nature of the artist's activity.

Whatever his motif or material, he is a carver; that is, one who uncovers the image or experience that is embedded in the material, and uncovers it by means of pronounced physical action. Carver-sculptor that he is, Marco works pictorially. To be more precise, the manoeuvres he performs with his materials are of a sort we associate more readily with painting than with sculpture, though we are wrong to do so.

Forms speak to us of tilting, of motion or pressure and his range of textures, colours and tones reveal the colour of the board itself. Some seem to be laboriously cut and scraped out of solid boards.

Paint remains a palpable deposit on a flat surface, an agile distinction to the self-colour of the carved surface. This multiplies the planar and spatial interaction of his elements with great sophistication.

The quantity of wooden constructions he has produced that are near monochromatic reminds one how central is the sculptural aspect in his work. These works are about space-construction.

The works on display show Marco Cremona at his best, constantly within the range of the highest standards obtained in Maltese Contemporary Art.