

Art in Malta today

St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity inaugurated its cultural calendar with an important exhibition on visual arts. Exhibition curator JOSEPH PAUL CASSAR writes about what is important about this event

The Art in Malta Today exhibition manifests the talent of 60 Maltese artists. More than a celebration of Maltese achievement in visual arts, the exhibition offers a cross-examination of the present state of affairs.

For a number of years, the local visual arts scene has gained momentum with an average of an exhibition by, mostly, Maltese and foreign artists every two weeks, mainly held at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta, but also at different places such as hotels, restaurants, local council halls, schools, and the few private galleries around. This has increased awareness of the arts; the public had more chance to regularly view different exhibitions.

Generally speaking, newspapers do carry write-ups about the exhibitions, although sometimes these appear when the exhibition has already been dismantled. Television also offers its share of coverage although, to date, this area leaves much to be desired; many times failing to offer professional filming, doing the job on an on-and-off basis and without any consistency.

While good critical writing and arguments occasionally make an appearance, these are hard to come by. Just as you cannot call an artist whoever picks up a brush, not everyone who writes can call himself a critic.

With this in mind, the need was felt to evaluate and assess where art in Malta today is heading, not by praising, simply of hanging paintings, but by encouraging innovative, interactive works, complete with a modest critical analysis of the present situation. This was done through brief critiques on the nature of each exhibit. A special programme was created to help visitors, families and school children understand better.

Inviting artists to take part in this inaugural event was no easy task. Where do you draw a line; who is to be included or left out?

As curator, I set myself the task of establishing the nature of the exhibition.

Alfred Camilleri's *Chromatic Orientations*
Acrylic, fibre board 150x24x12cms



Anton Grech's *King of all Birds* Tempera on linen, 192x152cm

Artists have every right to ask on what criteria I planned the whole event.

From the start, I had a clear picture in mind – I did not want a major, collective event like the one we are used to at Maltafest. I wanted to personally select the works from artists' studios to trace the development that has taken place, and is still taking place, in the local artistic scene since the advent of the Modern Art Group. The emphasis was on the last two to three years. Most of the works were produced this year.

Some of the works were developed specifically for this exhibition after I made the invitation. I focused on six different aspects of Maltese visual expression: painting, sculpture, ceramics, photography, video and installation art. This, I felt, offered a fair and wide spectrum of expressions prevalent in Malta today.

Artists were contacted on the basis of their commitment to art and according to the acclaim their works have received locally and abroad. Some artists ignored the invitation, some were late to fulfil the prerequisites, others phoned to see on what basis they were not contacted.

With a list of over 250 people who claim to be practising artists in Malta's cultural directories, it goes without saying, that whatever the criteria, it was impossible to include everyone.

This is where I had to decide what character I wanted to give the exhibition. I also claim full responsibility for the choice of artists. In spite of the fact that some important artists regrettably had to be left out (each case has its own story and context), the exhibition still provides

(Continued on page 26)



Patrick Fenech's *Struggling Mermaid*. Various materials, 304x203 cm

Art in Malta

(Continued from page 25)

a wide cross-section of what is happening and where art in Malta seems to be heading.

St James Cavalier, therefore, is not simply a place where artists exhibit their works, but a place which provides opportunities to promote a dynamic scenario for all kinds of innovative projects. The centre as a building embodies the past and has been transformed to look towards the future. Artists are being invited to come forward with their proposals with original work including experimental projects.

The exhibition brings out clearly the concurrent sharp, contrasting elements. On one side there is an active group of artists, young and old, who continue to work in the painting medium, exploring ever more the narrative form of expression. At the same time, others have abandoned subject matter and have verged into abstraction, making use of a variety of media and other forms of experimentation.

There is also a strong interest and development in the language of sculpture and ceramics, photography and computer-related art, video and interactive installation works. It is of paramount importance to see each piece on its own merits and to what extent it reflects the changes taking place in a society like ours

which is also more open to international influences.

We are living in a world of pluralism. Following closely the local artistic scene, it is becoming increasingly evident that there is a greater sense of tolerance. At times we have even gone to the extreme of ruling nothing out and implying that anything goes.

The thesis behind the present exhibition is not to establish whether art is still being produced, but to see what kind of art it is and the spirit in which that art is made. We seem to forget that we are living in an age of self-criticism where nothing is taken for granted any longer.

Maltese artists today have at their disposal an infinite menu of artistic choices and they are free to make use of them, as they deem best. Such a pluralistic artistic context calls for a pluralistic art criticism, that is, a criticism which is not dependent upon an exclusionary historical narrative, but one which takes each work up on its own merits, in terms of its causes, its meanings, its references, and how these are materially embodied and understood. This is an art which clearly has not passed the test of time, but this is our art.

The exhibition is open everyday, including weekends, between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m., and runs until November 22. Entrance is free.