

# Alfred Chircop

The demise of abstract painter Alfred Chircop on April 26 has robbed Malta of the constant rebirth of colourful compositions that adorned our major exhibition halls.

His steadfast commitment to art, coupled with his talent, were undisputable, and he continued to shower us with his latest achievements on an annual basis due to his prolific production. Now the paintings are the legacy he left for all of us to enjoy forever.

Chircop's talents were recognised while he was still a student in Malta as well as abroad. After completion of a course at the Bath Academy of Art in 1961, Malcolm Hughes, lecturer in painting, said:

"Already an artist of maturity when Chircop arrived at Corsham, he showed considerable artistic honesty and single-mindedness in being prepared to investigate anew certain fundamental problems of painting - particularly those that have an important bearing on contemporary painting. These investigations were very well carried out with considerable concentration and at no mean depth."

A second breakthrough came with the 1963 exhibition in Rome when Italian art critic Giulio Carlo Argan noticed in the young man a truly inventive painter. He singled out Chircop's basic vocabulary consisting of just a few selected colours, which at the same time offered an infinite variety of tonal changes.

It was also a vocabulary of a number of simple shapes, such as the sun-like disk (which remained a constant in his oeuvres), and the dividing lines between dark and glowing areas, married with an undisputed technical ability, that many times referred indirectly to the tension and exploration of structures in an evolutionary cosmos.

The essential qualities in Chircop's art remain unity, clarity and harmony. There are qualities of surprise and the unexpected, a constant evolution of purified forms and shapes that are the result of meditation and patient concentration.

Back in Malta, Chircop exhibited his abstract works at the Bank of Alderney Gallery in Valletta in 1964.

Later in 1969, he showed his works at the Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery. His abstract vocabulary was engaged in a process of self-discovery,

which gave importance to forms as much as to empty spaces, attempting to achieve equilibrium in the overall composition. He claimed that:

"Painting is an experience for me in that what I put in (the work) is always different from what I get out."

This quotation, taken from a few undated scribbled notes by Chircop, sheds light on the true nature of his art, where images develop by progressive accretion of marks, allowing movement, enlargement, reduction, even erasure in the process. His involvement is an act with as little premeditation as possible, exploring the relevance of stage-by-stage construction proceeding by trial and error.

Prof. Peter Serracino Inglott, a lifelong admirer of the artist, remarked that Chircop's work needed no title, no name, for "(his) paintings have to be lived with in order to be truly appreciated... a sufficiently long acquaintance and familiarity, in this case, will breed respect, then soon after, a feeling of warm friendship..."

When I was visual arts director at St James Cavalier in its initial years 2000-2003, the board of directors invited Chircop to show his work. It took place in 2001. I was asked to curate the exhibition, which was accompanied by a 36-page publication, the first in Chircop's long career, with articles by Emmanuel Fiorentino and myself.

Although engaged in teaching assignments abroad, I continued to follow closely Chircop's artistic development. In my last visit to his studio in Attard two years ago, I noticed his more spontaneous, aggressive approach, yet keeping his art light and free-flowing. There was less reworking involved and one sensed as if they were done in a rush of inspiration. We talked about this as he continued to bring one canvas after another for me to see and comment on.

Then in the end he told me that he was having too many sleepless nights and work in his studio. As painting ideas flowed, he breathlessly chased them one by one until he was exhausted. He told me that he felt this was his last rush to capture a new development in his art before his time was up.

Farewell Alfred, your art lives on.

**Joseph Paul Cassar**