

In Conversation with Monika Beisner

SPS Interview (*Gabriel Zammit & Luke Scicluna*¹,
with Cecilia Istria-Dorland[†])

Since we're sitting in a lovely, quintessentially Mediterranean garden, I'd like to start by asking how Malta has affected your work, and what led you to settle here.

We first decided to settle here because we visited a friend and liked it so much that, when we saw this house for sale, we had to buy it. That was how it started, about 35 years ago. Gozo was completely different, really different, and for me it is very nice to come back every year and to see how it has changed. In the beginning, there were very few cars, and few paved roads... no street lights and of course no internet. Our street would be pitch black at night, and we'd have to come home with torches to find our house. The only source of light was the lighthouse, which was always on at night... its lamp was so bright that it would block out the stars!

I love the architecture here, and, especially, the bareness of the landscape. It's such a contrast to Germany and England, where everything is very green and abundant. Here, you can see the land itself, its shapes and contours. And also, all these terraced fields are so beautiful and the stones... Most beautiful of all are the stone temples.

So why is it that you do what you do? Why are you an artist, and what drives you in your artistic practice?

It's changed over the years, of course. When I started out, I studied painting, and I thought I'd become a painter. In the '60s, London

was very interesting in terms of the art world. All these artists, like Kitaj and Howard Hodgkin, were becoming famous, and I was fortunate enough to get a scholarship to London. I did painting then, but the Slade School, where I had this grant to study, was so full that I thought, 'no, I don't want to stand there and make big abstract paintings.' So I started to work at home, and then I met my former partner Hans; we used to go to the greyhound races, which we thought were very typically English, and make drawings.

It really was like a ritual; there were these men, who looked like doctors in a way, wearing these white coats and showing the dogs around the area, and then, of course, they had this rabbit, and the greyhounds would run after it. Nowadays, it's all about culture. I go to concerts, to the theatre, and to museums with friends, and I'm interested in contemporary music, so I really *use* London.

You have a flat in Germany, which you only use occasionally. Have you ever felt the urge to move back there?

No, no, I've never felt that way. I mean, I like to go there because I have relatives friends there, but I just really like living in London. For, my purposes, London is the place to be.

Do you draw any inspiration from more contemporary artists?

I prefer older art, like that of Giovanni di Paolo, who has himself done the 'Paradiso,' and I also really like Medieval paintings, frescoes and Romanesque art; that is what I am mostly inspired by nowadays. Although, when I did my children's books, I must admit being interested in the pre-Raphaelites, which don't much interest me anymore.

As for contemporary artists, they do inspire me, but not directly in terms of form. I admire artists like Francis Bacon and Anselm Kief-

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er, but it doesn't show in my work. Recently, and especially with my *Gilgamesh*, however, I'm composing my images more abstractly than I have any of my previous work – the figures and forms manifest in shapes and compositions which initially give an abstract impression before the viewer starts to make sense of the details.

It's interesting that you speak about your work as though it has a life of its own. Is moving towards greater abstraction a conscious decision, or does the work unfold on its own terms?

When doing the paintings for my picture books, for example, I had chosen a text that had nothing to do with reality. I wasn't ever interested in how people actually did things, you know: in how the father cooked, or how the mother worked, or in anything like that. I wanted always to stimulate the imagination, going more for a feeling than for any visual form, even though that work was quite representational. And of course, when I started with Dante, the text was very important, as Dante is very precise about what he sees. So, in the first two books, 'Inferno' and 'Purgatorio,' I had to try to translate what I read into images; I even tried to remain faithful to the gestures, to the colours... to everything. In that sense, Dante was my guide.

In illustrating the *Metamorphoses*, how I did it *was* my invention, because I depicted every story in my own way. I designed a different outer shape for every image, according to the meaning of every story: Arachne, the weaver who is turned into a spider, is in a tapestry, and Persephone is in a pomegranate, as she eats 7 seeds from this fruit.

Although Ovid's stories have been depicted for hundreds of years, almost every artist has focussed on so called 'realistic' images, putting the characters into landscapes and so on. And I also tried to get the whole story into the image, that was my vision. And with *Gilgamesh*, as the story is so old, I really tried to be a bit more archaic in my way of painting. What influenced my artistic development is a bit of everything, guided by my own interpretation of the text and by the overall message or context of the work. It also has to look and feel right *for me*.

How has your approach to doing art changed over the years, and how has the way you relate to your practice changed, if at all? Was art a constant presence in your life, or did you develop an artistic perspective against all odds?

I grew up in a family with no art. Everything was lost in the war, our house in Hamburg was destroyed by the bombings, and we had neither books nor furniture. I grew up without children's books and without toys. When I think about it, and when I ask myself why I've done so many picture books, sometimes I think that it's because I wanted to make them for *myself*. It's really quite strange, I have several friends who grew up without any art who then wanted to create things. Very often, people have somebody, maybe a teacher or someone who really *influences* them. For me, it was really this sense of loss, a self-wanting. Well, I didn't do it consciously but in retrospect it might be this.

I remember myself painting constantly when I was a child. I can't remember much about myself, but, from what I've been told, I had a little table and I would always be drawing. When I was younger, it was more light-hearted I think, my art was more playful. And it has probably deepened over the years; the texts I choose now have more depth to them, and I think that this has permeated into my approach to my work. In my daily routine, I just sit down as always, and do it; it takes a lot of quietness and precision.

A couple of years ago, I went to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and looked at the paintings there very attentively, and, at that moment, I felt that many of the philosophical questions that had developed in my mind over the past few years could be most meaningfully approached through the field of aesthetics. Have you ever had any similarly clear experiences which pushed your work in a particular direction?

In a way, yes, perhaps very mundanely. One day, when I was around 13 years old, I visited Zurich, and there were all these posters — you know, in those days, they had very nice, artistic posters, not like nowadays, where they're mostly photographs and so on — and since I

had never yet been to a museum in those days, I thought that those posters were wonderful, and I wanted to become a poster artist. There was this very famous clown, Dimitri, in Switzerland, and there were posters of him everywhere, beautifully done, and that really struck me. But then, when I first applied to art school, I was not even accepted. If your family has had access to art, and if you have been provided an early artistic education, you are predisposed in certain directions. This could be very good, of course, but I personally did not have an artistic upbringing, I had nothing then. When I first went to a museum, it bowled me over that things could be done like that and that art could be created in that way.

And what about your later artistic education? I know that you've studied at the Braunschweig University of Art, and later in New York and London. What was it like in New York, and how did it affect your work? I often read about how artists like Warhol and Basquiat were changed by that city, but your children's books are completely different to the chaotic work of such artists.

Yes, completely different. When I went to Braunschweig Art School, I experimented, and I eventually won this scholarship to the Slade School of Fine Arts, in London. I won with paintings I now think are horrible, really terrible ones, of astronauts and swimmers. Then, when I went to New York, they were all painting these gigantic abstract expressionist works, and I thought, 'I can't compete in this.' And so, I started taking poems or stories by Tolkien and others, and illustrating them at home. I decided to dedicate myself to creating fantastic children's books; I invented stories and illustrated them, and then I happened to have an exhibition in New York at the Goethe Institute, who had invited some publishers. I got some commissions, and it just moved on from there. New York helped me along in this sense, but it never really took hold in my work.

Did you find painting or writing to be harder? And how did the two come together for you?

When I began, the images came first and the stories were developed from them. Sometimes, I wrote little rhymes, such as when I illustrated a book called *Catch that Cat*, and then I had this wonderful editor, Christopher Reed, who was also a poet and who edited my poems himself. Today, I look for inspiring texts to illustrate.

What drew you to the ancient world, and what relevance do you think myths and legends can have in contemporary life? How can they be translated into an applicable way of life, how do you relate to them, and what do you learn from them?

It's always been an interest of mine. One of my picture books, for example, was about constellations, and another was about fabulous beasts; mythology has fascinated me since childhood. I never wanted to draw mundane or worldly stories. Of course, it was a big jump from these to Dante. I wasn't sure if I could do it when I started.

The *Divina Commedia* is, in a way, a very realistic story. Dante has a whole cosmology in his books, and I find him fascinating. Theology, literature, poetry, geology, astrology, he has everything. What I also admire so much is that the whole thing is created from his own beliefs, his own world view. I think that the fact that a single person can do that is absolutely wonderful, especially in such beautiful poetry. What is also amazing is that, when it comes to the so-called punishments — in hell — he has visual images for each of these punishments, which exactly reflect the sinner's deed. Murderers are in a lake of blood; soothsayers have their heads turned around, looking backwards as they go forwards; shady businessmen, who deal underhandedly, are cast into pitch. I think that being able to do that is a mark of genius, and it really fascinated me. His whole journey is amazing, and it parallels life at so many levels that we can still learn from his tales.

† Would you say that the explicit visual elements of a painting or of an image can tell a story and carry a message in themselves?

Yes, that's what I hope. I mean, not so much in the *Gilgamesh*, because those are individual images, but in the *Metamorphoses*, if people

wanted to, they could form the story from what they see in the image, because there are several things happening at the same time.

It's interesting that you mention journeys, because the myths and legends which you deal with are all about transience, movement, transference... metamorphosis, if you like. Is this overarching theme a coincidence?

Yes, it just so happened that the 3 projects I've chosen last were like that. However, what you say is interesting, because even the authors themselves seemed to be writing about change from a position of uncertainty. Dante wrote his book in exile, Ovid wrote his book in exile,

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and, well, most of the story of Gilgamesh is set away from his land of Uruk. And they are all on journeys, in a way; Ovid starts with the creation of the world and ends up in his own time, with Augustus, whom he praises in the end. And he writes, you know, that his own work will make him

immortal; he writes that about himself — not very humbly — in the knowledge that he will journey on through time.

What was it like being educated in Germany?

Well, we had Schiller and Goethe and the like, but what was amazing was that, for our *abitur*, we did little theatre plays like Eugène Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna* which was in those years, quite revolutionary; we did that together with Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Der Tor und der Tod*. I acted in both, and it was really nice; at such a young age, everybody wants to become an actor later in life.

In school, we also wrote poetry in groups of friends, and read lots of French literature together: Baudelaire, Paul Éluard... and, in German, Paul Celan. I had given my poems to a school-friend of mine as a birthday present, and, when I turned 50 or so, she photocopied

them and sent them back to me all those years later. One is so gloomy when one is young, you know, *tristes*; it was so serious and sad, and it's interesting to read your own words again so much later.

It's almost a glimpse into a past life. I have a deep fascination with everything that goes into forming an artistic perspective, it's so different to that of scholars or academics, where intuition is not valued so much.

Yes, I work very intuitively. Even when I start an image, I make doodles – which are *really* doodles, not like Dürer's doodles! – and it sort of appears slowly, and then when I see what I have done, then it continues from there almost by itself. I only do a little bit of sketching, and the result could always change.

That almost sounds like Paul Klee, who would start a painting with a line and then see where it takes him, 'completing' it as it directed him.

Yes, 'taking a line for a walk' is a wonderful idea.

Considering the fact that your images stand alone, but are often paired with texts, could you tell me a little bit more about your understanding of the relationship between text and image?

My images are freer, in a way, as I use the text as a stepping stone to the image. Of course, with Dante, the link between the two is really precise; the image is quite literal, and it is in ways more like an illustration, as I really tried my best to visualise the text. Usually, though, the texts trigger images, which eventually become my paintings.

William Kentridge once said that "one of the things artists do is take things we know but can't see, and make them visible." Do you think that good art strives to embody universal forms, making them accessible to wider audiences?

I couldn't agree more, and well, I hope to do this in my humble way too, because I want to stimulate my viewers' imagination through images that are not exactly *usual*. Of course, you can also do this if

you paint realistically, but my images are a bit... bizarre, perhaps, and I hope they lead to the questioning of what the viewer sees.

I quite like this in art, and I do think that one of the functions of art is to bring hidden truths to light. It's like what churches are all about, all their frescoes and statuary... They tell stories for people who can't read, and it's very difficult to do that well. I see these pseudo-Baroque paintings in churches all the time, and, in my opinion, they really aren't very good! Medieval paintings are almost like comic strips, and they tell stories in images and forms which everyone can understand. Because we can still understand and appreciate them hundreds of years later, both for their form and their content, I think that art does have a privileged link with some ultimate truth which here and there it brings to light.

† In both your Gilgamesh and your Metamorphoses, you explicitly reference a text that forms the mythos behind your work. When it comes to art which is less explicitly tied to a text, do you think that it still refers to a knowing that is in some sense textual, or do you think that it has more to do with the primitive condition of the individual?

The text definitely has something to do with it... the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for example, is one of the most primordial texts, which I think strikes human beings intuitively, at a deep level. There does seem to be something which makes knowing in this sense less explicitly tied to a text. The texts of myths and legends, I think, are themselves translations of a deeply human sentiment, which visual art attempts to embody in turn. Whether an artist strikes out on her own or moves through a text which forms a gateway to these sentiments, it makes no difference. Of course, I can't tell whether others see this in my work, or whether they see this in any art at all.

‡ Isn't that what myths are about, something which is deeper than the story itself? You might go through the story to something deeper, which you can then extract in a visual form, or through any other form of art, really.

Absolutely, and I think that this why I like these kinds of texts.

‡ You said that, with *Gilgamesh*, you tried to do something more archaic. What was that more archaic sentiment for you, and what does it mean practically?

Well, visually archaic. I wanted them to be stark, elemental, and primordial. They are more... monolithic, imposing, simpler too. In the *Gilgamesh*, I tried to have a visual style which was more archaic, more direct, and so, in a way, more immediate and directly striking.

Some paintings are extremely simple, but also extremely precise. I am thinking here of Kandinsky or Rothko, whose works make your mind start to run and flow as though you were listening to a piece of music.

“The texts of myths and legends are translations of a deeply human sentiment.”

Yes, absolutely.

Do you think that art should ever be censored, and why or why not? For example, Jeff Koons’s pornographic images can be seen as expanding the artistic language, allowing something that would not normally be considered art to express profound ideas. Yet it could be argued that they’re extremely distasteful, and that they are only allowed near a museum because of the artist who made them. Should a line be drawn between what is considered to be art and what is not, and if it should, by what authority?

Art should never be censored, not even Jeff Koons’s. His images are pornographic, if one wants them to be, but, on the other hand, they are so kitschy, so bizarre, that one could just laugh at them. You know, there is something to be said about an age where these images hang in museums, and Koons highlights this. It’s so over the top, what he does, that I find it quite funny, although I don’t think he wants them

to be humorous! I've recently read a book by Michel Houellebecq, *The Map and the Territory*, which sets Koons up as half of the art world alongside Damien Hirst. Houellebecq does this very ironically, but he's right – this is what we are working with nowadays.

If I recall, The Map and the Territory opens with the main protagonist, Jed Martin, trying to paint this image of Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst called 'Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons Dividing Up the Art Market.' His protagonist can't capture Koons in his image, and gives up, ripping his canvas and feeling sick... it's such an apt metaphor for what Houellebecq thinks is the breaking point in art.

Yes, it's brilliant — it's so real. And at the end, he paints something like Jackson Pollock would, but with real blood and chunks of flesh.

Houellebecq is himself quite a subversive author. In Submission, he expresses some very controversial opinions about the Muslim population in France. Do you think books like this one should be censored? Where is the line between artistic comment and defamation to be drawn?

Well, in the book, which is set in 2020, he hypothesises that Muslims have taken over France. I don't think there is any defamation in it. One has to consider his style, as he writes very ironically. Everything has to be taken into consideration when it comes to judging art; subversive opinions are not enough to put something to the side.

‡ I think that what he's really doing is showing the hypocrisy of those around him. He criticises everyone, and its bad reception becomes part of the art itself, in a way.

What if the book were bad, as well as controversial?

‡ Well, then we're back to Oscar Wilde's famous dictum that "there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book." If it's a bad book it's a bad book, whatever it happens to convey.

That's right, but then you still have the question of who's to say what's good and what isn't. Intuition is simply not enough to inform laws about what is acceptable. Even in the case of racial or religious propaganda, which can sometimes be very strong, I don't think it should be censored. People have the option to not listen to it, and they must have the good sense to maintain a critical attitude. It is, of course, a difficult question, and education plays a big part in it.

What do you think makes a work of art good? Can anything be art if a viewer appreciates it or if a museum accepts it?

‡ I think we've been pondering that once since... Plato?

I think that if somebody thinks that it's wonderful, then it's wonderful. It's up to everybody, as, after all, art is there for the people who make it and for the people who view it. If someone picks up a stone and it strikes them as being wonderful, then it is wonderful.

I don't think that the same thing can be wonderful for everybody, as everybody has their own opinions. Especially nowadays, since we have this understanding of different art worlds and of all these different cultures which have radically different aims. Some people still think that African sculpture is rubbish, as it is not like Renaissance art.

For a short time, I taught a young girl whose mother wanted her to draw. She herself liked it, and she was very good at what she did. She had this primitive, clear style, very wonderful. I thought to myself, 'I can't do that,' but then the longer she did it the more she wanted to become like Dürer or Michelangelo or something, and she was never satisfied with what she did. When she grew up a little bit, she dropped it, and it was all gone. This is an example of the bad effects of imposing a single idea of what good art is. Very often, they say that we should unlearn in order to move forward, and this is one of the hardest parts of being an artist.

‡ This is a very modern conception of art, I think; in the 16th century, it would just not be possible. Unlearning implies learning, and follows from the move away from formalism.

One could consider a songbird beautiful, but that doesn't make it art.

Well, yes, of course, but I think that for the plastic, man-made arts, it is enough to know that it is appreciated. The question of nature, of course, is much more complex. In ways, I am still very old-fashioned; I still use paint and a brush.

Your art retains its vitality because its content is universal. If someone today were to pull a stunt à la Duchamp, it just wouldn't work, because the original was completely dependent on its context for relevance. Whilst Koons is doing something similar, by fetishizing objects and objectifying fetishes, I think that his work is just the logical conclusion of what went on in the previous century. Conceptual art is generally reactive, and moves in qualitatively unique leaps, relegating works that came before to the dustbin of the same tradition which that work had itself replaced.

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Yes, you cannot repeat things that came before; it's just that some things live on for much longer, because what they touch upon is so much more common to people, like myths that live on for thousands of years. It would be interesting to bring Duchamp's fountain to a group of people who had never seen it before, and to see whether it sparked in them the same effect that it had had originally.

On a similar note, if a child painted something in the style of Newman or Cy Twombly, do you think it would deserve the same esteem?

The young do wonderful things. We all admire them because they are not restricted. I also like so called 'outsider's art;' it is sometimes similar to children's drawings, but taken to a higher intensity. The only caveat with such artists is that they don't develop. They do their thing wonderfully, but they always do it the same way. Giorgio Morandi painted bottles over and over, and, in a way, they were all dif-

ferent, even though he painted things which seemed so similar. He became famous for them because they had presences; they struck you intuitively. Even though he would never move on from that, he still achieved something highly significant.

Do you think that artists have a responsibility to resist in authoritarian societies, or to respond to traumatic events? Artists like Gerhardt Richter and Don DeLillo figured events such as 9/11 into their work, and contributed to efforts of restitution. There are also artists like Anselm Kiefer and W.G. Sebald, who, perhaps more profoundly, respond to the spectre of war which still hangs over Europe. Do you think that artists are obliged to be political in this way?

There are so many different kinds of artists. I am certainly not one of those concerned directly with politics, but, as I said, I believe in awakening the imagination. That, for me, is the beginning of a world view, a 1st step, which goes beyond the temporary nature of current politics and looks at the root of human action itself. If the imagination opens up, I think that politics will improve; in this way, art can contribute to the betterment of human life.

I've illustrated a lot of works from different cultures, and touched on different topics — I did a book about trees once, stories about trees from all over the world — and this shows that there are themes that are a bit more lacking of temporal borders. It's the same as we were saying before; if art manages to embody something universal and show this to people, then that will have effects in their lives and eventually in wider society.

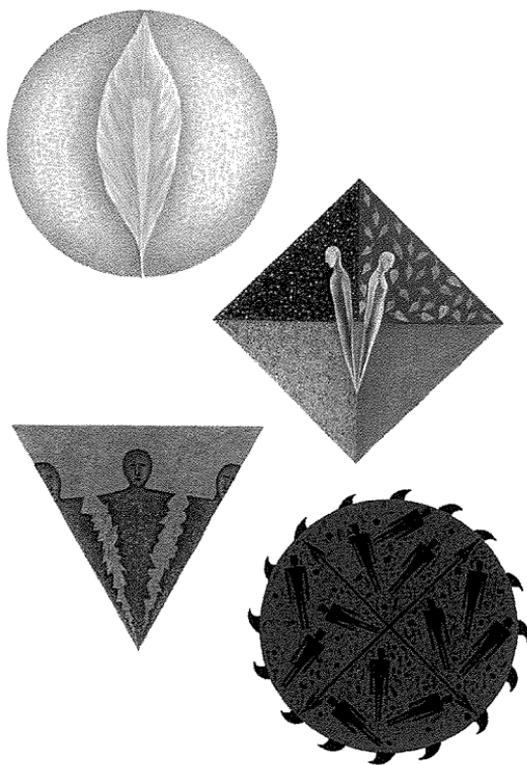
† Your Gilgamesh can also be seen to be quite political. Returning to what you said before, that art aims at expressing something of the unchangeable, of the universal, the deeming of something to be universal is in itself a world view, founded on a notion of how things ought to be. In this way, albeit not consciously, it is a political statement. I believe that all art must be political in order to function as art.

Yes, that is right in that everything human is political, even art. In a way, *Gilgamesh* is very political. Gilgamesh was, after all, a tyrant, and wanted fame and power for himself. When the gods made him an equal, he learned that there were other people. When his friend died, he realised that he too would have to die, and he sought out the secret of eternal life, which he was eventually denied. Gilgamesh has to learn that even the most powerful reigns must end. It's ultimately about human relations, so yes, it is political in that sense.

Even art that is not explicitly concerned with politics may have subtle repercussions in the realm of action. The imagination, after all, is at the root of most of what we do. Some would argue that it plays a fundamental role in the very structuring of our experience of the world.

Yes, I really do believe in that, in the power of the imagination.





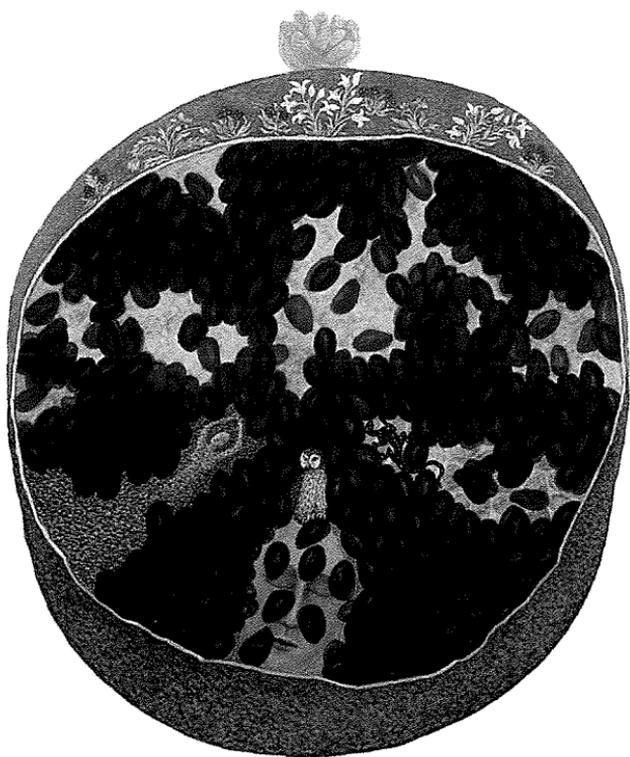
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