

# At the threshold of Two Worlds

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Upon visiting Antonio Mifsud's workshop to pick up a commissioned painting to be used in an upcoming publication of philosophical poetry by the late Carmelite Friar Felician Bezzina, I found myself plunged in an outburst of bright colours, mostly reds and yellows.



Antonio Mifsud

The artist was inspired by the mystical doctrine of Carmel as expressed in John of the Cross' writings, pregnant with symbolic language of darkness and hope. Immediately, past imagery of unforgettable aromas started to fill my mind. My sense of smell recalled the scent of leaves, trees and fields damp with the first showers inaugurating the coming of Autumn.

Frosty blues took me back in time to my childhood where, as a schoolboy waiting for the school bus on early mornings at Sa Maison, I would stare at the smooth, slight, moderate or rough sea, with chilly and fresh sea air.

Seagull cries complemented the soporific view. For a moment, the natural environment has become beautiful again in my memory as, unfortunately, our contemporary experience of it is dull. Nowadays, almost nowhere seasonal colours can be experienced in cemented Malta! Cloudy greys pitch a dark shell, and showers cause flooding in a country which is overly built and irreparably spoiled, symptom perhaps of a nation losing its soul; the scorching hot weather has become unbearable in a deforested island heading irrefrenably towards complete desertification.

On the contrary, in Mifsud's worldview, buildings, monumental ones which are part of our heritage, are not only colourful, but they are bursting with life. It is as if seasons entertain a springtime quality in Mifsud's imagery as he dares to dream of vibrant hues in their absence. There's a hint of prophetic nostalgia in Mifsud's paintings which reminds me of Pavel Florenskij's lament to his deceased friend and companion. "O my distant, my quiet brother! In you is spring, while in me is autumn, perennial autumn." This lament is im-

mortalised in 'Letter One' of his magnum opus 'The Pillar and Ground of Truth', entitled "Two Worlds" there, where summer is over and a new season stands in the air.

In "Two Worlds" the Russian polymath is rapt contemplating autumn hues made up of "golden leaves" whirling over the ground in serpentine, wind-driven whirlpools, pulsating like butterflies. "The air filled with the cool aroma of autumn, the smell of decaying leaves, a longing for the distances". Like in Mifsud's paintings, death and life dance together in autumn. "How good it was...how joyous and sad". Autumn becomes a reflection of the "infinite" cycle of loss and actuality. "Everything whirls. Everything slides into death's abyss" paradoxically germinating with vivacity. The visible and the invisible, time and eternity are merged in Mifsud's colourful realms.

In this sense, in his works even the secular is spiritual, the two worlds intersect. This is especially so in the more abstract works which are just patches of vivacious colours, vehement yet contained.

Some years ago, in 2018, it had been said that Mifsud explores a new realm, distancing himself from the religious for the secular. Some sort of emancipation. I beg to differ. I recall his 2008 exhibition *Anima. The Soul Within*, where Antonio merged the figurative with the abstract, mixing a vivacious palette with whitish bas-reliefs.

In this style, he accomplished religious commissions for churches and chapels starting with a crucifix for the Swatar chapel for perpetual adoration. Here the corpus is suspended in a mix of vibrant color as if emerging from the invisible realm characterised by a feel of liquefaction, out of which the solidified dead body of the Crucified emerges.

The latest work in this style is the *Risen Lord* commissioned by the Archbishop's Seminary, where again we find the same concept, this time from the perspective of life. Unconsciously, perhaps, Mifsud is giving form to Origen's theory of liquefaction and solidification which characterise our human, and hence our spiritual, experience.

In merging together these two opposites, Mifsud manages to capture our complex intersection between interiority and exteriority, the spiritual and the temporal, the tangible and the intangible. At the Lunzjata chapel he portrays the Incarnation in a dyptych, where the kenosis of the Word is the focal point to where the two figures of the hieratic standing Messenger and the kneeling Lady, almost supporting herself on a rugged rock, tend.

Mifsud's works are indeed explorations for a new idiom which captures the intersection of two worlds: the visibilia and the invisibilia. The perspective is that of a contemplative gaze, as in the two paintings portraying the mystic Mary Magdalene de Pazzi. The two works inspire stillness and speak of inner transformation. While nostalgically reminding us of the true colours of life, Mifsud's artistic expressions invite us to dismiss a dualistic worldview which divorces the spiritual from the temporal and penetrate our dull greyish actuality to discover the dormant energetic life-giving potential within and become catalysts of change, sparking in us "the longing for distances."

No doubt Mifsud is an explorer in search of a new idiom to express his deepest longings, bursting in his innermost centre where *las profundas cavernas del sentido*, to borrow John of the Cross' expression, are aflame, alight to illumine, consume and transform.

In this sense, Mifsud's art is scared as it witnesses a personal journey of transformation. Indeed, as in all authentic journeys, the path is arduous, ascetic if you like, kenotic. The somber and sometimes spectral figures, portray a certain reflective dantesque melancholy, indicative of an awaiting for the transformative kairós to birth new life as the MUMN commemorative monument and Risen Crucifix indicate.

Mifsud's artistic idiom is inquisitive, vibrant but pained, tangible but elusive, material but spiritual, gentle but hefty in abstraction. In other words, it stands at the threshold of two worlds. Standing before Mifsud's work Solov'ev's words in one of his letters come to mind: "For me, the conscious conviction that the present condition of humanity is not as it should be means it should be changed, transformed. I do not recognize the existent evil as eternal; I do not believe in the devil. In acknowledging the necessity of transformation, I commit my whole life and all my energies to actualizing that transformation. But the most important question is: where are the means?"