

# Curating Meaning

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**Gabriel Zammit** discusses with **THINK** how his studies at UM have informed his career path as we take a journey through his experiences in the art world: from undertaking his studies to organising exhibitions with themes ranging from solitude to challenging artistic norms. He also shares his thoughts on the Maltese art scene and the vast potential he thinks it has.

In today's world, the lines between disciplines are increasingly blurred, and few exemplify this more than Gabriel Zammit, a UM alumnus who graduated in Philosophy and Anthropology. Now an independent curator, Zammit has developed numerous art exhibitions that showcase his unique perspective, which combines a deep understanding of philosophy with an appreciation for aesthetics.

## PHILOSOPHY AND ART

Zammit's path did not begin with art curation. An essential indirect first step was his B.A. in Philosophy and Anthropology. There, his focus on speculative realism provided him with the tools which would later prove fundamental to his understanding of the art world and provide him with his distinguishing mark and approach. The main tenets of speculative realism are about overcoming the human experience, challenging the fundamental assumptions of traditional philosophy. Speculative realists reject the idea that reality can be fully understood through language, as well as the usual conceptual frameworks.

'I came out of my course at UM realising that certain fundamental questions don't have answers. Throughout my course, I had been absorbing art as a spectator: by going to museums, for example. At one point, I realised that the philosophical questions I was asking as a result of my degree, however, could perhaps be approached through an aesthetic perspective rather than a constructed, logical, and coherent way. That is how my interest in art developed.'

As a result of this realisation, Zammit decided to turn his experience in philosophy into a Master's in Art Theory and its metaphysics at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Kingston University, London. There, he obtained the language needed to develop an aesthetic and experiential understanding of his philosophical inquiries. Obtaining his master's degree, Zammit declares that something was instigated or catalysed. He points out how important it is to recognise these moments. The jump to curating art exhibitions, however, was not obvious. Instead, as with most things in life, it was the consequence of whimsy, coincidence, and perhaps a pinch of cosmic convenience.



## FIRST STEPS ON THE JOURNEY

At 23 years old, Zammit had just finished his master's, and was looking for the next step in his career. After a gap year in Spain, which itself was important to his growth, he landed back in Malta and started searching for a job. At that point, he professes to not have truly understood what a curator was or what kind of work the art world could really offer. His studies had been theoretical and conceptual, and so he focused on his skills in writing and research when seeking employment.

'Somehow, I found myself working in the Mdina Cathedral Archives. They have Malta's biggest archive of music, stretching back to the 13th century. As a research assistant, I came into contact with a lot of artists and musicians, and my work overlapped somewhat with the Mdina Cathedral Museum. That gave me a first contact with the art world, which would prove crucial ➤



*Sea, Sunset, Moon – installation shot*  
*Photo courtesy of Spazju Kreattiv*

in my journey. I would sometimes help with the set-up of museum exhibits or writing. Just carrying paintings or prints back and forth between the archive and museum, for example – but this gave me a practical understanding of art projects.’

A year into the job, there was a donation of a big collection of music to the archive by Pawlu Grech. Zammit says he was made responsible for coordinating and cataloguing this collection of music scores and placing them in the archive. Whilst doing this, he came into contact with Grech and his partner. Grech mentioned that they were trying to organise a concert, and it just so happened that he was also an abstract painter in the Late Modernist style. Zammit offered to help Grech, and one thing led to another to his first ever curation experience.

Zammit combined Grech's music and art, organising an art exhibition and concert all in one. Leveraging the experience of others, Zammit learned the process of event management step by step, from budgeting, selecting a venue, and collecting the works, all the way to set-up and the curatorial

dimension. He applied for funding, organised transport, and developed a concept informed by his studies.

‘This first exhibition was called *Departures* – and the concept was very Modernist. Modernism is about breaking from the canon of conventional ways of doing art. The musicians Pawlu Grech was inspired by were breaking the tropes of classical music – Stravinsky, Stockhausen, etc. Grech had also mastered colour and abstraction. We put on a show which explored this breaking of norms and gave it a philosophical spin through Emmanuel Kant's philosophy. Looking back, it seems quite amateur now, thanks to small things I did, like sticking the labels to the frames of paintings. That is a massive no-no and something one would see immediately with experience. But I was very happy with how it went, particularly as it was my first experience.’

## CREATING MEANING

Zammit's initial success made him realise that he could start organising similar things for other people. He saw

how he could give body to abstract ideas and explore philosophical concepts through a material, artistic language. Having put his face out there, things started to happen on their own. After *Departures*, he was invited to curate his second project, which became an exhibition titled *Darkness At Noon*. He applied for funds from the Arts Council again and got the ball rolling, managing to also get a few sponsorships.

‘*Darkness At Noon* was my second project. I was working with three very experienced artists, and through them, I learned what it means to really curate and think about details. I had a painter, a ceramicist, and a photographer working together, and during one particularly difficult moment, I was struggling to make the ceramics stand out due to how big the paintings were in comparison. It was difficult to coordinate a sensitive dialogue between the works, some of which were very loud. However, Paul Scerri, the ceramicist, intervened and offered me some tips and ideas for placement, and everything fell into place. It really was a learning experience.’



*Darkness at Noon – installation shot  
Photo courtesy of Gabriel Zammit*

For Zammit, curation is the intentional creation of meaning, similar to a philosophical essay. Such an essay is structured with a premise, an argument, and a conclusion. With exhibitions, the premise could be something produced as a text and given to the artist to draw inspiration from. For example, for another exhibition titled *Sea, Sunset, Moon – Variations on Solitude*, Zammit carried out research on the concept of solitude as a creative and destructive force. The artists were prompted by a brief which consolidated this research and produced unique work in response. Zammit then placed these objects into a common space to create a subtle dialogue. The whole thing, Zammit said, became a constellation of connections between the artists' work, the research, the space, and the audience, who then had their own experience of the work.

## CURATION ON THE HORIZON

With some experience of curation and project management, Zammit is now able to put his experience and knowledge to good use as the Events and Initiatives Officer of the Malta Society of Arts. There, he is

organising a whole programme of exhibitions for the entire year.

In June, Zammit will be curating a solo exhibition for Alex Dalli, who has been working in the arts for over thirty years. Titled *Il-Habba Tal-Ghajn*, the exhibition traces Dalli's painterly journey from the figurative into the abstract, following his investigation of the spiritual in art, looking for different, less encumbered, ways of seeing. As curator, Zammit will be looking for Dalli's authentic voice and seeing how he can facilitate making it heard in the clearest way possible. The date is set for 8 June at the Malta Society of Arts.

'Do I think there is space for art to grow in Malta? Just in terms of curatorial theory, there is a dire need for a curatorial institute or at least a couple of curatorial courses. There are huge gaps which need to be filled, and filling these gaps would definitely constitute some much-needed growth. There is a lot of talent in our country – huge talent. We are saturated with artists and creative projects, from dancers to writers, but there needs to be a more solid infrastructure in terms of better education, better standards for

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doing things, and more systematisation. There are also really simple things which can be done, like having a framework of basic wages for freelancers, or more solid representation for the interests of freelancers and practitioners.'

One concludes a dialogue with Zammit by understanding that both he and curators in general are bridges between the general public and the art world. A Philosophy and Anthropology degree at UM opened doors unimagined, as is the case with most worthwhile journeys. One should never know the ultimate destination before one even starts. **T**