

Vestiges: A study in ecologic

Written by Claire Casha

Silvio John Camilleri has unveiled his fifth solo show, *Vestiges*, at the Wignacourt Museum in Rabat. In *Vestiges*, Camilleri departs from the dominant focus on the urban landscape evident in his last exhibition to explore instead the thesis of 'ecological identity', a term coined by Mitchell Thomashow to refer to how persons perceive themselves in reference to nature. In the artist's own words, "This series represents a kind of shift for me – from depictions of external spaces to something more internal and symbolic." This shift could have been inspired by the passing of close relatives which sensitized him to the powerful metaphor offered by nature's cycles for the grieving process.

The collection of 32 vibrant paintings has six main strands of works related to the theme of ecological identity, particularly to the concept of totemism: Totems, Totemantics, Rhythmic Pulsations, The Horizon We Inherited, Kindred, and Primordial Lullaby. The artist uses a hybrid genre of surrealism and totemism. Predominant amongst the leitmotif of totems are four animate objects deeply linked to the Maltese context: bulls, lizards, figs, and loquat. In the case of the bull, the link extends to its strong representation in Maltese prehistoric art. In this article I explore how the genres of surrealism and totemism both align with the concept and title of *Vestiges* and discuss the artworks from both colonial and postcolonial standpoints.

Totemism as a kinship system

Totemism is a belief system relating to symbols or representations of our connections with inanimate or animate objects including fauna and flora. The word 'totem' was first mentioned by John Long, an Englishman adopted into the Ojibwa American Indian tribe. As first discussed by anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan, the term originates from the Ojibwa Indian word 'dodaim' and links to the concept of 'gens' (clan). The seminal work of various scholars including Wilhelm Wundt and Sigmund Freud, identified three major functions of totems: social (involving the establishment of kinship rules/belonging); psychological (involving identification with, and belief in the protective power of, the totem); and spiritual (involving sacred worship of, or reverence to, the totem).

As the fundamental tenet of totemism, kinship is most evident

amongst exhibits in the eponymously named Kindred strand of works which depicts the connection between humans and totems as kindred spirits and equally, the connection between humans and nature. The artist is concerned with foregrounding the innate, wild traits of humans as biological animals sharing deep evolutionary, genetic, and behavioural connections with nature – traits often masked, minimized, or denied by contemporary civilization. Stylistically, he achieves this by the depiction of a grotesque face, which he conceived of as symbolic of our wild nature, and by clever use of dark earth tones with luminous accents, symbolic of our oneness with human nature.

Dualism in Human Nature

A key feature of the collection is the overt or covert visual trope of dualism which can be reflective of the artist's attempt to navigate and reconcile different facets of his personality. The dualisms of structure versus chaos, self-control/deliberation versus impulsivity/spontaneity, and identity/recognition (characters with faces) versus anonymity (faceless characters) are carryovers from previous work. Idiosyncratic to this collection are the dualism of horned animals versus lizards and the dualism of the solar and lunar cycles.

As sacred symbols, totems bridge physical and spiritual worlds. Horned animals and lizards are therefore particularly apt totemic symbols as both are historically associated with the divine. Bovine animals – strongly represented in prehistoric art – were associated with power and fertility, with their horns being viewed as solar rays or lunar crescents. In many cultures, lizards were associated with the divine due to their regenerative abilities to shed skin and regrow tails. However, horned animals and lizards can symbolize the embodiment of contrasting features of nature and human psychology such as brute strength and power in the case of horned animals, and agility and adaptability in the case of lizards.

This dualism is strongly associated with the exogamous function of totemism. Moiety exogamy is a social regulatory system occurring in some indigenous societies. In this system, society is divided into two complementary unilineal descent groups (moieties), with each moiety having its own distinct totem. Individuals are socially obligated to marry a member of the opposite moiety. This



system, which has a number of functions including the reduction of inbreeding and the fostering of alliance and mutual reciprocities, is also symbolic of opposing forces that need each other to form a balanced whole.

Totems as cultural vestiges

As individual or collective symbolic representations, totems are cultural vestiges that encode and preserve meaning across time and space. This key feature of totemism is beautifully captured in

The Horizon We Inherited strand of works. The scenery as well as the expansive figures reminiscent of the style of Fernando Botero are at first glance suggestive of a timeless seam between past, present, and future. Yet this strand of works does not belie the threat that cultural vestiges can be lost. In *The Horizon We Inherited* No. 4, for example, the red tonality can be evocative of an awe-inspiring sunset or of an atmosphere of impending danger, and the ambiguous gestures of the figures

can convey both troubled and untroubled countenances. The presence of fruit and the childlike figure may reference Adam and Eve as progenitors of humanity and serve as a metaphor for paradise lost and the hope of it being regained. Scholars have read the Adam and Eve narrative as an allegory of humanity's transition from a pre-cultural, undifferentiated state into a structured world defined by binary oppositions – discussed earlier on – which emanate from human transgression.

cal identity



This can be linked to transgressions of nature in the context of colonialism, discussed by many influential post-colonial scholars including Frantz Fanon who critiqued colonialism as a systemic violence that destroys the political, environmental, and psychological landscape. The painting is at once a framed Utopia and a Fanonian critique of ecological destruction arising from colonialism and the current neoliberal context, itself a form of neocolonialism.

Artist as both totem and taboo

In a paper on the theoretical backgrounds of surrealism, Charles E. Gauss commented on surrealist works as being the residue left when artists strip down their souls to the bare framework of the unconscious. The Primordial Lullaby strand of works, inspired by the primal and ancestral influences that are hallmarks of Meredith Monk's iconic lullabies, signposts the viewer to multiple unconscious processes. In this review I limit my interpretations to those resonant with the ecological theme of the exhibition. In Primordial Lullaby No. 3, the self-portraiture is bounded by the grotesque face leitmotif. The grotesque face and broken teeth can be symbolic of psychological challenges. More specifically, such composition can reference the artist's fear, strongly evident in both his last show and the present one, of his identity being swallowed or – rather more pertinently – colonized by social conventions. This is another nod to the Fanonian critique of colonization and a re-working of the outcast (and hence, taboo) theme in his last exhibition. The artist, therefore, positions himself as taboo.

But as discussed earlier on with reference to the Kindred strand of works, the artist intended the grotesque face to allude to nature.

The imagery can therefore also be interpreted as the artist's psychic retreat into nature. The thick lining of the mouth is reminiscent of the uterine lining. This, together with the lullaby nomenclature, resonates with the 'regressus ad uterum' psychoanalytic concept referring to the unconscious desire to seek psychological refuge by returning to the original ecology of the mother's womb. Sándor Ferenczi perceived amniotic fluid as the primeval sea, arguing that the desire to return to the womb is an unconscious desire to return to the sea – the cradle of life on earth. Sigmund Freud linked the desire to return to the womb to the death drive 'thanatos' – which is the unconscious desire to return to the tension-free, inorganic state of death – by envisaging the undisturbed ecology of the womb to mirror the non-living state that preceded birth. The sleep/death-like depiction of the self-portraiture is reflective of this link. The depicted mouth can also be interpreted as a cave, which according to Carl Jung symbolizes a sacred space for birth and death, representative of the nurturing and devouring womb of the mother earth archetype. From a Jungian analytic perspective, therefore, self-portraiture in the sacred context of the 'cave' is symbolic of the artist's deep journey into the unconscious, his re-presentation of his personal and collective inner self, and his alignment of his work with deeper universal symbolism. This composition visually cements his role as a totemic figure, a recurring theme throughout the series of works.

Vestiges is being held at the Wignacourt Museum, 2 College Street, Rabat, and remains open until the 24th of May 2026. The opening hours are Monday-Sunday: 9.30am-5pm (last admission at 4.00pm).

New Words for a Changing World

Reading & discussion by Artist in Residence
Heather Bourbeau & David Samuel Hudson

Valletta Contemporary

14th May 2026 | 5:30PM - 7:30PM

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An evening of eco-fiction and literary dialogue at Valletta Contemporary

Valletta Contemporary will host New Words for a Changing World, a literary event bringing together US poet and artist in residence Heather Bourbeau and Maltese novelist David Samuel Hudson

VALLETTA Contemporary will host New Words for a Changing World, a literary event bringing together US poet and artist-in-residence Heather Bourbeau and Maltese novelist David Samuel Hudson.

The evening will feature readings from their latest works alongside a discussion exploring eco-fiction, storytelling, and the role of literature in a rapidly changing world.

Heather Bourbeau is an award-winning poet and fiction writer whose work has appeared in The Irish Times, The Kenyon Review, and The Stockholm Review of Literature.

Her writings are included in the Special Collections at the James Joyce Library, University College Dublin. Her latest poetry collection, Monarch, examines overlooked histories from the American West. Bourbeau is also an Associate Artist with the French think tank Pro(to)topia and has worked as a consultant with various United Nations agencies, including the UN peace-keeping mission in Liberia. She is currently developing a new poetry collection and an interactive map focused on protected lands in the Western United States.

David Samuel Hudson is an established Maltese author and journalist. He received the National Journalism Prize in 2018 for investigative reporting and served as a National Book

Prize adjudicator in 2020. With a background in teaching, editing, and translation, Hudson is currently a creative writing lecturer. His fiction has earned international recognition, winning awards in both the United Kingdom and the United States, and has been featured in outlets such as NPR and the Chicago Review of Books. In 2024, he published his debut novel M.

Bourbeau is currently undertaking an artist residency at Gozo Contemporary, hosted by the Norbert Francis Attard Foundation.

The residency programme introduces artists and creative practitioners to Gozo as a source of inspiration within a Mediterranean context, fostering intercultural exchange, professional development, and collaborative opportunities. Established in 2001, the programme offers flexible residency periods ranging from two weeks to three months.

New Words for a Changing World invites audiences to engage with pressing environmental themes through literature, offering insight into how contemporary writers are responding to ecological and cultural shifts.

The event will take place on 14 May at 5.30pm. For further information, please contact maria@vallettacontemporary.com.



Heather Bourbeau



David Samuel Hudson