

# TRANSFORMATIONS THROUGH PERCEPTION

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Stating that this is an exhibition of a graphic artist is a superficial, significantly removed, judgement of the work being shared, with us, the viewers. All pieces are part of a greater whole, the exhibition, a journey through the artist's metaphysical thought process via time. Each piece bears a title; each includes a graphic and a philosophical-poetical thought, an integral part of any given piece.

Why 'Għeliem'? *Gabra* states that 'għeliem' is the plural of the word 'għelm', meaning a sign, a label, an emblem.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the word 'għeliem' is the Maltese word for signs, labels, emblems. The signs for Vassallo are the landmarks in the Maltese environs, one of the five key elements that make up one's perception of the city in terms of Lynch's theory of urban design.<sup>2</sup> They are a point-reference to his memories and emotions.

The artist's personal childhood passion for the Maltese landscape and his quasi-obsession with sunsets, are reflected in each and every piece. One can identify the different skylines of the Islands. However, this is done with a twist. The pieces presented are produced by contemporary technological means. Photo manipulation and vector drawings were employed; digital printing is the end finish. Everything is conventional; yet everything is contemporary.

The artist is using a medium to realize his artistic creation and perception. This medium is the language through which he is communicating with the viewer; the resulting image is the message that the artist wants to communicate to the viewer. A difference in the moiré effect between the print and the digital rendering of the work is present. The moiré effect, discarded until a few decades ago as bad print finish, is hereby used as a

technique, paying homage to the roots of digital printing. Thus, zooming in or out of the soft image is neutralized through the digital print at the stated dimensions.

All images reproduced in the catalogue follow the order in which they had been conceived and graphically produced.<sup>3</sup> Going through them in the order that they are presented by the artist is part of experiencing the unfolding of his message. Rather than a derivation of eternal recurrence, one reads a dynamic spiral which gradually leads one to read the artist through his graphics. All the twelve pieces fall broadly in two classifications, townscapes and other geological related, landscapes. These landmarks are churches and the sea, an eternal





geophysical feature. They all have the touch of the artist's profession, an architect majoring in urbanism. Most of the former are cities/towns in the Maltese islands easily recognizable from the silhouette of the built environs, diagnostically identified by the parish churches. These ecclesiastical fortresses are emblems of the various parochial territories, the precursor of the present local council boundaries. Each is a landmark of the specific identity of a given settlement. Applying Mumford's urban theory, such a landmark is the aesthetic symbol of collective unity which a city/town requires.<sup>4</sup>

The settlements included in the exhibition, which are identifiable by the existing churches which dominate the skyline, are the following: Mdina ('A childhood fascination'), Gozo Citadel ('A distant emotion'), Mellieħa ('A new beginning'), Laferla Cross ('An ominous virtue'), Mġarr Harbour from the ferry ('Every time'), Valletta from Sliema ('Modern vintage'), Xewkija ('Heavenly aura') and Siggiewi ('Soon a memory'). The remaining exhibits are the Blue Lagoon, Għajn Tuffieħa Bay, Mellieħa and Filfla, the subject of 'A lost paradise', 'Youthful magic', 'New horizon', and 'A distant friend' respectively. These last four pieces all relate to the sea, the element which defines the Maltese archipelago.

1. <http://mlrs.research.um.edu.mt/resources/gabra/lexemes?s=g%C4%A7eliem>.  
*Gabra* is an open lexicon for Maltese hosted at the Maltese Language Resource Server, a project coordinated by the Institute of Linguistics and the Department of Intelligent Computer Systems at the University of Malta.
2. Lynch, K. (1960). *The Image of the City*. Boston: The MIT Press.
3. Vassallo, J., *Personal communication*.
4. Mumford, L., (1937). 'What is a City?'. In *Architectural Record*, 82: 92-96.