

An Explosion of Colours

Louis Laganà discusses the art of Joseph L. Mallia who is known for his versatility and also as a ‘perfectionist and experimentalist’. The success of his art is ‘shaped by necessity’

Perhaps one of the most versatile contemporary artists of the second generation of artists (artists born 1930 – 1939) in Malta is Joseph L. Mallia. Mr. Mallia’s works show us a pictorial vision of the world in which his figures, landscapes and abstracts meld through the expressive power of colour and form. His paintings reveal the development of an artist who moves from the figurative and the landscape to abstraction without compromising his identity.

Joseph L Mallia who works in many mediums comes from a refined artistic background. He started his art studies at a very early age and in 1957 attended courses in drawing and painting at the Government School of Art, in Valletta. His main tutor was Karmenu Mangion who left a great influence on him and many of his contemporaries. After studying art in Malta, in 1963 he left for a one-year course at the Bath Academy of Art in Corsham. Afterwards he returned to Malta for a short period and attended for another year at the Ealing School of Art in London in 1966 and from 1967 to 1970 at Wimbledon School of Art in London. After his art studies in the U.K. he was employed as a peripatetic teacher of art in Government primary schools in Malta. Mr. Mallia occupied many art-teaching posts, namely at the Technical Institute in Naxxar, the Art and Design Centre in Valletta, Government School of Art, Valletta and also as a visiting lecturer at

the University of Malta. He was head of the Government School of Art from 1991-1996 and served as Education Officer for Art with the Education Division from 1995-1998.

Joseph Mallia is mostly aware of the importance of the local landscape which has a great role in the cultural, ecological, environmental and social make-up of the Maltese islands. His landscapes are worked with meticulous detail, and one will discover typical scenes of the grand harbour and other seascapes but he is mostly fascinated by the countryside. He enjoys depicting vegetational assemblages of maquis, garigue and steppe, thorny bushes, trees, scrubs and faces of rocks formed by erosion which give interesting compositional effects in his work. In later years Mr. Mallia also attempted to create stylized scenes executed in geometric shapes and vivid colours, producing the typical rooftops and churches together with other interesting structures that make up the Maltese city or village.

I am particularly impressed and drawn by Mr. Mallia's figurative work, which throughout the years has become increasingly abstract, using geometric, often primitivistic compositions to represent human forms in particular situations. Let us not forget that for a number of years the artist worked on many illustrations of books and other graphic work where figurative art was central. When one looks at some of his figurative work like the series called 'Meeting' one will quickly see that the figures have an affinity with tribal sculpture or ethnographic influence. The grotesque shapes of these figures are self-contained and not particularly addressed to the viewers, but they rather express a strong intensity in the way the artist manipulated the geometric qualities that characterize the

direct formal influence of tribal art. Mr. Mallia focuses mostly on drawings which he produces in large quantities. He also had the opportunity to work on a number of portraits, some of which are stylized and have compelling qualities of a 'primitive' nature. During the years the artist experimented with various printing techniques and managed to achieve interesting effects mostly in his approach to landscape and abstract work.

As we know, art is derived from nature and the artist is the tool to make visible not just what is seen with the naked eye but also the unseen and communicates it. Mr. Mallia stated: "Although I refer to the visible world directly or indirectly when making art, outside form is perceived, filtered and changed according to forces in my subconscious." In fact in later years, his paintings moved from the landscape of the outer world to enigmatic images of the inner worlds, mostly expressed in an abstract idiom. It is, I argue, that images are transformed into lines and forms which produce depth and perception are spatially created and the viewer is swept into another unknown world. It is a natural evolution in the process of exploring deeper layers of the unconscious. In his famous book *The Spirit in Man Art and Literature*, Jung writes, "for all the freedom of [the artist's] life and the clarity of his thought, he is everywhere hemmed around and prevailed upon by the Unconscious, the mysterious god within him, so that ideas flow to him - he knows not whence, he is driven to work and create - he knows not to what end, and is mastered by an impulse for constant growth and development he knows not whither." I argue that Joseph Mallia's abstract works emanate from the unconscious and reflect deeply all aspects of our environment: colour, brightness, space and motion. These

we perceive as patterns. There is also consciousness of form, and the artist attains through the natural environment, the material provided by nature, and translates it into his own symbolical imagery. The artist maintains that ‘through his experience as an artist, art is shaped by necessity’. For him “art is invention, an inventory of form, a record of mental and spiritual activity, mostly unpredictable, where unconscious scanning and will to form, conjure magic”.

His style could at times be seen as a derivation of constructivist-futuristic roots and full of movement. It is also reminiscent of some abstract works by Kasimir Malevich, and one can also sense the elements of a ‘biomorphic abstract’ type of art. For example in his series of latest abstract works, we find titles like, Garden, Castle Rock, Endless Summer, Forest Dreaming and Fruit, which show that Mr. Mallia did not leave completely the landscape and the physical world but rather expresses the essentials and evocations of nature. These works are an explosion of colours composed of various fragments of sharp pointed shapes, round edged pieces and other universalized forms. Various shades of bright blue dominate these works mixed with subtle hues of greens, yellows and vibrant reds producing an intriguing effect. Versatility is found not only in colour but also in meticulous detail of the minutest objects found in the landscape and the natural environment and then abstracted by the artist according to the mood during the moment of creation.

The artist had seven personal art shows and participated in many collective exhibitions in Malta and abroad. Ex-Director of Museums, Fr. Marius Zerafa, in the inauguration

speech of the latest personal art exhibition by the artist, held at the Auberge d'Italie, in Valletta, described Mr. Mallia “as a perfectionist and experimentalist”. The exhibition entitled ‘I Paint Therefore I Am’, comprised a selection of paintings, drawings and prints from Mr. Mallia's prolific repertoire, with some works done during these last few years. One of his interesting works in this exhibition is his portrait executed in a rich textured manner, an unusual way of depicting a portrait. We know that painting a self-portrait is always a perceptual challenge for the artist. This work provided the viewers with a moment of conscious visual exploration. Surely it reflects the styles which influenced him during the years the artist spent studying in the U.K. One may associate it with a sort of pop art interpretation, where the artist focuses on the exploration of the edge using bands of translucent coloured stripes and light contrasts to achieve an effect of depth and tri-dimensionality.

Mr. Mallia’s images are an expression derived from his memory, the unconscious, and also from the transformative process of modernist art. His colours and forms are highly sophisticated, whimsical and expressive, as well as inventive. The ultimate meaning of all of his abstracted realities may not be grasped quickly by the viewers but surely known, and I think it's safe to say that they give joy and pleasure to everyone.

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