

Creative Vision of 'Nature'

Louis Laganà takes a look at the artistic career of German-Maltese artist Ebba von Fersen Balzan and discusses the development of her art.

Ebba von Fersen Balzan arrived in Malta for the first time in 1986. She was fascinated mostly with Maltese life and as an artist she was particularly attracted to the intense light of the Maltese landscape and the colour of the Maltese stone. She recalled: "I like the burnt, rough Summer landscape as well as the lush green winter, the flowers in spring and the particular, very aromatic smell of the Maltese countryside in Spring." Her first works in Malta expressed these qualities which we find in the Maltese scenery. Her first exhibitions in Malta date back to 1989 two years after she moved to Malta. The first exhibition was in aid of Alternattiva Demokratika, held at hotel Phoenicia and then another one at the Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta. The works in these exhibitions were about the Maltese prehistoric temples, expressing her fascination with our ancient heritage, mostly depicting the morphological qualities of the bas relief and sculptures found in the temples.

Ebba Von Fersen Balzan, participated in perhaps the most important exhibition dedicated to the 'Temple period' in Malta in 1999. The exhibition was part of a project entitled *Temples – Malta, Seven Women – Seven Temples*. Seven woman artists worked directly on seven prehistoric sites and the result culminated in a collective art exhibition. Von Fersen Balzan relates that she sensed a spiritual energy while working inside the temples. She stated: "I feel the energy in the temples tremendously, and I try to express their secret, sacred spaces." This fascination is

what made her return time and again to the temples. There is, she suggests, a healing aura at work: “Sitting in a temple is a very spiritual, happy and thus creative experience.” If we look at her works: *Deep Inside* (Fig. EFB-01), *Look Through* (Fig.EFB-02), and *The Message* (Fig. EFB-03) they all evoke the ‘energy’ felt inside the temples. Maltese writer Victor Borg described her paintings as “bold brushstrokes of reds, purples, dirty browns, blacks, but she tenderly expresses the curvaceous qualities; the megaliths overlapping one another like folds leading deeper into some living organ.” The viewers are invited to study the colour and brushwork, to feel this ‘energy’. It is expressed by light emanating from a centre and gentle contours and voluptuous curves. Light is opaque in some places and transparent in others. Using her language of lines, forms and colour Von Fersen Balzan tries to share with us the experience to penetrate into the world of ‘inner-earth’.

Other important exhibitions date back to 1991 when she exhibited for the first time with Isabelle Borg, in an art show with the title, *One Landscape Two Visions*, and in 2001 a solo exhibition in France, called *Dialogue Megalithic*, and another group exhibition about the Maltese temples called *Sacred Sights* in 2002. In the same year the artist held another solo exhibition in three different places in Germany, namely in Sonne, Stein and Geschichte.

Apart from her great interest in the Temple period in Malta, Von Fersen Balzan finds great inspiration in the way ‘nature’ manifests itself to us today. She argues that “nature is a living, changing thing, and I, at times, imagine it is a whole living and interacting organism, of which we form part. However, humanity treats nature inhuman, and without respect. We do not understand ourselves as part of nature but as

the conquerors and masters of nature. A dangerous attitude: as what comes out of it is that human behaviour is much like a cancer, eating the resources that feed a whole structure themselves, at the same time destroying a beautiful and finely balanced system.” These are some thoughts about how the artist perceives ‘nature’ and the way she strongly connects it to prehistoric society when people had a completely different attitude towards ‘nature’.

For Ebba von Fersen Balzan 2006 was a fruitful year because she produced a large number of works and held three major personal exhibitions. The first exhibition was a joint exhibition with one of her closest friends, ceramic artist, Julie Apap. The exhibition was held at the G. Gallery in Lija during the month of May 2006, with the title ‘Creation’. In this exhibition Von Fersen Balzan focused on the theme of nature using in many works the elements of the connection between the human figure and the earth. The primitivistic approach, which the artist successfully succeeded in demonstrating in her works, can be described as a sort of a romanticised vision of life. An element of exoticism also runs strongly in most of her work. The human body, especially that of the female, is expressed with a finesse of line, which creates an element of sophistication. The artist is not interested in anatomical structure or in the formal relations of mass and surface colours, but rather in the powerful expression of a single dominating character. This is found for example in ‘Promenade’ and other works where the female figure becomes the central subject of the composition. Such paintings are the product of an interior force rather than related to the outside world. These works also possess a highly symbolic quality with deep reflection on how nature is perceived by the artist.

In 2006 Von Fersen Balzan took part also in an art project in Ober Ramstadt in Germany. This place was an industrial area, abandoned since 1993, where many buildings were in a dangerous state of disrepair. The project was to transform the building site into a place of culture and tourism. It had to undergo drastic changes and last summer a series of activities were planned and held to give the place a new identity. In the first activity twelve artists and a musician took part and an art exhibition was held at the end. People from the nearby towns and villages were given the opportunity to visit the site. Ebba von Fersen Balzan's piece in this exhibition was called *Die Wilde 13* or *The Savage 13*, a title based on a very well-known German children's book, where thirteen savages describe dangerous pirates that turn harmless and friend once they found out that they were only twelve. This outstanding work was represented in wood in half a circle. The artist used twelve wooden planks symbolically representing her thoughts. In this work, Von Fersen Balzan unintentionally depicted thirteen lizards on the planks. Vertical panels were used with a range of motifs related to lush vegetation and fossils executed with vibrant, colourful textures. The human form also forms part of the composition on the side panels of the installation.

Another interesting work which the artist exhibited last Summer at the Arts in the Environment exhibition organized by the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts as part of the Malta Arts Festival 2006, is entitled 'Systems of Knowledge'. This work, which consists of a pile of old paperback books treated with coats of paint and decorations of leaves, flowers, spirals, fossils, and shells symbolises the exploration of knowledge. The concept is that written language and patterns make open-ended statements about the history of 'nature'. It seems that for the artist everyday objects

form part of the realm of reality. The method of painting on surfaces of objects is not new for von Fersen Balzan. She also applies printing techniques, mostly lino printing and other mixed media to achieve a tri-dimensional effect and depth of line and texture.

The artist has also a studio and art gallery at Plussulien, a lovely village in the heart of Brittany in France. When she finds time Von Fersen Balzan makes short escapes from Malta to find time to reflect and produce more work. Early in September of last year she opened an exhibition at her gallery known as Gallery 22320, which formed part of an old school dedicated to St. Jeanne d'Arc. The title of this exhibition in French was *Vitalité*, that is, the vitality of nature. Most of the works on show were inspired by various elements of 'nature'. The use of the female figure as a metaphor of life and its relation with the earth dominated most of the paintings in this exhibition. For example in the works 'Viola', 'C'est la verité' 'Lady from the Sea' and 'Le Matin', von Fersen Balzan shows the female figure as an emblematic figure which seems to symbolise Mother Earth. The artist captures the mythological essence of the feminine. They are archetypal female figures that appear with voluminous luminosities and hues.

Another interesting facet of Ebba von Fersen Balzan's artistic expression is the 'jazz' series. She was instrumental with Jeni Caruana to start working 'live' during the yearly Malta Jazz Festival held in the month of July each year. In fact the artist exhibited regularly every year after the jazz festival, at Chez Philippe restaurant to show her jazz paintings. In these works, spontaneity and improvisation are the most important aspects of von Fersen Balzan's working method, and she tries also to express how she feels while listening to the music. Works like Bill Bruford's

Earthworks, Emily Bezar, and the Original Blues Brothers convey the whimsical spectacle of the performers.

Although in recent years Von Fersen Balzan's iconography is becoming more abstract, themes with reference to the prehistoric temples, and the relationship of the female form with the earth and nature still form the basis for all her compositions. Her love of nature remains central in her creativity. She makes lyrical or political or emotional statements where female figures become a vehicle for social critique or an ardent desire to change the world. The result is an idealised world - a dreamscape in which Ebba von Fersen Balzan could dwell in her own imagination.

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