

Transforming Reality into the Imaginary

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The islands of Malta and Gozo provide some of the best scenery in the Mediterranean not just for environmentalists but also for many artists. John Busuttil Leaver is one of those artists who enjoy plein air painting and who also records photographic images of some intriguing scenes we find along the coast and the rural areas of the island.

Although Busuttil Leaver is a visual realist and thematically he is still attached to what surrounds us, the environment and our heritage, it seems that recently he has been moving towards another direction, that of leaving the unconscious to determine the subject matter and the process of his creations. As an artist, John Busuttil Leaver is also a romantic and shows that he is much aware of the concern about what is happening to us especially the changes in the environment. In recent years the artist visited many interesting rural areas on the islands, especially seaside views, taking photographic images and making sketches in drawing to continue to work on them in his studio.

The Cliff Face Series

John Busuttil Leaver created a body of work related to the beauty of the cliffs we find around Maltese seashores. As we know, Malta is nicknamed the 'Rock' by many because its formation is characterised by exceedingly high cliffs in some parts of the islands and also inland escarpments and natural fault lines. These cliffs create a remarkable scene when seen against the splendour of the background between sky and sea.

The artist visited and explored many interesting sites like *Iċ-Ċumnija Cliffs*, *Tal-Ahrax - The Harsh Edge*, *Ras ir-Raheb - Fomm ir-Riħ*, *Paradise Bay rocks and cliffs*, *Bahrija cliffs*, *Ras id-Dawwara - Mtaħleb*, *Ta' Ċenċ* and *Wied il-Għasri*, in Gozo, *St Peter's Pool*, *Fawwara*, and *Il-Qlejgħa rocks*. At first the artist started to create a topographical and realistic imagery of these beautiful intriguing scenes. Then he began to transform the images of the cliffs and personify the rocks into faces but without losing the right undulations and structures. Most of these faces are imagined but in some cases they are realistically found in nature.

In this collection John Busuttil Leaver is presenting a series of drawings and paintings showing the evolvement from realistic imagery of rocks and cliffs to a surreal transformation of the seascape or landscape. At first, John is suggesting what his eyes have contributed to the experience he saw, that is, the accurate image of a scene. Then gradually these images are transformed into an imaginal reality and a representation of strange and fantastical faces of rock and cliffs.

The representation of figurative imagery emerging from landscapes actually started many years ago. John explains how it all started:

The real 'root' piece which started it all goes back further to circa 1995 when I photographed a hill in *Għajn Tuffieħa* and imagined a male torso in the rocks. The painting I did from the photo is called '*Earthman*' c.1995. Then after this work followed many sketches and small paintings but I never developed the idea and abandoned it. Then this concept popped up again in the art show entitled '*A Diary of Obsessions*'.¹



26 Rock Face Series
The King of the Hill
Oil on canvas
600 x 500 mm
1995

Opposite:
The artist in front of *Wise*
Oil on canvas
700 x 700 mm
1995/2014



Earthwoman hair
Pastel on paper
120 x 120 mm
1995

The transformation of boulders of rocks into a body of a man kept preoccupying the creative ego of the artist. So this element of earth-body transformation is also reflected in another work done in 1995, entitled *Earthwoman Hair*. John here presents a monochromatic drawing in pastels showing a landscape in the form of a woman's body with her hair spreading out in the open space. Here the artist wanted to send a direct message to the viewers about the sacredness of the 'body' of the earth. The female body becomes synonymous with the earth. Art historian, Lucy Lippard also comments on this earth-female connection. She states:

Woman can, and do, identify the forms of our bodies with the undulations of the earth – the hills and sacred mountains which were the first gardens and the first temples. Our menstrual periods are moon-determined, therefore related to the earth's magnetic energies and to the ocean's tides. Our genitalia recalls caves, cleft rocks, river beds – the cozy fearful abysses culturally associated with the nourishing and with the fearsome, with the maternal and sexual, the regenerative and deathly aspects of the Earth Mother.²

The relationship between the body of the female and nature has been discussed for a long time now. This also influenced many artists in their work and one could find in modern and contemporary art history many fine examples. To mention just a few, artists like Frida Kahlo, Ana Mendieta, Georgia O'Keeffe, Susan Hiller, Emily Carr, and many others who celebrated the female image connected with the transforming aspect of the earth. John Busuttill Leaver is intrigued by the Maltese landscape, especially in rural areas where nature is still a dominant factor and plays a crucial role in the beauty of our environment. In these paintings of this period, the artist is encouraging us to feel closer to nature and the earth. These works will actually take us to a more 'transformational' experience where the earth actually is changed into living faces of creatures.



01 Rock Face Series
Ic-Ċumnija Caves
Pastel, charcoal & chalk on pastel
paper
290 x 390 mm
2014

Transforming cliffs and rocks into personified images

In this series of drawings we see the typical rocks of *Ic-Ċumnija Cliffs*. The artist absorbed the essential quality of the landscape which evokes a still atmosphere. It is a scene broken only by wind and the ripples of the waves breaking on the rocks. Its forms make it possible to divide the drawing into four equal parts, the linear dichotomies being emphasised in light and shade, substance and shadow, land and water, rock and sky. In the first drawing the subject is very familiar to us, which is the grotto. The reflections in the calm waters appear to create an illusion of an embodied expression. Deep holed eyes and a tight lipped face forming a thin line emerge from the abyss of the sea. It is the guardian of the land standing there in endless contemplation.

John studied every angle of *Ic-Ċumnija Cliffs*, and gradually he began to imagine and extract images of faces which sometimes look as if they are real and are part of the structure of the rocks and cliffs. There are other examples where the artist creates a more surreal image of faces emerging out of rocks and cliffs and therefore contribute to a more irrational iconic imagery but yet within the structure and forms of the perceived view.

Throughout art history we find many artists inspired by the ancient Greek myth of Narcissus. Salvador Dalí was one of them. He was inspired by this myth and he produced one of his best masterpieces entitled *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*. In his paintings it is typical of Dalí to transform rocks and cliffs into faces and figures. Surrealism at its best shaped artists to see beyond the real and to render the inspiration by the unconscious. Although in concept John Busuttill Leaver's cliffs are different from those of Dalí, there is somehow a trait of surreal elements in his *Cliffs* reflecting into the sea. There are other occasions where the artist sees his own image, his face, not as a reflection in the water (the

sea) but mostly on the rock itself. This appears strongly and unconsciously on the first photograph of this booklet. The face of the cliff becomes a notion of the self. The artist photographed his face in profile juxtaposed in front of one of his best paintings, entitled *Wise*. This image produces a bodily echo of the artist's narcissistic attempt to interrelate with nature and the audience.

In another work of this series entitled *Rock Formation - Selmun* (Fig. 20), there is a hint and some resemblance with the cliff faces of Mt. Rushmore in South Dakota, in the United States. It is the greatest mountain ever carved, showing the face of the four U.S. presidents: *George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln*. Although John's drawings are totally different in concept, method and style of expressing faces in rocks, there is somehow a similarity between the two works. Of course, Mt. Rushmore's cliff faces are more realistic and monumental in size while John's drawings of rocks and cliffs were done in pencil and on a very small scale, and with a minimalistic approach.



20 Rock Face Series
Rock Formation - Selmun
Pastel, charcoal & chalk on pastel paper
390 x 490 mm
2014

From the 'Primitive' to the Contemporary

In the early stages of human life on earth, images of the human figure began to appear on stones. This early form of sculpture had a psychological importance for primitive cultures. We find this in many ancient temples around the world, some express images of 'gods' and 'goddesses'. The 'menhir',³ in Neolithic times is a fine example. In Malta, we find that there is the probability that the 'menhir' evolved into an image of a deity. A good example of the 'menhir' is the one found at the *Xaghra Stone Circle*, "standing directly below the grave's entrance as though guarding the dead."⁴ Such an anthropomorphic figure "is an early portrayal of a divinity associated with the tomb, a Goddess of Death and Regeneration..."⁵ Here, the primordial artist's concern was to create a remarkable myth out of these extraordinary images. These relics in stone influenced mostly some modern and contemporary artists, because they "continued to celebrate the central role of stone, consciously or unconsciously unearthing fragments of ancient beliefs, delighted when their own creations parallel those of cultures closer to nature.

John Busuttil Leaver's attempt to create 'mythological' faces continued to evolve into the first Rockface group of works done with canvas. The artist experimented by using small pieces of canvas folded and fixed on a larger canvas to produce a 'wave' effect and stiffened into shapes of faces. Paint is applied to achieve a three-dimensional effect. These works are perhaps the climax of the result of the transformation of images of faces expressed in minimalistic way. In works like *The Old Men Face the Majjistral* (Fig. 30), *Three Old Men* (Fig. 31), *Standing Guard* (Fig. 33), *Shield* (Fig. 32), *Time Sentinel* (Fig. 34) and *Love forever* (Fig. 35), the artist made use of raw pieces of canvas shaped into uneven rectangular faces with a few slits to show the eyes, nose and mouth. These works were executed this year. Like in the *Arte Povera* of Lucio Fontana (1899–1968) and Alberto Burri (1915–95), the artist emphasised mostly on the spatial qualities and the rectilinear shapes of the paintings. The works convey a lyrical vision of the artist's interest to explore further the mysterious characteristics of rocks and cliffs. It also merges the creative impulses arising from the unconscious with the visible imagery of the scenes to achieve a pictorial representation of the artist's transcendental experience.

In the final works it seems that the surreal image is at work within a constrained dimension and use of materials. Each work marks the end of a journey and the beginning of the next. Although at a glance these relief paintings in hessian look the same, they all express a different story and symbolise a concept in life. I see also that the unconscious plays a very important role in the process of the projection and identification with a symbolical language which we can all apprehend. As the great Surrealist artist, Salvador Dalí proclaimed:



35 Rock Face Series
Love forever
Oils on canvas & canvas applique
250 x 580 mm
2014



The artist, centre, with guests at the Camden Image Gallery, London, April 2014

The subconscious has a symbolic language that is truly a universal language, for it speaks with the vocabulary of the great vital constants, sexual instinct, feeling of death, physical notion of the enigma of space — these vital constants are universally echoed in every human.⁶

We can surely recognise the interplay of the psychological condensation and displacement in a painting, “of transformation and inversion, of isolation and objectification, of dramatisation and deflection, especially where socially significant events are evaluated.”⁷ Perhaps this is what John intended to communicate to us in this last series of works. Each work tells us about a story, an experience and an emotion. In these works, the artist constructs myth in which the dialectic becomes a space in which symbols are formed and ideas created. The archetypal imagination of the artist employs a deliberate dichotomy in his dialogue between opposite elements: shadow and light, confinement and open space, reality and dream, and architectural and natural. These are the conflicting constituents which form our life today.

Last Easter, John had eight works exhibited at the Camden Image-Gallery in London. The works were eight pastel drawings on paper taken from the same series which are also on show. These works are the predecessors of the Rock Face series.

John Busuttil Leaver is continuously searching for new concepts and material. In recent years he successfully created a visual language to express his ideas and beliefs and make us understand that through the imaginary symbols of life, there is some form of reality. These are in fact the triad of media, perception and representation which form an important part of the triad which the French, Freudian psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, articulated about the meaning of the symbolic-real-imaginary.⁸ These three Lacanian orders serve to place subjectively within a system of perception and dialogue with the external world.

Notes

- 1 Personal correspondence with the artist, 24/09/2014.
- 2 LIPPARD, Lucy, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, 1983, p. 42.
- 3 The word *menhir* is derived from two words: *men* = stone, *hir* = long. See BROWN, P.L., *Megaliths, Myths and Men: An Introduction to Astro-Archaeology*, 1977, p. 6, Dorset: Book Club Associates.
- 4 MONSARRAT, Ann, *The Deity – God or Goddess?*, in *Malta Before History*, Miranda Publishers, 2004, p. 299.
- 5 GIMBUTAS, Marija, *The Civilization of the Goddess*, 1991, p. 174.
- 6 DALÍ, Salvador, Address delivered at M.M.A., N. Y., 1934. J. Levy, *Surrealism*, p. 7.
- 7 GOITEIN, Lionel, *Art and the Unconscious*, 1948, Chapter 8.
- 8 LEVINE, Z., Steven, *Lacan Reframed*, 2008.