

Metaphysical Abstraction

Abstract Art still matters today in popular culture. Louis Laganà illustrates the approach to abstract art by artist Alfred M. Camilleri who considers that ‘in abstraction a natural process is a conceived process, that grows within itself.’

Alfred M. Camilleri started to show his work to the general public way back in the early seventies. One of his first collectives in which he took part was the most popular exhibition held in Malta at that time, the Sacred Art Exhibition also known as the Biennale of Sacred Art which was one of the few opportunities for an emerging artist to show his work with those who were already established in the local art scene. As Camilleri himself points out, “at that time it was very difficult to show the work to the public, contrary to today, where numerous opportunities and exhibition spaces are available to any beginner.” Like some other artists of his age, the artist succeeded to get the admiration of the public and establish a name and so he continued to participate in the few exhibitions held at that time.

Mr. Camilleri had his formal art education at the Lyceum, in Hamrun during the sixties. His teachers were Antoine Camilleri and Esprit Barthet. Later he spent a short period attending the Government School of Art, at that time in Msida. His earliest works were more of an experimental nature, sometimes religious and within a social context, stressing more on the formal and compositional elements of the work.

The response to what is happening to nature and the sensibility of the artist can also be traced in his early works executed in the seventies. A fine example is 'Peace Now', where Mr. Camilleri depicts in a dramatic way a human reaching out for the slain dead bird full of blood. This work in mixed media on canvas is a strong statement about the constant struggle of those who oppose hunting and also the negative effect on the different bird species.

In his first personal exhibition, Alfred M. Camilleri showed works from the late seventies and some from 1980. The exhibition was held at Gallerija Fenici, which at that time formed part of the back side of the Mediterranean Conference Centre. The gallery was relatively new and Mr. Camilleri was the first Maltese to exhibit his work at the gallery a few weeks after its inauguration with a collective exhibition. Most works varied in techniques, but were homogeneous in style and thematic content. This period marked the initial stages of the artist's metaphysical phase.

When one analyses the works of the eighties and nineties by Mr. Camilleri one discovers the 'diverse elements' as well as 'silence, isolation, solitude, stage props, theatrical lighting and a sense of suspense' as the main denominators. Such works were the echoes of the unconscious impulses and the artist's inspiration by the great doyen of metaphysical art, Giorgio de Chirico. The sense of emptiness and the use of vast spaces in the artist's work of this period is the result of the same effect felt by many artists about the existential dilemma of contemporary man. De Chirico himself quoted the famous Nietzsche's statement of "dreadful void" and "God is dead", which explains this "loss of

the supreme factor that gives life a meaning". It is the deep reflection of the absence of belief in any type of transcendental values which troubles the minds of contemporary artists and is still expressed in their work. The lack of presence of the human form in these works by Mr. Camilleri demonstrates this unconscious and ironical representation of what art critic, E.V. Borg suggests, as "the world as an empty stage" and "the artist in splendid isolation in the simultaneous role of actor and spectator."

Mr. Camilleri's process from the figurative to abstraction was not a sudden one. It was a natural process through experimentation with new themes, and material, especially wood and metal. This has been strongly felt in the eighties. He argues: "In abstraction, a natural process is a 'conceived process' that grows within itself, with its own valid reasons for development, emanating from clearly identifiable roots. Otherwise it risks being artificial, simply pretty and decorative. There is a conventional abstract painting as much as a conventional still-life or landscape. There are enough of these on the market nowadays, both local and imported." A fine example of abstraction taken from his repertoire of this period is his painting with oil on board called 'Spatial Structures' executed in 1985. This is a composition based on the square and the rectangle with contrasts and effects achieved through the superimposition of shades of colours and reflections.

In paintings such as 'Chromatic Planar Configuration 01', taken from his repertoire of the late 1990's, the main action was to create the illusion of receding space in a painting. This tendency in Mr. Camilleri's abstracts could also be seen also in the years that followed.

These works were exhibited in the summer of 1995 at the University of Malta foyer. They mainly consisted of unframed canvases and were his first attempts to what are called as 'free-standing paintings'. In the catalogue for this exhibition, Dennis Vella, curator and art critic, wrote: "What might now appear to be yet another series of walls in the paintings of Camilleri will soon be discovered to be mere stage-flats for the eye: this time round their flimsiness and lightness are shown as indications that the artist has become somewhat more prepared to reveal other layers of his spirit. This is not done through rejection, but assimilation, of what has been previously expressed thus allowing continuity to exist". These works evolved from flat textured surfaces composed with geometric and irregular shapes to more structured compositions, like we find in 'Spatial Directions', executed in 2004.

We can say that Mr. Camilleri's style today is an interesting combination of minimalist concepts and the geometric, still attached to pure abstract forms but with a richer colourful palette. The artist himself claims that his work today is 'a more radical synthesis of the planar'. His latest works remind me of the topical colours used by British artist, Bridget Riley, and similar to some works by American artist, Ad Reinhardt. Earlier this year, Alfred M. Camilleri, had another personal exhibition entitled 'Artworks' held at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta. An example of what I call 'metaphysical abstraction' is a work seen in this exhibition called 'Interacting Colour Fields 02' It shows the interplay of regular and irregular forms painted with a range of light to dark purples and blues contrasted with stripes of vibrant yellow and orange hues.

In this collection of works the artist included his 'painted' free standing sculptures. Colour has an enforcing effect on the artist as sculptor and painter and also subverts the otherness in sculpture, rendering volumes as surfaces. The clue to transform certain sculptures through colour could be seen from the time the artist finds the component objects and the act of bringing them together. For Mr. Camilleri the process of creating a painting or a sculpture is a long thoughtful process. The artist stated: "Today I rarely do any preliminary sketching. I develop each piece gradually, through a mental process of constructing and re-constructing. The technical aspect must also require a plan because there is much more to it than simply painting." Contrary to what most contemporary artists do, Mr. Camilleri spends hours of thinking and planning before the actual creative act. The artist continues to argue that he is "so sceptic about certain abstract art whose value is considered simply by the spontaneity of execution, on the immediate instance, reducing it to something casual. On the other hand I dislike an art which is overweight with talk and extraneous meanings."

I believe that Alfred M. Camilleri 's works today are deeply imprinted with personal experience, and that his carefully constructed paintings and sculptures engage the viewers on an emotional level while asking intellectual questions about the condition of painting today. One has to articulate that the condition of contemporary art needs constant negotiation and rethinking to overcome the doubt that has plagued painterly practice in an age of changing attitudes in the wake of modernism.

Times of Malta: <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20080119/arts-entertainment/metaphysical-abstraction.193559>