

Changing Metaphors in Clay

When I entered for the first time in George Muscat's studio, I saw in a small frame hanging at the far end of the room print the following words written in bold:

“Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause thee to hear my words. Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it. Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.”

These words taken from Jeremiah 18, 1-6, are the appropriate words which suit not just the religious connotation about the potter but also proclaim the art of the potter as a creative act 'alive to the concreteness of a moment'. Clay is one of the 'materials of the moment' and includes emotion and spirit. All work concerns spirit and soul and involves our ability to connect them with surface realities. The work of George Muscat expresses these qualities.

George Muscat is one of the most talented ceramic-sculptors in Malta. We all know that he first started as a potter creating enthusiastically pots on the wheel and then later he immersed himself working and experimenting with various methods and techniques of ceramics. We can say that his latest techniques and creativity in the art in clay today has reached a high level of aesthetic value.

When following George Muscat's work throughout the years, one can see changes in techniques, forms, firings and glazes. I first noted his first RAKU pieces in his last personal exhibition at the Razzett L-Antik Restaurant in Qormi, in January 2005. Today he mostly creates hanging pieces and murals in the Raku technique, while his sculptures are mostly fired in stoneware temperature and uses a variety of glazes specially prepared

for his work. One must not forget that today in his sculptures, Muscat uses other material like stainless steel, iron, glass and wood to enhance his creations in ceramics.

In recent years the artist created a body of work of ceramic abstract sculpture, both as wall plaques and freestanding. I call this work, metaphors in clay because in my opinion his ceramic sculptures are the synthesis of his emotional passage materialised in space. Muscat observes and contemplates, remembers and anticipates and projects, memories, dreams and visions on clay. In this collection, his abstract pieces convey an array of emotions to the viewers: joy, happiness, sadness, fear, pain and other human conditions. His ceramics have great symbolic content.

When we look at Muscat's ceramic sculptures from a distance, we notice quickly that they possess an insistent profile and reductive form of images of simplicity and stillness. But when we take a closer look we discover a sense of history, traces of transformation that generate narratives of accretion and deterioration. The surfaces of his sculptures expose the artist process of building up and wearing away, a layering and removing of materials that implies processes occurring over time and depicting the effects of decay, erosion and weathering.

In this exhibition we find an interesting work which shows pressed, folded and incised slabs of clay in a sort of a compact container leaving the unusual shape of each piece to retain its original softness and surface texture. Other works express fragmentation, separation, material bursting and exploding and other similar, negative states of the traumatic dimensions of life. Although most of his present work is untitled, one could easily give a title to each sculpture.

Both technical and formal concerns have informed and continue to inform Muscat's work. His signature forms have evolved slowly over many years as a natural process of working in different techniques and discovering new textures and shapes. Lately he is combining pieces of iron and other metals to his fired stoneware as we find in this exhibition.

In his search for new techniques in the manipulation of the primary material of clay, George Muscat will surely achieve more heightened aesthetic appeal in the near future. It is his greatest investment over time and I am convinced that his results will continue to generate great interest in those who have ceramic art at heart.

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