

Emotions in Stone

Louis Laganà reviews the first personal exhibition by Charles Bonnici who works in Maltese stone and creates figurative sculpture.

Charles Bonnici is one of the very few artists in Malta who experiments continuously with Maltese stone. Unfortunately, this is a medium which has not yet been thoroughly explored. The artist is fascinated by the movement that stone can offer to produce interesting figures and themes which are of social importance.

Mr. Bonnici started to get interested in art when he was still a young boy. He moved to the United States with his family when he was 5 years old and at school he was always placed first in art. Young Charles was encouraged by his mother to continue his studies in art. In fact he first attended the Art and Design School in New York and later followed courses at the Sculpture School in Manhattan, the Rich View School of Sculpture. So we can say that he had excellent academic grounding in various skills to produce an artifact.

Like many other sculptors, Charles is attracted mostly to the human figure. In his first personal art show, which is currently being held at the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, 'Palazzo de la Salle', Valletta, we can notice many different interpretations of various human conditions we come across in life. Intriguing is his work of the Mother and Child theme which expresses the special bondage between these creatures and is also considered as a metaphor of the first love.

Another interesting series in this exhibition is his 'Humanity' pieces. A sort of a tower is made up of people signifying that no man is an island and that human beings do not thrive when isolated from others. Above all these works express beautifully the movement of the human form. They are bold and daringly alive. In them there is a quality of sensuality, playfulness and joy.

Mr. Bonnici is absorbed by the movement and aesthetic splendour of the human body. Perhaps the best work in this exhibition is a torso of a female nude entitled *Cold Shoulder*. The artist transformed a piece of stone into a highly stylised sensuous shape of a female body. Simplicity is a major force in this work and even in others and the voluptuousness of the form and use of lithe lines recalls the influence of the female sculptures by the great twentieth century modernist master Constantine Brancusi.

Although most of the works in this exhibition are figurative we also find others expressed in a more abstract manner. Good examples are *Come to the Point*, *Solitude* and *Broken Promise*. In another interesting piece called *Confined* the artist encrusted pieces of wood in stone and in two other abstract pieces called *Measuring Up* and *Hole Sculpture*. The artist uses a hole as an important element in the whole composition. The hole was purposely made to produce a connection between different expressions of form and to achieve space. The works also have two distinct shapes each textured differently to create contrast.

Mr. Bonnici feels very enthusiastic when working on a piece of stone. He projects his experience in stone. His artistic philosophy is that Art expresses certain inner experiences and is also part of our existence. He feels that simplicity is found even in a piece of earth which then he transforms into something tangible and conveys a meaning. Even when looking at his abstract pieces one still sees traces of the human body. With a subtle twist the artist successfully creates the figurative through abstraction. We know that today the body represents the most important, long-lasting, dedicated theme in Western art and shows the survival and resilience of the human body as a form.

I think that Charles Bonnici has found the right path to continue his long exploration and experimentation with Maltese stone and I am sure that in the future he will keep presenting a body of work which embodies diverse emotions which we encounter throughout our life.

The exhibition runs until the 20 March 2009.