

# THE CREATIVE PSYCHE AND THE REPRESENTATION OF REALITY

by Louis Laganà

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*‘What Psychoanalysis was able to do was to take inter-relations between the impressions of the artist’s life, his chance experiences, and his works and from them construct his [mental] constitution and the instinctual impulses at work in it – that is to say, that part of him he shared with all men’ (Sigmund Freud, S.E. 10: 65).*



Gilbert Fenech, *Ghodwa, Ahrax*, 2015



Henriette Mallia, *Scorching heat*, 2009

The four artists under discussion in this volume come from different backgrounds. George Fenech and Joseph Mallia come from different art schools, even though they both had their first formal art education at the Government School of Art. George continued his art studies in Italy while Joseph attended three different art schools in England. One has to consider that there is also a ten-year gap in age between the two artists. What they have in common is that in their works they express beauty of the Maltese landscape and seascape and its unique identity. They also participated in many collective art exhibitions held in Malta and abroad. The two artists experienced and endured the effects of World War II, and the war left a psychological impact on their psyches. This is reflected in their work through colour symbolism and the interpretation of reality. George Fenech’s representation of reality is embedded in the Italian traditional academic manner. The artist chose the landscape as his primary means of expression and kept it throughout his life. On the other hand, Joseph Mallia moved from the strictly realistic style of landscape painting to abstraction.

When we look at the works of Gilbert Fenech and that of Henriette Mallia, we notice they both inherited and assimilated their fathers’ artistic sensibilities. They use their legacy to project their own personal sentiments, perceptions, and interpretation of reality. Gilbert’s ‘realistic’ paintings reveal his emotional response to what surrounds him within a contemporaneous context. Henriette’s paintings depict the world in a more deceptive and elusive approach than her father’s. One has to consider her feminine and individual artistic predilections which are evident when comparing their painting styles.

The human psyche plays a very important role in the formation of symbols and sublimation is the core of creativity. Starting with Freud’s theory of sublimation, we will employ his writing to discuss the work of George Fenech and the artist’s

perception of beauty. So we need to understand Freud's definition of sublimation as the process of deflecting sexual instincts into higher acts of social valuation and, in particular, a 'conspicuous feature of cultural development; it is what makes it possible for higher psychological activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilised life' (Freud 1961: 79–80).

Following Freudian thinking, art interpretation was modelled on the theory of dream interpretation, so we will try to re-evaluate the significance of symbols. The process of symbol formation in itself is the mechanism responsible for all art, dream, and phantasy. We will use the theories by the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein to establish the developmental role and activity of making and experiencing art which explore the artist's relationship to his medium and also the spectator's encounter with the aesthetic object.

The return to Freud is Jacques Lacan's response to continue the exploration of 'ego psychology' through his outstanding seminars and voluminous writings. His theoretical foundations of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic will lead us to the understanding of his concept of the *mirror stage*, in which the human being recognises to see itself from the outside before it can have an internal identity. This provides the framework in which to discuss such common symbols or images of the ego (as expressed by the artists) to let us remember that the ego situates and defines itself by virtue of its relation to the external world. The work of Joseph Mallia is a good example to explain the Lacanian mirror stage and more or less an attempt to grasp the ever intangible relationship between subjects and objects, inside and outside, self and world.

### Interpreting the landscape in the works of George and Gilbert Fenech

*'Painting is, first of all, optical. That's where the material of our art is: in what our eyes think. Nature, when we respect her, always tells us what she means'* (Paul Cezanne, 1908).

When we analyse the landscape paintings of George and Gilbert Fenech, we mainly judge them for their formal aesthetic qualities. The beauty of their landscapes resides in the way the artists arranged colour in a certain manner; how they have used lines to draw shapes; the different shades or tones of particular colours used, like light blue, mid-blue, dark blue and so on; the sort of surface texture the painters have created; the picture composition of the views and whether the artists tried to represent a place or a scene in reality. Painting the landscape for George and Gilbert became a ritual. It is that direct experience of the place, and the bond they had with the land. The artists propose landscapes not just for viewing but also as a spiritual journey within the image. Their landscapes not only act as visual representations of the natural world in order to communicate the importance of place, but also to display an emotional response.

Our ancient ancestors always connected a place with sacredness. We see this since the Neoplatonic and Christian belief of the theory of the cosmos which is identified with philosophy. The cosmos is the order of the world and for the first



George Fenech, *Ir-Torri Ghajn Hadid*, 1996



Joe Mallia, *Self-portrait*, undated

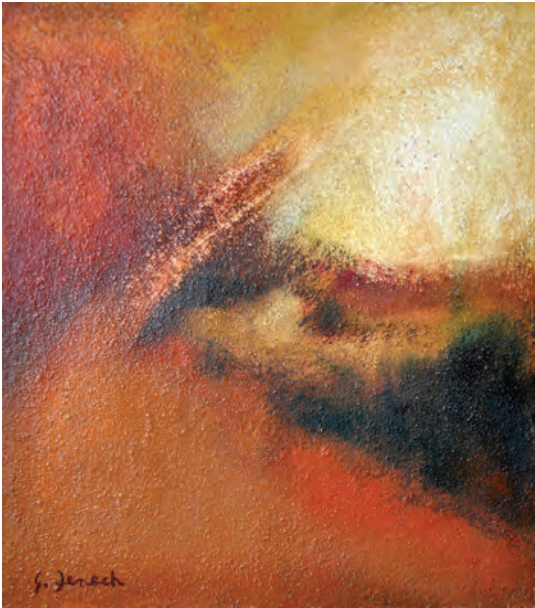


Gilbert Fenech, *Afternoon shadows*, 2010





Gilbert Fenech, *Lellux*, 2012



George Fenech, *Abstract*, undated

Although George Fenech mostly painted landscapes, still lifes, and portraits, on one or two occasions he attempted to paint an abstract work. In my opinion, his approach in this technique is very similar to the one used in landscape painting. In fact, this work appears to be like an 'interior' landscape. Contrasts of light and dark colours govern the composition of this small abstract painting which was found amidst the large number of drawings and oil paintings in the artist's studio. Fenech was totally immersed in discovering the 'sublime' and to express and actualise his ambitions. It was an attempt to move beyond beauty and to enter into an inner dimension to free himself from the qualities of the maternal aesthetics.

philosophers, as well as for Aristotle and the Hellenistic thinkers, the cosmos is referred to the primordial concept of the *Physis* (Milani 2001: 36). Nature is the foundation of all that exists and from a theoretical and philosophical standpoint contemplation of nature means that 'the spirit turns towards totality, towards the divine' (Milani 2001: 36). Philosophical reflection is a way which is open for an aesthetic of the landscape and is understood as the product of civilization and art.

It may seem unusual to analyse landscape painting from a psychoanalytic perspective but it actually offers a significant and insightful contribution to explore its aesthetic qualities. There has been a lot of interesting material written about the subject.

Since Freud wrote about *The Ego and the Id* in 1923, when he considered the relation of unconscious processes to various visual images, it has become accepted that artists produced landscapes as a form of self-expression not just an exercise in which art imitates Nature but also 'to find metaphors of their own body and sensibility "in" the natural world' (Bollas 1993: 40). Furthermore, Freud elaborates on sublimation. He uses sublimation as the transformation of unwanted impulses into something less harmful. This can also be simply released through constructive and valuable pieces of artwork. 'A satisfaction of this kind, such as an artist's joy in creating, in giving his fantasies body, or a scientist's in solving problems or discovering truths, has a special quality. But their intensity is mild as compared with that derived from the satiation of crude and primary instinctual impulses' (Freud 1960: 29-30). When we are faced with the conflict of uncomfortable thoughts, we create psychic energy. This has to go somewhere. Sublimation channels this energy away from destructive acts and into something that is socially acceptable and creatively effective.

In the landscape paintings of George Fenech, I see this sense of 'sublimation' at work when he transforms the image of a view into something beautiful. His visual sensibility represents a kind of sublimation that feeds into his method of painting. A painter of the intimate world of soothing forms and colours, George enjoyed representing the sentiments of daily life, whether they are expressed in the figurative, in simple objects, or the landscape. The artist, 'loved nature and felt comfortable with it ... he transcended the ordinary to capture in his art the essential beauty of nature ...' (Borg and Cassar 2012: 4) It is exactly what the great post-impressionist French painter Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947) once wrote:

Representing nature when it is beautiful. Everything has its moments of beauty. Beauty is the satisfaction of sight. Sight is satisfied by simplicity and order. Simplicity and order are produced by the legible divisions of surface, the grouping of sympathetic colour, etc. (Hyman 1998: 188).

So George's vision of beauty, as seen within the confines of sublimation, involves a corresponding connection with a repressed past. One has to remember that the artist came from a large family of eight children and had a hard childhood experience, not least because of the approaching clouds of war. Therefore it was

necessary for the artist to recreate a new feeling of his internal world. ‘The desire to create is driven by this longing for reunion and healing, and the enjoyment of art appreciation is the joy of experiencing this restoration as embodied in the artwork’ (Hagman 2010: 19).

The quality of George Fenech’s landscapes makes me think about many other artists who still use an impressionistic or somewhat abstract approach to Maltese contemporary landscape painting. Stylistically, George stands on his own and his landscapes seem to represent the artist’s internal experience with the natural world as opposed to a mere reflection of the exterior world itself. A kind of tranquillity is sensed in each and every view which the artist interpreted in his own manner. For George, the place where he painted frequently became also a place of refuge. The formal elements in his landscapes express the visual aesthetics of refuge and prospect which involve multiple dimensions of sensation. The changing quality of light, the muffled quality or open quality of sound, the feeling of temperature and air on the skin all play a part in creating feelings of refuge (holding) and prospect (release). George’s landscape paintings move us because we experience a different affective state and a different self-state. Unconsciously, the artist was drawn to paint the landscapes of his surrounding vicinities to recreate early relational experiences of engagement with the parents, and by extension the world. Such ‘related aesthetic states can be characterised as maternal (refuge) and paternal (prospect) and the artist’s ability to express the various dimensions of these experiences in their artwork become the source of his or her inspiration and our enjoyment’ (Hagman 2010: 125). George Fenech’s landscapes convey his deep reverence and intense affection to his family and home village.

### The maternal landscape

*‘A man who has been the indisputable favourite of his mother keeps for life the feeling of a conqueror, that confidence of success that often induces real success’*  
(Sigmund Freud 1953: 5).

The fact that George was preoccupied with the immediate surroundings, especially the limits of his home-village in Mellieħa and his repeated landscape of the massive rock of San Niklaw, may give an indication that his landscapes are connected with the body of the mother. There are instances where these visualised vistas suggest the artist’s infantile phantasies towards the maternal body and its loving and reparative phantasies.

To appreciate more George’s landscapes, one needs to consider Freudian psychoanalyst Melanie Klein’s (1882–1960) theory which attributes the importance of an infant’s first object relation (i.e. the relation to the mother’s breast and to the mother)<sup>1</sup> Introjection of this primal object in a secure environment lays the basis for individual development. Rooted in Freudian symbols, Klein’s writings offer a ‘psychological understanding of the disposition of the formal or aesthetic features of a work of art’ (Maclagan 2001:56). She is mostly known for her distinction between ‘good breast’ and ‘bad breast’. The ‘good breast’ is instinctively the source of nourishment and therefore of life itself



George Fenech, *Dabla ta' Razzett*, 1995



George Fenech, *Rocks under the cliff*, 1995



George Fenech, *Selmun village*, 1995





George Fenech, *L-Ghajn ta' San Niklaw*, 1974



George Fenech, *Ghalqa Lellux*, 2003



George Fenech, *Is-Santwarju tal-Mellieha*, 1998

and provides unity with the mother. It also restores the lost prenatal unity and, even when food is not sought, providing constant reassurance of the mother's love. The good breast is internalised, 'taken in and becomes part of the ego, and the infant who was first inside the mother now has the mother inside himself' (Klein 1957: 179). In Freud's model of the psyche, the superego is part of the ego. This also explains that the ego is formed on the basis of the internalised 'good' objects, while the superego results from the introjection of the 'good' and 'bad' breasts. Therefore the child loves the good breast and hates the bad but at the end comes to accept that they are the same. This loving-and-hating instinct working contemporaneously repairs and restores the losing and regaining of the good object. The infant first fears of the loss of loved objects. These external and internal objects are projected within the ego and are destroyed, resulting in persecution and guilt for their loss and a desire to restore and recreate the lost objects outside and within the ego. With growth comes an ability to restore and abandon the depressive anxieties, and an integration and enrichment of the ego by assimilation of the loved objects. The guilt gives rise to a need to restore and recreate and this provides the roots of creativity. Klein's model offers a form of sublimation which is the basis of creativity and the artist can identify with the landscape a feeling of oneness with the mother. The beauty of the landscape can activate the sadness and loss of memory of an ideal object and its rediscovery.

Painting repeatedly the massive rock of San Niklaw, George Fenech figured the good object that he imaginatively introjected as the core of his ego. His preoccupation with this motif is neither regression nor neurotic repetition but a means to reach to the early foundations of the adult self. His maternal landscape form an ego incorporating, a whole object of the kind. Il-Blata ta' San Niklaw, a solitary massive boulder, epitomises George's reparative and productive way of seeing the landscape. It also combines the hesitantly but good rock/breast and the damaged but repaired valley/mother body into one harmonious whole which also forms an integral part of the artist's ego. George's mother was a perfectionist, a trait he inherited from her, and he was closely attached to and spoke of her with praise and admiration (Borg and Cassar 2012: 4).

To conclude on George Fenech's landscapes and his repetitive images of the rock of San Niklaw, it is suggested that the gendered 'maternal' landscape is recognised as an infantile conception of the mother's body. George's landscapes represent a metaphorical object which is incorporated into his ego, especially while painting. It is a primitive phantasy that involves an alternative world and life, and recreates what has been lost in the internal world and self.

### Mapping the mystery of the artist's mind

*'The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves'* (Carl Gustav Jung 1876:197).

On the other hand, Gilbert Fenech's works have a different interpretation, even though the subject often remains basically the same. Gilbert frequented his father's studio and accompanied him during *plein air* painting and some form of

influence can be observed. Today, Gilbert's landscape paintings have a different meaning and interpretation. His more recent landscapes are more vibrant and intense and his works are brighter in colour. He also adopted a flatter approach in most of the compositions. Surely, this demonstrates Gilbert's struggle to move away from the initial stylistic influence of his father. Joe Camilleri pointed out:

Yet the more recent paintings display a better-structured and balanced composition, a richer chromatic orchestration, and a freer hand. His discarding of non-essentials and his limited modelling with colour to the extent of adopting the quasi-flat colour patch is indicative of Gilbert's concern to move further away from his source of influence and try to create his own particular artistic idiom (Camilleri 2006).

While Gilbert's landscape paintings are considered of an optical realist style, one could sense a type of liberal approach, especially in the use of bold colours and the elimination of subdued tones. Some good examples of these works are *Evening Light*, *The Red Tower* and *Għajn Hadid*.

The struggle to move away from his father's influence generated anxiety in Gilbert. I call it creative anxiety, which is an essential aspect to the successful creative process. I argue that the source of his conflict and the aesthetic challenge provoked this anxiety. It is evident that his landscape paintings communicate a state of calmness but at the same time the artist strives to reconcile the tensions and conflicts within the self.

In art, most artists make up their primary focus on self-experience and self-esteem related to others. In his book *Dreams and Drama: Psychoanalytic Criticism, Creativity and the Artist*, Alan Roland discusses the diversity of human 'selves' that make up the human sense of 'self'. He describes how the artistic 'self' takes precedence over others. He wrote:

In an artistic self there is an inborn aesthetic sensibility and resonance as well as talent in one or more fields of art. This not only draws the person into the field(s) of art but perhaps more important, to a particular tradition within the field. For every field has a number of traditions ... The artist then spends his or her life in a dialogue with the tradition: trying to live up to the best of it while creatively modifying it (Roland 2002: 31).

Gilbert Fenech kept exploring other aesthetic realms and means to transform his immediate environment into different perceptions of the landscape. A series of landscapes and seascapes mark these changes. In some of them, light and darkness dominate the whole composition, as in *Nocturne* (2010), *Morning Light* (2010), and *Morning after the Storm* (2014) where he gave dramatic tension to the whole images. Here is a painter who is intensely aware of creeping colour and an ability to read and absorb a landscape, tracing lines of land and sea through movement, stillness, displacement, and the very present. The absence of figures in the landscapes is a salient feature. They are landscapes of the promenader and the rambler. Each individual painting is highly developed, like Cezanne's landscape paintings executed in the open air. He registers each brush stroke and patch of colour in a tactile sense of placement and distance. Time enters the



Gilbert Fenech, *The Red Tower*, 2013



Gilbert Fenech, *Mellieħa Sanctuary*, undated



Gilbert Fenech, *Il-Bieb tar-Razzett*, 2012





Gilbert Fenech, *Ghajn Hadid*, 2009



Gilbert Fenech, *Water Reservoirs*, 2009

work as the painting records a multitude of moments of seeing. The viewer is encouraged to go spatially through and explore Gilbert's landscape, even if the scenery forces up against the flat picture plane.

Furthermore, Gilbert's attempt to move to abstract or semi-abstract forms is another observation worth giving attention. Although the artist has produced very few abstract pieces, this development demonstrates his crave to change and move forward in his creative intent.

### **The artist's subjectivity**

*'This is what makes art distinct as a human activity: the artist works to refine and perfect the expression of his or her subjectivity as it is concretised in the artwork'* (Hagman 2010: 24).

To understand the artist's mind and the creative process, one needs to expand on the individual subjectivity which cannot exist out of context. There are three dimensions of the artist's subjectivity. Every artist creates in his work 'intrapyschic (individual), intersubjective (relational), and metasubjective (cultural) dimensions of his own subjective life' (Hagman 2010: 25). The artist cannot be separated from his social surroundings. We need also to see and understand the changing of these three dimensions of subjectivity. Therefore, 'Art involves the expression, of the subjectivity of the artist and the process of perfection of that expression, as a function of the creative process' (Hagman 2010: 30).

Gilbert Fenech's works have these three dimensions of subjectivity. As an artist, his 'intrapyschic' qualities are found in his dynamic experience of the world. It is the world of objects which involves this sense of externalization of self-experience interlocked with the discovery of the world. As Dissanayake proclaimed, 'the rhythms and modes of archaic attunement become the templates for our aesthetic engagement with culture' (Dissanayake 2000: 8). In a way this is similar to the concept of 'projective identification' with Winnicott's transitional experience. 'Once an action is taken, altering the object in some way, it can be said that subjectivity is externalised and the artist enters into a relationship with an object which is now invested with qualities of the artist's own subjective experience' (Hagman 2010: 27). The qualities of the external object are essential (as in the mother-infant dialogue) (Hagman 2010: 27).

So we need to view Gilbert's landscape paintings not just an aesthetic experience which is limited to emotion or a specific idea or an impression, but also an artistic creation on the 'idea of being' (Hagman 2010: 27). Art is not simply a mirror or a representation of ourselves, but it is also a creation which evokes self-experience and demonstrates the self-relation through aesthetic excellence. Whether it is a realistic landscape or an abstract painting, there is some form of human experience. So the artist creates an intense dialogue with the world. Through his own visionary seeing and praising of it, he discovers himself within the 'offered' forms. Like the landscape painter who discovers within the

landscape's forms the forms of his own feelings. In his passionate engagement with the medium the artist subjectively transforms the object (landscape) of his poetic 'praise'; in Winnicott's words, he creates a *subjective object* (Winnicott 1971: 65–85).

### Searching for the self

*'I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object. What is realised in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming'* (Lacan 1977: 86).

Joseph Mallia's landscapes and abstract paintings conform closely with the definition of the 'fantastic', which unites time, space, and character of authority. The overwhelming negative effect of World War II influenced his childhood and the years he spent studying art in England created in him a high integrity of the self and its situation in relation to 'reality'. Joseph's landscape paintings express an utopian conviction within modernism and the new art describes the modern world which communicated to a larger audience was conceived as the broader 'polity' to which the artist belongs.

The time Joseph spent in England was a crucial time for his artistic development. His first works were more of a realistic nature, depicting typical scenes of the Grand Harbour, seascapes, and the countryside. The theme remained the same but later Joseph attempted to create stylised scenes executed in geometric shapes and vivid colours, producing the typical rooftops and churches, together with other interesting structures that make up the Maltese town or village. Then these works became more abstract and, interestingly, the absence of any recognizable form expressed a sort of provocative illusionism. The artist produced hundreds of sketches which for him are forces emanating from the unconscious (Personal Communication 2015). Joseph asks and proposes:

What are the forces that work their way from the depths, are always driving my hands to make marks or shape forms? The answer is perhaps manifest in the piles of sketches that I have been turning out continuously for decades. I consider this as more telling than many of my paintings. In fact I have been trying hard to catch up with my drawings, because I knew that my sketches are outbursts, hot from the bubbling recesses of my inner self (Personal Communication 2015).

I argue that images are transformed into lines and forms which produce depth and perception which are spatially created which sweep the viewer into an unknown world. It is a natural evolution in the process of exploring deeper layers of the unconscious. In his famous book *The Spirit in Man Art and Literature*, Jung writes, 'for all the freedom of [the artist's] life and the clarity of his thought, he is everywhere hemmed around and prevailed upon by the Unconscious, the mysterious god within him, so that ideas flow to him – he knows not whence, he is driven to work and create – he knows not to what end, and is mastered by an impulse for constant growth and development he knows not whither' (Jung 1967: 102). Joseph Mallia's abstract works derive from the unconscious



Joe L. Mallia, *Senglea Point*, Grand Harbour 1982



Joe L. Mallia, *Senglea point*, c. 1990

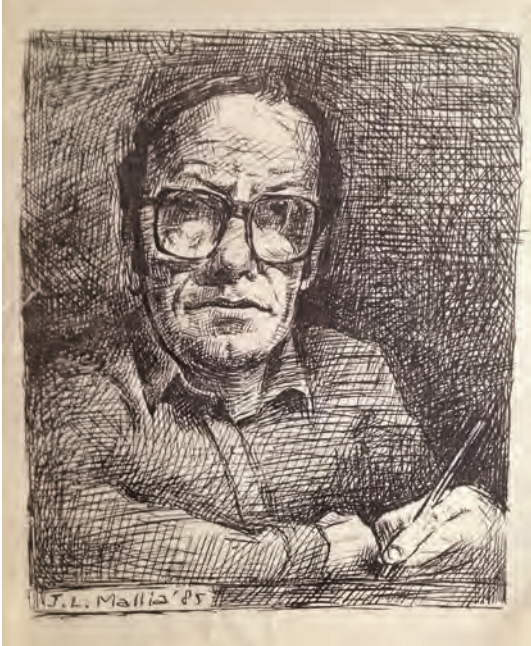


Joe L. Mallia, *Abstract*, 2014



Joe L. Mallia, *Abstract*, 2000





Joe L. Mallia, *Self-portrait*, 1985



Joe L. Mallia, *Dream Garden*, 2006



Joe L. Mallia, *Windmills*, 2014

and reflect deeply all aspects of our environment: colour, brightness, space, and motion which we perceive as patterns. There is also consciousness of form, and the artist attains through the natural environment, the material provided by nature, and translates it into his own symbolical imagery (Laganà 2008).

To continue my analysis on Joseph Mallia's works, I will now focus on the psychoanalytic theory by Jacques Lacan (1901–81), the French psychoanalyst who was an affiliate of the Surrealists (Walsh 2013: 45). I find that there is an affinity between the artist and the psychoanalyst. Lacan was a Freudian who proposed to reread Freud and articulate the mechanisms of the master's pivotal work on the unconscious, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). In his famous seminars, Lacan discussed Freud's theories of the unconscious and suggested repeatedly that "The unconscious is structured like a language."<sup>2</sup>

According to Lacan, the psyche is divided into three structures that control our lives and desires. Most of Lacan's terms explain the complexity of the psyche's workings which can be related to three major concepts and correlate generally to the three main moments in the individual's development, as summarised in the Lacan module on psychosexual development (Felluga 2003–07: ). These are the Real, the Imaginary Order, and the Symbolic Order (Levine 2008: xvi). Lacan wanted to remain loyal to Freudian psychoanalysis within post-structuralism. He kept the tripartite concept corresponding to Freud's *Id* (the Real), *Ego* (the Imaginary), and *Superego* (the Symbolic).

The concept of the Real is defined by Lacan as the state of nature from which we have been severed by our entrance into language. This state expresses the needs of the human being. A baby needs and seeks to satisfy those needs with no sense of any separation between itself and the external world or the world of others. The Real is the unconscious part of the psyche and it is mysterious because it remains hidden. For Lacan, this state cannot be expressed in language; therefore it is impossible to achieve. The very entrance into language marks our total separation from the real and many times; it continues to exercise its influence throughout our adult lives.

The Imaginary Order is the second concept which corresponds to the mirror stage and marks the movement of the subject from the primal need to what Lacan terms 'demand'. The connection to the mirror stage suggests that the 'imaginary' is primarily narcissistic because it sets the stage for the fantasies of desire. Whereas needs can be fulfilled, demands are, by definition, unsatisfiable. He explains that the child starts to realise that there is a separation from the mother and the world and therefore anxiety dominates and a sense of loss is felt. Lacan continues to discuss about the difference between 'demand' and 'desire' which is the function of the symbolic order. The idea of the 'mirror stage' is an important early component in Lacan's critical reinterpretation of Freud. The child misrecognises in its mirror image a stable, an established whole self, which, however, does not correspond to the real child and therefore it is impossible to realise. For the child, the image is a fantasy and strives to compensate for the

sense of lack or loss of what Lacan terms an 'Ideal-I' or 'ideal ego.' The fantasy image of oneself can be filled in by others whom we may want to emulate in our adult lives (for example, role models, etc.). Anyone that we set up as a mirror for ourselves turns into a narcissistic relationship. For Lacan this 'imaginary realm' continues to exercise its influence throughout our life and it is only superseded in the child's movement into the symbolic (<http://www.lacanonline.com>). So 'these demands were brought to bear upon the partly conscious, partly unconscious interplay between the Ego and the Id by the so-called Superego (*Über-Ich*, or Over-I), the internalised imperative of social norms' (Levine 2008: 16). This Freudian triple mapping corresponds to the famous Lacanian triad of the Imaginary (Ego), the Symbolic (Superego) and the Real (Id).

It is Lacan's contribution to the distinguished theory of the Ego which proposes a visual setting. The mirror stage in childhood which corresponds to the mother's and siblings' behaviour and actions have an effect on the individual's formation. We can see this 'formative interplay' (<http://www.lacanonline.com>) at the mirror of the mother and child in many works of art throughout art history. For example, it is reflected in the works of Leonardo, Caravaggio, Manet, Picasso, Pollock, and other modernist artists.

The Symbolic Order is the concept which could be also recognised as the 'Big Other'. While the Imaginary is about identification and equations, the Symbolic is about language and narrative. When the child enters into the system of language, he or she starts to accept the rules imposed by society, and starts to deal with others. Lacan argues that the acceptance of language's rules forms part of the Oedipus complex.<sup>3</sup> The symbolic is made possible because of the acceptance of the Name-of-the-Father, those laws and restrictions that control both the desire and the rules of communication. 'The name of the father' is one of Lacan's central concepts. According to Lacan's Psychoanalytic theory, the force which drives us is 'desire.' This process of symbolization of reality is what allows for communication between people. But language is an outside order which precedes us and therefore, according to Lacan, 'is always somewhat alien to us' (<http://culturalstudiesnow.blogspot.com/2012/05/lacans-name-of-father-summary.html>). When the individual enters into the realm of the symbolic order, 'desire' projects a sense of absence which cannot be explained by the person.

Lacan proposed that desire is directed at many objects during one's life, starting from the mother, which is the initial Big Other, moving to the father which is the central figure in the process of entering the Symbolic order. Later on in life, the role of the Big Other will be assumed by various types of authority and social institutions (*Écrits* 67).

Through recognition of the Name-of-the-Father, the individual is able to enter into a community of others. The Symbolic, through language, is 'the pact which links ... subjects together in one action. The human action *par excellence* is originally founded on the existence of the world of the symbol, namely on laws





Joe L. Mallia, *Drawing*, c. 1967



Joe L. Mallia, *Drawing*, c. 1967



Joe L. Mallia, *Drawing (Reflections)*, c. 1966

Joseph Mallia's mirror drawings are not actually the reflection of the person or model but rather a reflection of the Other in a Lacanian sense.

and contracts' (Freud's Papers : 230). According to Lacan, the Real is concerned with the needs, the Imaginary with demand, and the Symbolic with desire.

We will mostly focus on Lacan's Imaginary order which corresponds to the 'gaze', in his Mirror Stage theory of psychosexual development. Lacan explains that there is an attraction in the relation between the gaze of the other and what one wishes to see. For example, when an artist looks at the mirror to paint his self-portrait, he sees himself seeing himself, but what he doesn't see is the invisible gaze of the Other to which he is unconsciously showing himself in order to be acknowledged as worthy of recognition. So the subject is seen in a way which falls short of how the artist wishes to be recognised (seen). Thus the eye, the organ which sees, functions in the same way as Lacan's *objet a* and, like the phallus, symbolises a lack (Levine 2008: 73–4).

Joseph also struggles with the question of what do we see when we look at an object. He says that what he, as an artist, sees, is not what others see. For him, appearances are a 'phenomenon.' What is *seen* is informed by who the see-er is, his or her life experiences, his or her own way of understanding the world. So, whatever the object that Joseph draws or paints, it conveys the way in which he, Joseph, sees it. It is the artist's gaze we are looking at when we look at his drawing or paintings. In this respect, the artist comes very close to Lacan's understanding of the lack that exists in the tension between seeing and knowing, as we can see in the illustrations of his drawings executed in Ealing in England in 1966.

I argue that Lacan addresses the issues of desire and lack which is also found in Joseph Mallia's process of drawing and painting. In Lacan, there is almost an ontological status: 'Once the subject himself comes into being, he owes it to a certain non-being [lack] upon which he raises up his being [desire]' (Miller 1988b: 192). The Lacanian subject's desire is unattainable; it eludes him and he lives his life within the context of the lack. This is what makes the artist continue to create.

### The Internal Object

*'The picture on the wall had been painted, that was certain – it was not a dream. But how did it happen? And what next? She was on fire, devoured by ardour within. She must prove to herself that divine sensation, the unspeakable sense of happiness that she had felt could be repeated'* (Klein 1986: 92).

The object relation theory by Melanie Klein (1882–1960) is perhaps the best tool to analyse and discuss Henriette Mallia's paintings and works. In the psychoanalytic arena, Klein was definitely the most innovative of her age. As already stated earlier, the value of Klein's theories is that 'she accords similar aggressive-sadistic phantasies to both girls and boys prior to their separation into separate sexes predetermine by biology in the genital phase' (Walsh 2013: 113). With regards to creativity there is a process of splitting, projection, and introjections which generates a wealth of symbolic activity that is pre-linguistic and also signifying. These are processes which involve the creating of absences

and also removing things and eliminating them from the mother's body.

It seems that although female artists have visibility in the art world, they still face obstacles in achieving the same recognition as their male counterparts. While today there is a change in this kind of thinking, because of the social changes that gave women more opportunity to show their work and involve themselves fully in the art world, the change occurs at a much slower pace in the psyche and so we have to deal with the question of femininity and its culturally over-determined relation.

The concept which I find important in this analysis is that the perspective of the object relations theory by Klein views art as the function of the psychological dynamics of the depressive position. It is a search for order and beauty which is an attempt to reconstruct and preserve an 'internal good-object world' (Hagman 2010: 4). It is important that our approach to art and creativity has a dynamic and integrative function in which the artist works to achieve an enhanced form of self-expression by means of the creative activity (Hagman 2010: 4).

In her oeuvre, Henriette includes the flower motif which, in its finest expression, is feminist. The 'flowers' remind me of the great American artist Georgia O'Keeffe. Although the interpretation of O'Keeffe's flowers by many critics connect and allude to female genitalia, most probably the artist was striving to use the 'flower motif' to demonstrate and set herself apart within the masculine world of twentieth-century American painting. I have already emphasised that there seems to be a gap between male and female artists especially early in the twentieth century, and its effect is still echoing in Maltese contemporary art. 'Her portrayals of flowers are about various things, above all morphology and colours.' (<http://de.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2014/february/05/what-do-you-see-in-georgia-okeeffes-flowers/>). I see here that there is a sort of parallel cult between the flower paintings of celebrated artist, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Henriette's.

Henriette's 'flowers' reflect good introjections which is a means to allow the 'good object' to make a good kind of projection into the artist's inner world. In these paintings, we see the flower paintings which are expressed with brightly coloured pigments, centralised and symmetrical designs radiating from a centre. They are symbolical images of flowers. Although one could also read them as sexual metaphors, they are most probable internalised objects linked to the unconscious phantasy of life-and-death instincts.

The projection of the 'good object' is also seen in her abstract motifs. For example, in *Chequered* (page 133) we see symbolic images of circles, spirals, diamond-shaped structures, and curvilinear lines reminiscent of female curves. By these motifs Henriette wanted to create the elements of transformation, perhaps the metaphorical symbols of the 'goddess' within. The spiritual appeal lay precisely in the abstract part of the painting. As Kandinsky says: 'The more abstract its form, the more clear and direct is its appeal' (Kandinsky 1977: 32).

In Henriette's works, in every painting, a world of her own is created. They are



Henriette Mallia, *Isola*, 2015



Henriette Mallia, *Tears of Iris*, 2014





George Fenech, *November day*, 2003



Gilbert Fenech, *Coastline*, 2010



Joe L. Mallia, *Abstract*, 2007



Henriette Mallia, *Striky bacon*, 2008

recognizable images, but permeated with a kind of transcendental and magical experience. Her style is not a particular one which could be distinguished from that of other local artists, but one could see that there is a study of historical progression. Her work has evolved from her own direct experience of the physical world and from her unique visual sensibility. The artist experiments with abstract motifs derived from nature. She works in series, synthesizing abstraction and realism to produce works that emphasise the primary forms of nature. While some of these works are highly graphical and detailed, in others she eliminates what she considers the inessential to focus on shape and colour.

To conclude, these four artists, through their creations of artworks, brought together parts of the lost objects that have been split and lost. Each artist no longer thinks within the confines of the 'individual mind' but within consciousness, subjectivity, and the way to reunite the internal and external worlds through art.

Artists engage themselves in an externalization of self-experience and the 'result is that the artwork functions as a self-object<sup>4</sup> experience, mirroring the artist's perfection or offering an ideal opportunity for admiration of its beauty' (Hagman 2010: 22). George Fenech's landscape paintings characterise this self-experience state, reconciling internal conflicts to bring about the feeling of peace, harmony, and joy. In fact, in most of his paintings we experience this sense of tranquillity and affective contentment. For Gilbert, the bliss of his art is also a psychological state in which the experience of the self is positively charged. The artist is not just satisfied with the affinity and good relationship he had with his father, but he strives to unfold his skills and aesthetic qualities of newer approaches to painting.

Lacan's analytic techniques in psychoanalysis also supported the elimination of the narcissistic position of the ego in order to expose the illusions and fantasies that we encounter in our daily life. His concepts became important benchmarks in modern and postmodern art discourse. Joseph Mallia's work reminds me of 'Lacan's dictum that there is a void at the heart of the subject that we will fill with signifiers which communicate with one another rather than express our sense of being' (Walsh 2013: 93). The artist discusses his creative process and the satisfaction achieved through making art. He confesses that

Seizing on various triggers has become my favourite game when making art. For me, art is invention, an inventory of form, a record of mental and spiritual activity, mostly unpredictable, where unconscious scanning and will to form, conjure magic. Behind all this is a struggle, but the trophies are worth it (Personal communication 2015).

Joseph's work goes beyond simply expressing a narrative of local identity or the artist's instantaneous vision of his perceived reality. Whatever the significance of the image the artist wants to convey, his art is an unconscious sublimation gained by creating the effects of beauty by 'disarming the effects of desire' (Levine 2008: 54).

Finally, to return to Melanie Klein and the object relations theory and Henriette

Mallia's work, we need to juxtapose the concept of the three different modes of reparation that Klein distinguishes. We need to use the form of reparation that is grounded in love for the object, the good object. It is an acutely idealistic paradigm to understand the need and to promote the desire that the subject has in the wake of the negative: to recreate a relational field. Henriette's flower paintings and the works which relate to her home city, Senglea, produce a sense of nostalgia and belonging. It is a construct to preserve the self within the social indexed real life and phantasy.

Creativity, art, and psychoanalysis are an open-ended and on-going process of unearthing and revealing the past, present and future. Artists construct their ideas through imagination and use the symbolic feeling of charged images by unfolding the unconscious psyche. With their tools and materials, they express universal truths of reality and humanity.



Henriette Mallia, Backstage, *Sindy Rella*, 2014



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Melanie Klein, 'Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse' (1929), in *The Writings of Melanie Klein: Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945*, Vol. 1. Works 1921–1945, London, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> The unconscious is structured like a language is Lacan's central thesis and it is his most influential contribution to psychoanalysis.

<sup>3</sup> Freud describes the Oedipus Complex as a stage in a child's development in which the child experiences an erotic attachment to one parent and hostility towards the other. The tension created in this emotional triangle is according to both Freud and Lacan, a key element in the psychological development of the individual. See Freud's six stages of the Oedipus Complex (1897–1938) and Lacan's seminars (*Four discourses*, France, 1969).

<sup>4</sup> In recent years, some self psychologists have elaborated a theory of creativity and art. See the 1988 paper by Carl Rotenberg, 'Selfobject Theory and Artistic Process', Hillsdale N.J.

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