



LOUIS LAGANÀ
 PAYS TRIBUTE
 TO A VISIONARY
 ARTIST WHO
 FELL IN LOVE
 WITH MALTA AND
 GAVE A GREAT
 CONTRIBUTION
 TO MALTESE ART

A TRIBUTE TO EBBA VON FERSEN BALZAN 1957-2008



EBBA IN HER STUDIO IN EARLY 2007

Ebba von Fersen Balzan first came to Malta in 1986. She was mostly fascinated by Maltese culture and as an artist she was particularly attracted to the intense light of the Maltese landscape, the colour of the Maltese stone and the megalithic temples. In 1989 she held her first exhibitions in Malta: the first exhibition, in aid of Alternattiva Demokratika, was held at the hotel Phoenicia and another followed at the Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta.

Using temple themes, Ebba von Fersen Balzan produced many works and took part in several exhibitions. The artist used colours as symbols. In one of the interviews she gave me on the Voice of the Mediterranean radio station in March 2001, she described the use of various colours, identifying them with different temples. She also explained why her work became more abstract and less realistic. "I like to use realistic forms; the interpretation often lies in the colour. Each temple has a different hue for me. Mnajdra being the warmest, I use strong oranges and reds. Skorba is more yellow; Ta' Hagarat has interesting greyish hues. Partly this is



also due to the colour of the stone. They all have a warm reddish feel about them. I learnt only recently that they were painted in red ochre inside. It seems one can still feel the colour. Abstraction on the other hand is a possibility to express and underline certain aspects or ideas without the diversion of direct recognition. I like to use both. My work on the Hypogeum is becoming more abstract, and I suppose getting even closer and deeply involved with the temple theme; this will happen more often."

In one of her works, entitled *Deep Inside*, the artist used shapes and colours reminiscent of the architectural forms of the Hypogeum. The colours of the stonework are bold and strong, and the shapes of the rock-cut chambers are expressed with less detail. Light is transfused through the crevices and gives a sense of mystical atmosphere to the place. It is a sacred place and the viewer is captured by the mystical aura that emanates from this sacred place. The Hypogeum is the symbol of continuity of life. That is perhaps why the sleeping statuettes found in this subterranean temple are in a foetal position, therefore suggesting the 'womb', the symbol of life. Fersen Balzan used colours and symbols to give a certain identity to each and every temple she painted.

Apart from her great interest in the Temple period in Malta, Von Fersen Balzan found great inspiration in the way nature manifests itself to us today. She argued that, "nature is a living, changing thing and I, at times, imagine it is a whole living and interacting organism, of which we form part. However, humanity treats nature inhumanly, and without respect. We do not understand ourselves as part of nature but as the conquerors and masters of nature. A dangerous attitude: as what comes out of it is that human behaviour is much like a cancer, eating the resources that feed a whole structure themselves, at the same time destroying a beautiful and finely balanced system." These are some

thoughts about how the artist perceived nature and the way she strongly connected it to prehistoric society when people had a completely different attitude towards nature.

The connection between the form of the female body and the undulations of the earth was a major theme explored by many artists in the past. Today, a renewed interest in women's political identification with the earth seems to be re-emerging in the works of contemporary artists. Von Fersen Balzan focused on the theme of nature using in many works the elements of the connection between the human figure and the earth. The primitivistic approach, which the artist successfully demonstrated in her works, can be described as a sort of a romanticised vision of life. An element of exoticism also runs strongly in most of her work. The human body, especially the female one, is expressed with a finesse of line which creates an element of sophistication. The artist was not interested in anatomical structure or in the formal relations of mass and surface colours, but rather in the powerful expression of a single dominating character. This is found for example in *Promenade* and other works where the female figure becomes the central subject of the composition. Such paintings are the product of an interior force rather than related to the outside world. These works also possess a highly symbolic quality with deep reflection on how nature was perceived by the artist.

Another important facet of Von Fersen Balzan's artistic expression was the jazz series. I remember the artist actively working with two other artists, Jeni Caruana and the late, Olaug Vethal who died a year ago, during the nights of the Malta Jazz Festival. Each year these artists produced a large number of paintings and drawings, inspired by the lively atmosphere of the crowd, lighting and sounds coming from the jazz musicians and bands. The paintings were usually exhibited after the jazz festival in different venues in Malta and also abroad.

In the last few years before her demise, the artist also had a studio and art gallery at Plussulien, a lovely village in the heart of Brittany in France. She used to make short escapes from Malta to find time to reflect and produce more work. Early in September 2006 she opened an exhibition at her gallery known as Gallery 22320, which formed part of an old school dedicated to St. Jeanne d'Arc. The title of this exhibition in French was *Vitalité*, that is, the vitality of nature. Most of the works on show were inspired by various elements of nature. The use of the female figure as a metaphor of life and its relation with the earth dominated most of the paintings in this exhibition.

Ebba von Fersen Balzan passed away at Mater Dei Hospital on March 16, 2008. She will be profoundly missed by her husband, Saviour Balzan, who always supported her artistic ventures. She will be also missed by her family, her close friends and many artists who admired her for her most sincere creative expressions which will be always remembered in Malta's cultural heritage. ■

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