

Mapping the Memories of Life

Zepp Cassar, a Maltese-Australian artist, is currently showing his work for the first time to the Maltese public at St. James Cavalier Centre for Creativity. Cassar's paintings are infused with wonderful colors and an instinctive feeling for light and all that is found in Maltese culture.

Joseph Cassar, or Zepp as he is known emigrated to Australia twenty-one years ago and settled in Sydney. He was born in the bakers' town, in Qormi and spent many years of his childhood in Marsaxlokk, where he lived with the nuns until he was 18 years of age at *Zejtun Jesus of Nazareth Home*. Later he joined the Salesians where he contributed immensely to the formation and upbringing of disadvantaged young children and adolescents. Cassar used art for the last twenty-three years as the tool to bring about the bridge between the non-communicative world and the silent world. In Australia he met the famous painter from Sydney, Donald Friend, whom he looked after during the last years of his life. All this contributed immeasurably to Cassar's artistic development and influence to start painting. Zepp Cassar is an 'Outsider' artist, not because he never had any academic, artistic training but because his art is raw, pure and spontaneous. It is an expression of his outsiderism to escape from the past and serve as a therapy to reshape the tribulations of life.

For those who do not know anything about 'Outsider' art, I will explain briefly how the term emerged and of its importance today. The term was originally coined by British art historian and writer, Roger Cardinal in 1972, a term equivalent to what French painter Jean Dubuffet called 'Art Brut' in the mid-40.

Outsider art is a type of 'primitive' art style that has now a widespread recognition in the contemporary art world. It is also the latest development in contemporary art practice by artists "operating at the periphery of society" and to "attempt to fashion a renewal in art and in some cases, a utopian renewal of society". I am using the word 'primitive' to explain the rawness and purity of the artistic expression and the definition implies usually all creative works such as paintings, drawings, sculptures, assemblages, and even simple

garden designs and other outdoor constructions done by people who never had any formal training in art and who produce art without regard and reward from the mainstream art world's recognition, marketplace or definitions. These people first make art for themselves or their existing community, often without recognizing themselves as artists. Of course there are debates today about this new idea of labelling a type of art which intends to be naive or have idiosyncratic qualities. The main aspect is that outsider art remains free from all formal conventions.

This type of art is today sought by many art collectors and there is an increase of outsider art exhibitions held in many countries across the world. There are also a good number of museums which invest in outsider art collections.

Now let's return to Zepp Cassar's art and his inspiration. The first impressions of the artist's works were just blobs of paint on paper which later evolved into layers of colour, texture and shapes. Most of the works on show are related to the sea and the beauty and richness of marine life. Cassar paints abundance and prosperity and not scarcity and the fish he paints and all that is related to the sea symbolizes a positive outlook towards life. The fish as a symbol of the sea does not just reminds us of the beauty and diversity of marine life but there is also a clear message about our environment. If we neglect and abuse our water resources we will lose a precious characteristic of nature. Besides the environmental significance, Cassar uses unconsciously the fish as a symbol of rebirth. The years he spent in an institutional religious life left a great influence on his character and artwork. As a child he spent years in church, assisting in all the requirements needed to keep the institution going. During this period Cassar was occupied with the festive decorations and other important artistic jobs.

In this collection Zepp Cassar illustrates with a delicate style the typical fish found in Malta and Australia. *Vopi*, *Kavalli*, *Lampuki*, and *Sawrell* are familiar fish caught in their own season in the surrounding waters of Malta and are created by the artist with vibrant colours and translucent spaces which suggest movement and a sense of depth.

For example, he also shows shoals of *barramundi*, the fish caught wild and farmed for export found in the region of Australia. Here the artist captured the colourful textures of the scales of the fish and its particular shape of an elongate body form with a large, slightly oblique mouth and an upper jaw extending behind the eye.

In this first exhibition in Malta, Cassar proves that ‘colour’ is the most important element in his paintings. The artist is not satisfied to use one medium only. When painting he uses and experiments with a mixture of mixed-media. The bright Mediterranean colours and light are strongly felt in most of his works. The nostalgia of the artist’s surrounding atmosphere became the means by which he created a unique artistic language and an identity which is felt so powerful and energizing in his paintings.

Other interesting works found in this first personal art show in Malta, articulate the visual beauty of the Maltese countryside as perceived by an outsider artist. Strong expressive forms and lines demonstrate the effective use of a variety of colours which are seen prominently in *Buskett*, *Xlendi Bay*, *Ghar Dalam* and other distinguished Maltese sites.

Zepp Cassar exhibited his works widely and his paintings are found in many private collections and galleries in Sydney, Tasmania, England, Ireland, Singapore, Serbia, Paris, Bordeaux, Vietnam and in Malta. After the Malta exhibition, Cassar will be holding his next personal art show in Paris while he is touring Europe. We can finally say that the artist’s body of work is a visual cultural diary of his life’s experiences. His emotive moods are expressed with a great potential that transforms his memories into visual icons of life. His art is not only a tool for exploring the unconscious but also that for mapping our existential picture of ourselves and that of society.

The exhibition runs until Sunday 13 June 2010.

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