

# A Pied Piper's Diary of Obsessions

Louis Laganà introduces us to two Maltese artists who are inspired by nature through literature. These artists explore visual representations derived from novels, poetry, history and other literary sources to express the aesthetic qualities of our world

Some artists draw their inspiration and subject matter from literature, and their interpretations vary according to the material and the style used to express them. Anthony Catania and John Busuttill Leaver are both inspired by literature but they have distinct works.

Anthony Catania, who started his art training in the mid-eighties, is mostly known for his drawings and paintings of vast seas and mythological imagery. He is profoundly inspired by the great writers we find in Greek, Nordic and Egyptian mythology. On the other hand he also derives visual inspiration from artists like Van Gogh, Goya, Turner, Böcklin, Pollock, Monet, Rembrandt, and the 'Cave Artists' of Lascaux, Altamira and Soutine.

Dante Alighieri's works were always of great inspiration to many artists. Perhaps the most famous artists in art history who interpreted Dante's works are Sandro Botticelli, Eugène Delacroix, William Blake, Auguste Rodin and Salvador Dalí. Catania was also greatly inspired by Dante's famous *La Divina Commedia*.

In 2006, the artist worked on the theme of Dante's *Inferno* and also on Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. This resulted in an art show entitled *Selve Oscure*, held at Heritage Malta, and a year later the artist combined Greek mythology with Paleolithic Art in another exhibition at the Museum of Fine Art in Valletta, entitled, *The Cave of Centaurs*. In this exhibition, the theme of the paintings dealt with the centaur stemming from Greek mythology and the imagery evoked by the wonderful Lascaux cave.

Last September his personal exhibition held at Heritage Malta was dedicated to the popular tale, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*. The title for this art show was *The Piper's Requiem*, "a play of movement and tensions that in its rhythms mirrors that primary song of death that the Piper plays," to quote writer Marija Grech.

In this exhibition, amongst his fifty-six paintings, you can see an interesting work entitled *Bubonic Blues*. This oil painting, executed in florescent blue and black silhouette, illustrates the image of the eerie figure of the Pied Piper roving on a tiny pointed shaped boat on the surface of the sea through the misty atmosphere. This painting is also reminiscent of the famous painting *Isle of the Dead* by nineteenth century, Swiss-German painter, Arnold Böcklin. It is an allegory about life and death.

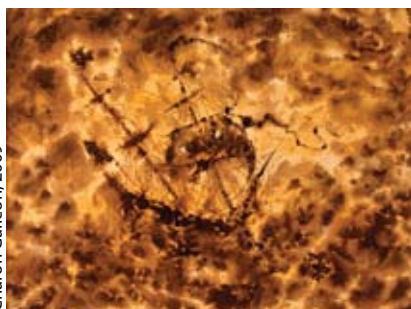
The Death of Acteon, 2005



Bubonic Blues, 2008



Charon Galleon, 2009



Wood of Silence, 1998

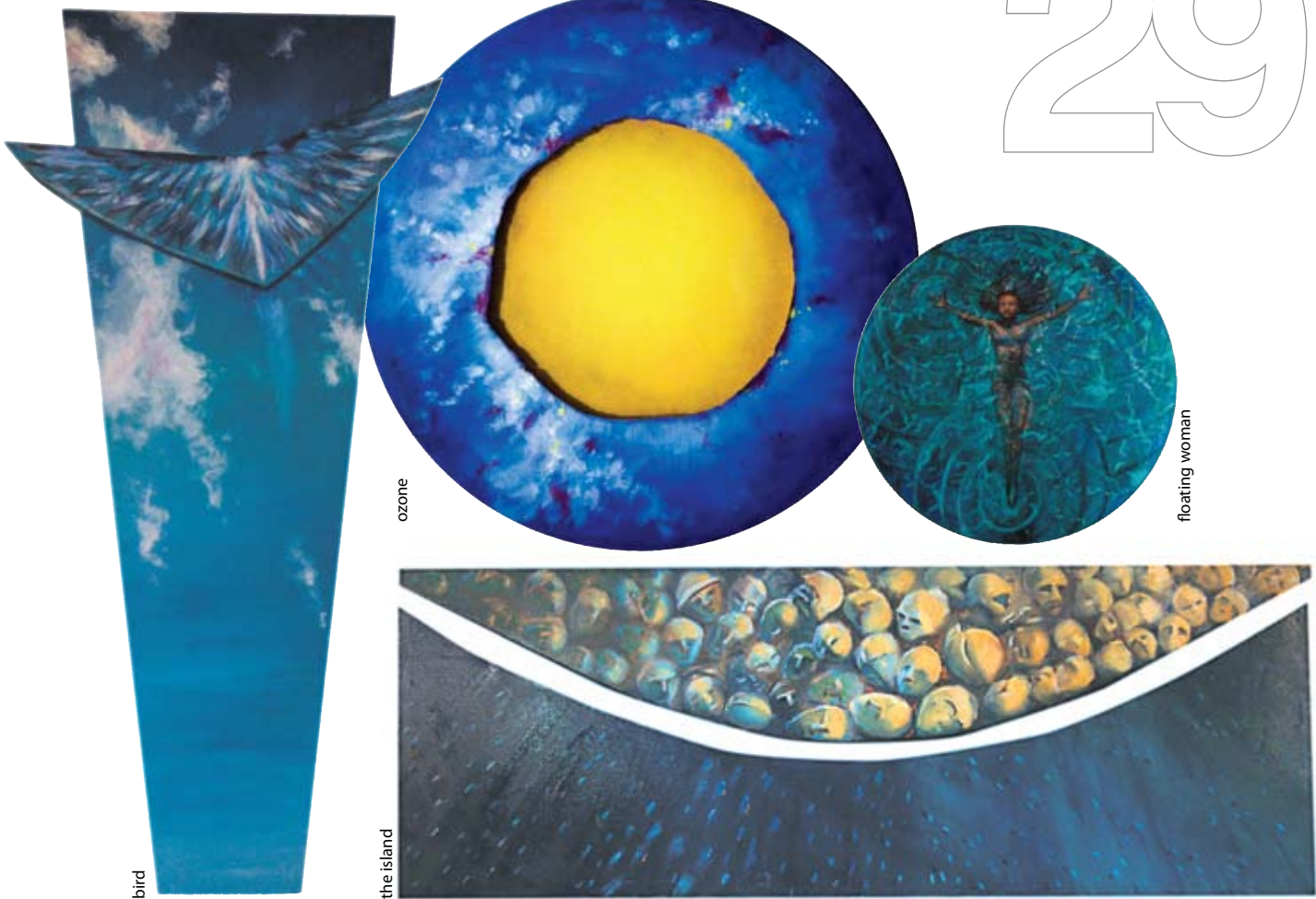


In Catania's latest solo art exhibition we see works inspired by S.T. Coleridge's poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The exhibition entitled *Spectre-Bark*, was held at the Malta Maritime Museum in Birgu in September 2009. The works executed in various media like pastel, ink, oil, water-colour and print, allowed us to catch a glimpse of the images of the abyss of the sea and the lost 'ghost' ships wandering through the stormy and quiet waters awaiting their destiny. In addition, the artist frequently includes dramatic winged creatures many times referring to the albatross which is symbolic of the ego, and the sea which represents the subconscious. Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* perfectly illustrates this concept. In his introductory essay to the exhibition, *Visions and Visitations of Disaster*, Professor Ivan Callus wrote; "It is as well to agree from the outset, therefore, that the works in 'Spectre-Bark', exhilarating though they are in the intensities of their inspiration and the assuredness of their technique, are not uplifting in terms of their theme or focus. What they depict is the penumbral space of hopelessness, where the prolongation of a sense of a disaster that is somehow both imminent but also recently visited upon those on whom it breaks is communicated, in a paradox that also carries great psychological realism, through a stilling of time." Catania deftly traces the psychologically complicated relationship between matter and spirit.

Anthony Catania was born in Valletta in 1969 and today he lives and works in the area of the Old Church of Birkirkara. In 1986, Catania began studying art techniques with well-known musician and artist Mro. Pawlu Grech. From 1999 till the present day he has pursued further the study of art with his mentor Dr Saviour Catania.

John Busuttill Leaver, a well-established artist, started his art career at a very young age. He attended the Government School of Art from 1979-81 and his tutors were Harry Alden and Joseph Mallia. In 1985, he successfully concluded a three-year course for a Certificate in Graphic Design at the Art and Design Centre in Valletta. Busuttill Leaver is a voracious reader and gets his inspiration from books, culture and family.

His first personal art exhibition, entitled *Circles* was held at the Auberge de Provence in Valletta, Malta, in November 1988. In this series the artist based his compositions of the paintings on the 'circle' or what is commonly



known as the 'mandala', to achieve a permutation of patterns. The 'mandala' is a basic circular form, which can be found in nature and many other places such as plants, elements of matter, and also in the animal world and images created by man and his psyche. Busuttill Leaver's mandalas are mostly related to the environment and are also a symbol of the psyche. Recently he returned to this perfect geometric structure; and an interesting example of this work is his painting called *Ozone*, showing two perfect circles painted with vibrant celestial blue and yellow. During that period the artist was also inspired by the writings of Carl Gustav Jung. In his critique on this exhibition, art critic, Mr. Dominic Cutajar commented: "This hard won objectivity, liberated from any sort of reference, indicates a modern artist's zest for the emancipation of the creative act itself. Thus ultimately the artist remains justified by the lyrical purity and authenticity of his handiwork, becoming in the process an artist-creator."

An interesting book about art which in a way also influenced John Busuttill Leaver's works is, *Art as Experience* by John Dewey. The artist commented: "This book opened a whole new world to me by showing that an artist's daily life and interaction with his surroundings and people form the experience which is the pulp for creativity, going way beyond the realistic representation of reality." The work *Ozone*, stated Busuttill Leaver, "was one such direct experience where I was shocked by the increase of power of the sun when glancing up at it, compared to my younger days."

The painting called *Bird* was inspired by the book, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* by Richard Bach, which is a fable in novella form about a seagull learning about life and flight, and a homily about self-perfection. In this painting the artist depicts an image of a seagull with its opened wings flying across the deep blue sky and scattered clouds. This work is typical of Busuttill Leaver's unusual paintings done in a three-dimensional form using pieces of wooden panels overlapping each other. One could also describe them as painted sculptures. In fact his recent works evolved and changed dramatically. From painting on flat surfaces the artist explored other possibilities of painting beyond the frame and the two-dimensional. For the artist the frame is a symbol of restriction and limitation.

As mentioned earlier, some of Busuttill Leaver's paintings were inspired

by the great Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Gustav Jung, an influential thinker and the founder of analytical psychology. For Busuttill Leaver, Jung's famous book *The Spirit in Man, Art, & Literature*, was perhaps the most influential of all his books. The artist maintains: "This book is the closest I got to believing there is a God. At least it convinced me that we must have a spirit which is an entity apart but simultaneously joined to our mind." Through Jung's writing, the artist created one of the best works in his collection depicting a circular painting of a floating woman with arms wide open. This painting is titled *Spirit Floating*. Later, this painting evolved into a figurative sculpture retaining the same posture of the woman.

Busuttill Leaver is a visual realist and thematically he is still attached to what surrounds us; the environment and our heritage. An interesting painting which is considered very important in his repertoire is *The Island*. This work is an attempt to encompass the history of Malta into a representation of the "heads" who were the protagonists. These were painted to remind us of the farmer's typical rough stone walls. These heads painted on this canvas, represent our culture, our islands and the sea.

John Busuttill Leaver can be distinguished by his search for different, various forms of expression; and throughout the years he always worked consistently. In fact, from the end of October till mid-November of 2008, he held another important personal exhibition called *A Diary of Obsessions* at St. James Cavalier in Valletta, which was the latest part of his creative and artistic journey.

It seems that literature still plays a very important part in the works of many artists; especially in painting and sculpture. Literature and Art are non verbal expressions and there is a relationship between the emotions represented by the writer and the artist. These emotions are predominantly found in human beings and they continue to satisfy the impulse in all of us to search for the story and meaning in art.

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