

A Visionary Journey

Chris Zarb takes us through the inner realms of dreams and fantasy, discovering the strong powers of the 'anima' in his creativity.

After his first exhibition 'Sole Imagery' at tal-Markiz Mallia Tabone in Mosta, earlier this year, Chris Zarb has just presented his second exhibition of paintings entitled 'Contemplation', in the corridors of Heritage Malta. It is a visionary journey where the artist takes us along to see through the ordinary phenomenal world into a world full of revelations. In his work the artist explores the world of spirits and dreams and the world of the extremes. It is an invisible world. This exhibition is a continuation of another phase in his art which relied increasingly on his own inspiration and aspiration. In fact, many of Zarb's works show some characteristics of surrealist art; they all express a dream-like atmosphere where the mundane is nearly eliminated and the world of the 'underworld' dominates.

Zarb's work can be described as a mixture of real life emotions and fantasy dreams. Most of his figures in the paintings are female. At times these figures are nude. They are solitary figures, representing the 'anima'. Anima is the female archetype in men, derived from the Greek word for 'soul'. In Jungian parlance, the anima is usually understood as the unconscious feminine component in the male psyche. Zarb's female figures represent life with all its beauty and joy but also with all its sadness and uncertainties. Most of his figures seem caught between reality and fantasy, between what life has to offer and dreams. As the artist himself comments: 'the nakedness in my paintings symbolizes both

beauty and freedom. The wings represent our own aspirations, maybe to become gods, searching for something better or perfection, or simply to get away from our own destiny.'

In his work, *Nihility Mundane Soul*, the artist depicts a graceful nude woman as the 'anima'. She suggests beauty and elegance and is a messenger that brings new light. The male figure in this painting symbolizes the 'animus', which is the other part of the psyche, shown without a face, without any kind of identity. This figure is reminiscent of Giorgio DeChirico's faceless mannequin figures (1916) set in an ambiguous and contradictory stage-like space. The 'face' in this painting is the unconscious, gazing at us, observing and leering at us. She is our inner guide and sees things far beyond our conscious mind.

Another interesting work is named for the famous goddess *Gaia* who is supposed to be the goddess representing Mother Earth. This early Greek goddess was thought to be born out of the great void of the universe or chaos. Zarb's vision portrays the face of this goddess emerging from the vastness of creation. In the sombre foreground a solitary leafless tree on the edge of a cliff expresses the mysteries of grief and the bitterness of life. Is this the artist's concern of what is actually happening to Mother Earth? Or is it the result of the artist's experience of the unconscious and the way he followed its inspiration? Another work which refers to the sea-nymphs of Greek mythology is *Nereid*. This is an enigmatic, ethereal face of a female head revealing the transcendent

divine aspect. The blue monochromatic effect of its expression provides spiritual nourishment and seems to be outside the colourful realm of life.

A set of six paintings of female nudes expressed in the relatively hard-edged style, painted with black, blue and white overtones on a red background, seems to give way to a more succulently sensual and exuberantly relaxed brushwork and an interesting construction of compositions. Yet these female figures are repeated by the artist in an obsessive manner in different postures and situations. This confirms that the artist through his paintings is continually revealing the unconscious desire to bring into the threshold of consciousness, a magical understanding of the 'self'.

Why do most of the female figures created by Zarb have wings? The answer is that, historically, figures with wings like those of the butterfly or bird symbolize spirituality, imagination and thought. The Greeks portrayed love and victory as winged figures, and for Christians, wings symbolize the light of the sun of justice that illuminates the mind of the righteous. Wings also symbolize the 'soul' or 'psyche'. Winged figures are repeatedly portrayed in Zarb's works as in: *Immortal Companion*, *Icarus*, *Butterfly*, *An Angel in Darkness* and others.

Mythological figures and legends are other sources which inspired and influenced another aspect of Zarb's work. For example, one of the few male figures in his paintings in this exhibition is *Icarus*; a painting inspired by the famous ancient Greek myth of *Daedalus and Icarus*. Daedalus planned to escape with Icarus from the Labyrinth in Crete

by constructing wings and then fly to safety. In this painting we see *Icarus* in flight, freeing himself from this prison world. This beautiful male body represented by Zarb reminds us of the works of 18th century British visionary artist, William Blake. The dramatic potential of this composition is expressed through the use of bold contrasts of strong yellows and reds.

Above all I consider Chris Zarb as an ‘outsider’ artist, and as we know, ‘outsider art’ is uncontaminated by the academic world of art. Therefore it seems that no other artist had a direct influence on his work. Although surely visible is the admiration he has for the great masters who studied the human figure and the modern surreal and fantasy artists. It would be wrong to make comparisons and distinctions between artists coming from the academic world and those ‘outsiders’ who are today categorized in various groups (self-taught, visionary, folk, insane, etc.) Since 1992, ‘Outsider Art’ emerged successfully in many countries as an art marketing category. Unfortunately, in the past, the term was often misused. However, artists like Zarb definitely need recognition in our local art scene mostly because of ‘a strong sense of identity and distinctive creative tradition’.

Dr. Louis Laganà

Times of Malta:

file:///C:/Users/Mr.Lagana/Documents/weekender%20reviews/article.phpChrsi%20Zarb%2001.htm