

IN THE FIRING LINE

LOUIS LAGANÀ EXAMINES
THE WORK OF TWO ACTIVE
MALTESE CERAMISTS WHO ARE
CONSTANTLY EXPERIMENTING
WITH CLAY TO FIND NEW
POSSIBILITIES FOR FURTHER
CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Contemporary ceramics is a diverse discipline. We find ceramic sculptors, studio potters who produce domestic and industrial ware, architectural ceramists and ceramists who work with computer aided design.

Nowadays, the art of ceramics is becoming more popular in Malta and it seems that in visual art practice, artists are using ceramic materials in new, unexpected ways and in different contexts. Two artists who continuously experiment with clay and exhibit their work in personal and collective exhibitions in Malta and abroad, are Sina Farrugia Micallef and Charles Sammut.

Sina Farrugia Micallef, a ceramist and educator, has worked for many years on different themes related to Neolithic culture. Her artwork evokes great spirituality. The symbols of life and death regularly emerge in her artwork, her ceramics. As a potter, Farrugia Micallef kept the ancestral tradition of making pots and vessels. She is fascinated not only by the shape of vessels but also by their symbolical aspect. Vessels or pots are not just functional containers but also symbolically represent the human being. The artist is able to conceive objects which exploit the plurality of meaning of the word 'vessel': her creations look both receptacles and long, carved boats or ships.



The firing process of clay is a very fascinating phase for the artist even when sometimes a breakage occurs during the firing and thus the result would be different than expected. For Farrugia Micallef the challenge of the firing process is also an incentive to work. The various firing techniques like raku, pit, wood, electric, gas, diesel oil and smoking of ware, which she mastered throughout the years, all encourage her to produce more work which is excellent in standard and visually spectacular. For example in her collection of porcelain vases like 'Mediterranea', the artist successfully created pictorial effects showing sgraffito drawings in a light glaze over a dark one.

Farrugia Micallef also derives her inspiration

THIS PAGE: CHARLES SAMMUT



THIS PAGE: SINA FARRUGIA MICALLEF



from nature. She is mostly inspired by clouds, birds, marine creatures and the deer. These images have a symbolical connection. The artist is enthralled by the use of primal imagery that is transformed into impressive works of art. During these past few years she has worked on a good number of ceramic sculptures, vases and wall plaques and had the opportunity to work with other ceramists from Malta and from other countries. Her work is becoming more expressive and she finds that spontaneous work gives her greater satisfaction.

Charles Sammut is well known for his monumental sculpture in different mediums especially ceramics and metal. His earlier work in ceramics is considered as part of his experimental phase with form, texture and glazes. His fruitful experience at the Jaust-Hus School of Art in Denmark in the late eighties and early nineties enabled him to learn and master the techniques of pottery making including wheel throwing and hand-building, decorating and firing, glaze formulation and other important skills to be able to create any kind of ceramic ware or sculpture. Like Sina Farrugia, Sammut exhibited widely in many countries and during a stay in Australia some years ago, he was invited as a guest to teach pottery at Trinity Regional College in Melbourne.

Birds, fish and other animal species also give an important impetus to Sammut's creativity, for he has a passion for plant and animal life and a dedicated

commitment to conservation issues. In fact he works as an aquaculture officer at the Malta Centre for Fisheries Sciences, taking care of turtles and sick animals while rehabilitating them back to their habitat, the sea.

Today Sammut lives at the Sculptor's Lodge, formerly a pottery house and studio, which is found at the edge of Buskett in the limits of Rabat. His studio is well-equipped with kilns, pottery wheels and all that is needed to produce ceramics. Sometimes the artist's structures in clay are designed to be installed in situ, outdoors or in enclosed public places. One can say that such work will become what is termed as environmental ceramic sculpture. The artist sees that ceramic materials need not be limited to a domestic scale but also for work on a large scale which could enhance and embellish architectural settings. Sammut is currently experimenting with paperclay and mostly oilfires his sculptures in a double chamber down draft kiln. Recently he was also one of the organisers of two joint collective exhibitions of ceramics by Maltese and Cypriot artists.

These two ceramists have used clay as a base for very different styles and techniques in their work. This shows that with a modern ceramic technological experience, plus their own research and ingenuity, they will continue to explore and expand their technical and artistic endeavor. ■

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