

INTERPRETING THE MALTESE PREHISTORIC GODDESS

Louis Laganà LOOKS CLOSELY AT THE WORK OF JENI CARUANA AND RAPHAEL LABRO, TWO ARTISTS WHO ARE CONTINUOUSLY INSPIRED BY MALTESE PREHISTORIC ART



Despite its size, Malta is extremely rich in its prehistoric archaeological heritage. During the course of their careers local as well as foreign artists were and continue to be fascinated and influenced by prehistoric art. The well-preserved state and beauty of the Maltese Temples and their artifacts still stimulate the imagination of artists to create works of art that show not only their personal reflections, but also their 'collective' psychic qualities.

In their work, a number of contemporary artists interpret prehistoric symbolism, particularly the image of Maltese Prehistoric Goddesses. Two foreign artists, Jeni Caruana and Raphael Labro, made Malta their home and are particularly enthusiastic about working on themes inspired by the Maltese Prehistoric Goddess. Their work is not just a topographical interpretation of the famous statuettes found in prehistoric temples. Rather, the artists employ pictorial means to effect a transforming connection with the emotional or spiritual urge within the self.

Jeni Caruana has been living in Malta since 1978. Over the years, apart from working on landscapes and figures she developed an interest in the Maltese prehistoric heritage. Caruana held personal exhibitions and participated in many collective exhibitions dedicated to the prehistoric theme. Recently she has been working on an interesting project, showing for the first time a large installation dedicated to the underground sanctuary, 'The Hypogeum and the Goddess'. It consists of a collection of paintings which is a further exploration of the theme 'Remembering Mother Earth', an exhibition held at the Museum of Archaeology in Malta in September 2003. In the construction of this installation, on show later this year at the crypt of the Auberge D'Italie, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Valletta, one may see an inner apse featuring an acrylic painting of the Oracle: Mother Earth in contemplation. This is complemented with paintings of sleeping women and male figures. The artist noticed that the Temples' outer walls are constructed with upright 'male' stones between horizontal 'female' stones, and therefore, symbolically, the arrangement of the paintings is done with alternating male and female images: the upright canvasses are male nudes and the horizontal ones female nudes decorated with architecture and spirals. This is the culmination of bringing together the male and female which symbolises the spark of all creation.

(ABOVE) ORACLE: MOTHER EARTH IN CONTEMPLATION
Jeni Caruana, artist, born in Hillingdon, Middlesex. Studied art at Hull and Harrow Colleges of Art. Moved to Malta in the late 70's and has become a well-known figure on the local art scene, holding regular exhibitions of her work and teaching drawing and watercolour



**(ABOVE, RIGHT)
AWAKENING OF
MOTHER EARTH**

Raphael Labro, professional photographer and artist, born in the South of France in 1956. Studied art at the School of Art in Nice. Worked for Paloma Picasso, Roger Planchon, Patrice Chéreau and collaborated with Kenzo and Jean-Paul Gaultier

Raphael Labro, a professional French photographer, shows his goddesses as strange creatures often depicted in a bulbous form with orange-brown hues and fluorescent green faces. Labro focuses mostly on the image of the goddess as a metaphor of life and uses universal symbols with a deep concern for our planet Earth. He exhibited for the first time at the Sinclair Stevenson Gallery in Gozo in August 2007 with the theme 'Rebirth', and nowadays is working on various projects and exhibiting in other countries including Dubai, Paris and Hong Kong. In his last exhibition, 'Awakening' held in November 2007 at the Mediterranean Conference Centre in Valletta, the artist highlights the importance of the changes happening around us. Labro argues that the 'Goddess' or as he calls her 'Tellus', an alternative name for Mother Earth, is awakening after 25,000 years dormant. It is now the time "to think logically about how to ensure the next generation will survive and to reforest the land in order to encourage the water cycle". Labro's works reveal the voices of ancient cultures and evoke a symbolic reflection of the inner depths of the self and the outer expanses of life and space.

Jeni Caruana and Raphael Labro seek to live spirituality that includes a concern for the earth and the human being, as well as their own personal fulfillment in life. We can understand that these artists have a primitivistic quest for the 'spiritual' because they desire to revive the forgotten feeling for the 'sacred'. These artists want to reclaim the archaic, pure state of 'mystical consciousness.'

"Primitivism became a medium of soul-searching and self-transformation especially for people who feel ill at ease or constrained in the West." This is an implicit reference to the 'Oceanic' state of consciousness; the experience of coming out of the self, having a sense of mystical awareness. In fact in Jungian thinking, "the 'Oceanic'- can be accented as a positive symbol of rebirth." There is a quest for change and a sense of new beginning. It is the sense of discontent with Western civilization which is found in many aspects of life. Artists express all this in their work. ■

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