

The 'Lines' of Life

Jeni Caruana takes us along her creative journey through her exploration of 'lines' in the studies of nudes, dancers, Maltese landscapes, flowers, moon paintings and her recent abstracts.

Jeni Caruana is currently showing her latest paintings at a personal exhibition at the Ministry for Tourism and Culture, Auberge D'Italie, in Merchant Street Valletta. The exhibition, entitled 'Lifeline', was inaugurated on Friday 29 September and will remain open until 28 October 2006.

In the Maltese artistic scene, Caruana is well known as a main exponent for her remarkable watercolour studies of landscapes, figures and themes inspired by nature. Her imaginative and tasteful works have highly decorative and complicated compositions of sceneries, almost alive with refined brush strokes, taken from the Maltese environs, trees and grass. The effect of clouds in the sky is solid proof of her strong artistic talent and colourfulness. Also, for a very long time she worked and exhibited her works in personal and collective art shows related to Prehistoric Malta.

In recent years her work has evolved considerably. Ms. Caruana acknowledges the importance of the techniques of good drawing for any artist and indispensable for an artistic formation in art education. From an early age she had academic training in art and acquired all the necessary skills to create any representation of objects and figures with meticulous attention to detail and superb draftsmanship. In her works, lines move from gesture to an outline of a contour of a figure, a landscape or simply an everyday object. Ms. Caruana argues that the skills of drawing start from a simple drawing of a 'line'.

The human body has always been of central importance for Caruana's development of her artistic maturity. She produced a variety of nude studies in different mediums, which enabled her to achieve intriguing opportunities for expression. We see for example that the study of the human body also emerges spontaneously in the series of jazz paintings produced every year at the Malta Jazz Festivals held in Valletta. Since 1995

Ms. Caruana painted live jazz musicians performing on stage and managed to capture the movement and the improvisational elements, and the beauty of sound transformed into colour. Other recent works exhibited at the Auberge D'Italie, which also suggest the movement of the figure, are her famous flamenco dancers. With just a few colourful, vibrant strokes of lines in pastel on black paper, the artist managed to express the echo of the motion of the figures and a sense of intimacy and drama of the dancers.

In this exhibition Ms. Caruana has introduced a series of paintings called the 'moon paintings'. The artist uses titles of names given to zodiac signs, which also inspired her to depict the different moods of this 'metaphysical' scene. Perhaps the most interesting example in this collection is *I Burn for You*, a colourful monochromatic and dramatic scene. I think that this section shows a very important phase in her artistic career because the artist moved away from the accurate depiction of images to a more emotive expression of 'lines'. In these paintings the artist captures the mythology of this great symbol, the moon, which underlines the dominating power of the feminine. Since archaic times, the moon has always been considered as a source of wonder and profound impression. It is not just the spectacle of the night sky, which stimulated the minds of artists but also its relation to the calendar and menstrual cycles, which influenced the physical actuality structuring of human life. In these paintings Ms. Caruana takes us along a mythic dream, re-enacting the primal scene to satisfy our quench for the existential meaningfulness of life.

Abstracts like *Love is the Seventh Wave*, *Desire* and *Molten* are of a more recent attempt of the artist to rely more on her emotive powers rather than to represent a specific object or a figure. In the abstract pieces of this section, most of them executed in watercolour, we notice that paint is not used in the usual manner but becomes thicker and more lines flow to create a surface texture. Although one may classify them as non-representational, they are 'non-objective mindscapes' that contain elements on the border of the representational and the abstraction.

An outstanding work in this collection is *Vortex Ggantija*. Ms. Caruana synthesizes the imagery of the prehistoric temples of Ggantija in Gozo and the surrounding natural rocks into a poetic narrative of ancient life. In the past Ms. Caruana worked on

a considerable number of paintings inspired by Malta's Prehistoric heritage. The artist does not show only the topographical images of the temple structures but connects her later work with 'spirituality'. She connects her personal history and psyche with an unconscious identity of the temples. In fact the artist's work started to change primarily because she wanted to express her inner feelings, and therefore she moved away from the empirical objective world to the abstract, to the world of the unconscious. The symbolic images emanating from the unconscious of the artist have also this spiritual connection. Ms. Caruana feels that the temples evoke in her a kind of 'spiritual' appeal. It is a primordial instinct, a state of intimate participation with nature, exactly what Lucien Lévy-Bruhl termed 'participation mystique'. For the artist the 'stones' of the temples suggest immortality and mystical power. It is precisely this great lure for 'primitive' animism that the artist is immersed into.

Definitely, Jeni Caruana is today celebrating not only her relationship with the natural world as an artist but also the successful evolution of her art career.

Louis Laganà

Times of Malta:

file:///C:/Users/Mr.Lagana/Documents/publications/weekender%20reviews/article.php%20Jeni%20Caruana%20Lines%20of%20Life%202007.htm