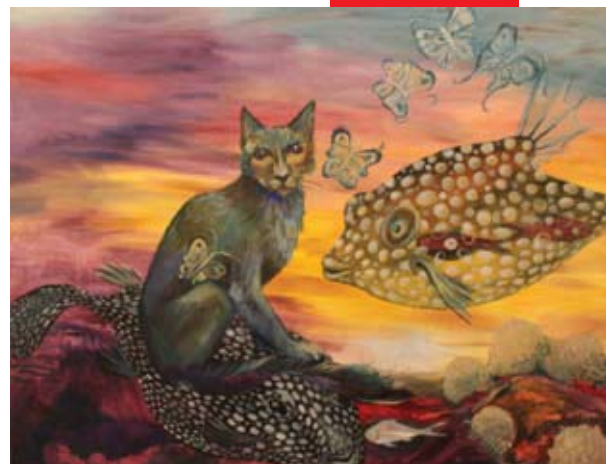


TO DIVE FOR

THE BEAUTY OF
UNDERWATER FLORA
AND FAUNA AROUND
THE MALTESE ISLANDS
FASCINATE ARTISTS
SO MUCH THAT
THEY SOMETIMES
CREATE FANTASTIC
IMAGES. *Louis Laganà*
HIGHLIGHTS THE WORKS
OF TWO ARTISTS WHO
CONTINUOUSLY EXPLORE
UNDERSEA OBJECTS



A young artist who made Malta her home since 2005 is Anastasia Ponyatovskaya. Born in 1979 in Kishinev, in the Republic of Moldova, Ponyatovskaya's artistic education started at the Lucaium Ioganson attached to the Russian Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg, Russia and for five years she also attended the Academy of Arts in the Republic of Moldova. Ponyatovskaya became widely known for her unique style in painting and her vivid imagination.

Ponyatovskaya finds that Malta is full of legendary and beautiful places which are very inspiring for her creations. She presents new original art works in a postmodernist fantasy style. In her art she tries to rethink heritage and old traditions which bring new inspiration in her work.

Malta and the sea became her favourite subject for her artistic creations and in some of her paintings we find themes like the Nymphs of Comino, phantasmagoric creatures like unicorns, sirens, mermaids, and flying ships which are imagined to have inhabited on spellbound islands.

Underwater imagery is a subject which Ponyatovskaya thoroughly explored. Most of her fish motifs appear primarily in her works with a surrealist bent. In fact in some of her recent paintings we find the repeated image of a fish with a superimposed symbol of a cat. These images of fish are carefully balanced with whimsical patterns of colour in contrast with the watery translucent depths of the seabed. They are pictorial narratives that leave the viewer to contemplate on these images and the meaning behind them.

Perhaps fish have a particular meaning for Ponyatovskaya. I believe that they represent beauty and a reflection of the self. We know that the fish symbol has its roots in pagan fertility rites and sexuality. Before Christianity, the fish symbol was considered as the Great Mother. We see fish iconography in many cultures and in different epochs - these have been mostly linked to fertility, birth, femininity and sexuality. They are also considered as the female natural force and as a generative and reproductive spirit in mythology. The artist succeeded in painting a creative and meaningful symbol that also celebrates the inner and outer aspect of beauty.

In another work related to underwater imagery entitled *Fantasy*, Ponyatovskaya depicted various marine creatures, including a mythical figure fully decorated with shells, fish and other ornamental objects and a cat. Strangely enough the image of a cat is frequently included in many of her compositions. Symbolically the cat represents agility, magic and mystery. It is also associated with courage and confidence. In other paintings we find cities and towns submerged in the sea, with shoals of fish moving around the buildings.

A veteran Maltese artist who is perhaps one of the few who has profoundly explored aquatic imagery and marine creatures is Charles Cassar. His love for the sea came naturally when he was a young boy and his father, who worked in the merchant Navy, used to take him for trips to other foreign countries. Cassar's art is all about painting nature's textures reflected in powerful representations of changing moods.

In Cassar's repertoire we find a range of aquatic images like fish, the seahorse, octopus, sea urchins and sea-shells. These images are represented with vibrant colours and rendered on canvas in superlative realist illusionism. In the patterning and colouring of these images we see the skillful crafting of a language of his art which developed and became coherent and cohesive. Cassar displays an approach to life that is fanciful and more often mystical. An interesting example is a painting of a female nude in a seated, relaxed pose immersed underwater alongside a protuberant head and suction cups of the waving tentacles of a large octopus with gazing eyes.

The symbol of the seashell is a recurring image in Cassar's paintings and is found in many of his paintings. We know that the seashell is a symbol which has always been and is still found in various cultures. It appeared in Roman depictions of Nereid and sea-goddesses, and, like water, represented fertility. The seashell has a religious content and also an ancestral mystical tradition. In ancient Mexican philosophy the seashell is a symbol of birth, generation and origins that is of life itself. Seashells have a long history and have been used by humans in food, trade, religion, fashion, jewelry, art, agriculture and crafts. Because of their pleasing geometric shape, seashells became common decorative motifs and so we find them in many works of art. I believe that for Cassar, like other objects found in nature the symbol of the seashell represents time.

From time to time Cassar returns to the theme of underwater life. In his latest experiments with different mediums, the artist produced heavy reliefs of rich textures which give his paintings an added dimension that almost seem to enable the art to leap from the canvas. This latest phase of the artist's work is unique and original and in some instances the abstract forms of underwater views of the ocean, expressed with calming blues and greens and a penetrating light, create a peaceful image.

Charles Cassar is the next artist who will be hosted by the Bank of Valletta to hold his retrospective exhibition at the Gallery of Bank of Valletta in Santa Venera in Malta in the first quarter of 2009. ■



Dr Laganà is a reader in Modern and Contemporary Art History, specialising in Jungian Aesthetics, Primitivism and other aspects of art criticism and theory. He lectures at the Junior College and the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta.