

Landscapes of Identity and Emotion

With a singular style in painting Isabelle Borg captures the essence of the Maltese landscape and personal emotions

At the premises of Din l-Art Helwa, in Melita Street, Valletta, Maltese artist, Isabelle Borg is showing a series of Maltese landscape paintings in oil. Ms. Borg is a well-established name in the local art scene and her work covers a range of expressions from abstraction to portraiture. In this exhibition she is showing another important facet of her commitment as an artist, which is to strike a balance between emotion and observation expressed in the beauty of the unique landscapes of Malta.

One of the locations that Ms. Borg frequently chooses to paint is the southwestern area of the islands especially the limits of Zurrieq. It is an area which includes most of the characteristics of the Maltese landscape: dramatic cliffs plunging into the sea, rocky hills, terraced fields and lush valleys, the mysterious prehistoric sites, ancient farmhouses, cave chapels and the rustic architecture of the peasants' houses of the surrounding areas. Works like the *Arch-Ras il-Hamrija*, *Towards Ghar Lapsi*, *Filfla No.3*, and *From Wied Fulija*, demonstrate not just the beauty of the aesthetic qualities of a unique environment but also the artist's effort to capture the mood and spirit of the place. It is typical of Isabelle Borg to handle colour by using bold gestures to redefine the landscape. She has given the Maltese landscape concepts of a new dimension. Her studies of dramatic skies and light-drenched landscapes allow her to create one major strategy, that of shaping a double identity: that of the self as an artist and that of framing a sense of place. She immortalises the concept of a landscape and thus the place becomes a metaphor and then a myth. British writer, Simon Schama argues in his monumental book, *Landscape and Memory* (1995), that 'Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock.'

An interesting work, which is the largest canvas in this art show, is the popular view of the Grand Harbour as seen from Barrakka gardens. It is called '*Sky Overhanging Grand Harbour*'. Ms. Borg focuses more on the movement of the sea and the sky.

The structures of the fortifications are solid and the use of paint applied with thick, wavy strokes show the dynamics of unstructured forms, such as clouds and seascape. The composition is dominated by the strong, red, turbulent sea, which suggests an atmosphere of agitation and uneasiness. This painting is not simply an illustration of this 'historical scene' but captures also the emotions and changing moods of the artist.

In *Old Quarry at Nigret*, Isabelle Borg uses abstracted spaces to form her composition. The simplification of form is enlivened with texture and colour to produce a landscape, which clearly allows recognition of a place. Although the artist uses unrealistic colour, the atmospheric effect is always present. This is one of her best examples of abstracted realism. A horizon line is positioned at the top to separate the sky and the land and analogous blends of ochre and browns are used to define the morphological rocks. Earth and sky are painted by broad, vague areas of colour and varying intensities of lights and darks.

Lyrical abstract landscapes and the meticulous study of the construction of spaces, situate her work between reality and spectacle. At times, one cannot make a distinction between landscape and abstraction. The infinite expanse of Ms. Borg's landscapes surrounds the view and gives a feeling of relating a story, impregnated with metaphors that connote a theatrical universe at the extremes of time and space. The strong, vibrant, red rocks and skies, which these landscapes constitute, transport the viewers into another dimension.

I find also that the primitivistic appeal is another important element in Ms. Borg's work. If we look carefully at some of her landscapes we discover that the rocks and the rural areas found in her studies are depicted in such a way as to overwhelm and surprise the viewers with their dramatic features. Her intense palette, which is dominated by bright reds and blues and a limited selection of colours gives her work 'rectness and immediacy'. They are not works to be analysed at length but rather contemplated to be grasped. With her great aesthetic education, Ms. Borg succeeds to eliminate the unnecessary and produce one single effect of what she wants to convey.

When she paints she makes intuitive and spontaneous decisions. Like many other artists who put the 'spiritual essence' of the place or the figure in their painting before

anything else, Ms. Borg demonstrates this in most of her works. She considers herself a vehicle for the expression of nature's spiritual presence. She maintains: 'The theme which runs through my work, not so much as subject matter but in spirit, is the essence of the primitive, an element which refers to my early fascination with Maltese Prehistoric art.' One of her first references to Prehistoric Malta, is her '*Lovers in the Bull*', which dates way back to 1984. Above all Isabelle Borg is a contemporary primitivist artist. Her modern search for the 'primitive' is not only sought in themes related to Prehistory but is also achieved in common objects that surround us in our daily life.

Today, Isabelle Borg is offering important insights into the psychosocial dynamics of the contemporary art scene. Her work will remain as a timeless icon in Maltese art.

Louis Laganà

The exhibition will remain open until the 26 May 2006.

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