

Love of nature and the ‘primitive’

The beauty of the sea and the land of the islands of Malta and Gozo always fascinated Maltese and foreign artists. Malta is not only known for its exotic beauty but also for the richness of its cultural heritage. The archaeological monuments that survived attracted interest from some artists at a very early date. Today, it seems that prehistoric imagery is becoming a major influence on the art of some local artists. These artists are inspired and produce images of Maltese prehistoric temple sites and motifs because of the qualities they find so appealing in ancient art. Artists find primeval art to be closer to nature. They want to return to ‘nature’; therefore they use the temples as metaphors for their enquiry of the relationship between humans and the natural world. It is a primitivistic appeal to nature, thus artists explore the primal conditions of humankind. It is a ‘transformation of and communication through matter – the primitive connection with the substance of life, or *prima materia*.’ This is the fundamental realm of all artists.

Julie Apap, a ceramist and Ebba von Fersen Balzan, a painter, are holding a joint exhibition with the title ‘Creation’ at the Gallery G in Lija, until the end of May 2006. The central significance of this exhibition is the great awareness of nature and its energy. In the past years both artists had the opportunity to work together inside the Maltese temples and exhibit their work together with other artists.

Julie Apap is impressed by the texture of the weathered limestone and rocks, the deep blue sea and bright light of the sunshine, and inspired by the Neolithic temples. Her pottery is mostly done on the wheel, mainly stoneware. She feels that her terra cotta

or ceramic vessels become ritualistic artefacts. They have a sculptural effect manifesting a variety of primordial symbols, like the meander, the spiral, labyrinthal patterns, brush signs, rectangles, concentric rectangles, rhombi, converging triangles, chevrons, tri-lines, zig-zags, wavy lines and other geometric motifs. Each work relates its own story. There is a sense of energy in Apap's work, the same energy that certain people claim to feel inside the temples. Like the other artists who worked in the temples and felt this 'energy', Apap felt the same aura. 'When I go there, I feel a sense of peace, a sense of belonging, if you like. I can transport myself back into time and try to become one with the ancient people,' she remarked in her interview with me. Speaking about her symbolism in her pottery the artist affirmed that this 'energy' is found especially in the spiral. The spiral is an ancient symbol, which has a wide range of meanings. The images of spirals in ancient art hold complex messages, which still attract scholars to try to discover their meanings.

The primitivistic appeal that we find in Julie Apap's work is first and foremost found in the direct formal borrowing from prehistoric motifs and symbols. But another important aspect of her primitivistic approach is the way she looks back to the past. The artist feels a real kinship with the ancient ancestors of the temples. When the artist speak about the kind of 'energy', which is felt inside the temples, this 'energy' is now transformed into material 'energy' in her work. This is of course expressed in a variety of ancient motifs found in most of her pottery. Some examples of the spiral and circular motifs as well as other primordial markings that evoke a kind of energy are shown in her works: 'I am listening', 'The magic remains', 'Comfort Zone', and 'The Incredible Journey'. These ceramic works are elegantly designed and the artist

made emphasis also on the glazes of her sculpture. Recently, Ms. Apap also introduced a new technique in her work, known as ash glazing.

In another work called 'the awakening' the artist uses motifs with light and dark hues of glazes. It shows the central image of the sleeping lady found at the underground oracular temple of the Hypogeum. The image of this statuette was given many interpretations by writers and artists and the most common is that of dream incubation. In this work, Ms. Apap transforms energy into movement with highly personal symbolical motifs. The shape of the oracle chamber is clear and other archetypal symbols on this plaque suggest a variety of meanings. They could symbolize shelter, protection, nourishment and even fertility.

Today artists express themselves in many different modes, styles and materials to show their creative power. Ebba von Fersen Balzan worked on many themes related to Prehistoric Malta. Lately, she has been experimenting with prints made from linocuts and printed on rice paper. She also makes collages, built up with layer after layer of paper and other material producing a 'fossil' effect. For example in her work called 'lady from the sea', the artist represents a composition of a female figure decorated with fossilized leaves and fish which give the impression of an archaic icon which is also another reminder of the prehistoric culture. In this art show, Ms. Von Fersen Balzan has other works which include the female nude and composed of vegetation and floral motifs. The artist is trying here to show us women's identification with nature through her symbolical imagery, which is an essential element in primitivism. It is also a kind of 'animistic sensibility', which is an attempt to return to a 'primitive' way of seeing nature. Artists like Ebba von Fersen Balzan,

seek to experience and express the essential forms of nature in a simple and spontaneous manner.

In 'transformation' the artist merges the spiral motifs with the architectural forms of Maltese buildings and landscape. The reddish brown colours of the stonework are bold and strong, and the shapes of the spirals float as if captured by light. A sense of mystical atmosphere could be felt. Neolithic symbols of the spirals create forms and textures that are ever-present in the natural world around us, but most often go unnoticed in the fast world in which we are living. Re-creating ancient symbols bring back the lost feeling that humans had in relation to nature. Ebba von Fersen Balzan has a commitment as an artist to bring the lost ancient culture alive and to develop a visionary approach to nature through her work.

The Maltese temples seem to remain an important source of inspiration to Julie Apap and Ebba von Fersen Balzan. Because Neolithic temples are considered as sacred places and the decoration inside them provide contemporary artists with inspiration, artists also connect them spiritually with the earth, using it as a foundation for their creativity.

Louis Laganà