

# LANDSCAPE MEMORY



MIZEN HEAD



MINI AND IRISH ELSIE AT FERRIES

*Louis Laganà*  
 REPORTS ON THE  
 LATEST WORKS OF  
 ISABELLE BORG AND  
 RICHARD SALIBA,  
 WHO IN DIFFERENT,  
 VERSATILE WAYS  
 EXPLORE THE  
 LANDSCAPE



GRAND HARBOUR FROM GIROLAMO



SANTA VENERA RISING SMOKE

**F**ranz Kafka once stated that: "The landscape disturbs me in my thinking. It is beautiful, and therefore demands attention." This statement explains how the landscape is important not just for artists but also for anyone who loves nature. People perceive nature differently and therefore the landscape itself becomes a question of subjectivity.

Throughout the ages, artists have sought to create landscapes for many reasons. Some artists explored landscapes as a result of the aesthetic sensibilities towards nature and created topographical features of the land and the sea. Others used the landscape to send political, symbolical or metaphysical messages. The landscape also served as a place of repose and reflection for the artist.

In Malta, two contemporary artists who are considered as two leading landscape painters are Isabelle Borg and Richard Saliba. Their styles are distinct and both artists have a significant approach in the way they create landscapes.

During these last few years, **ISABELLE BORG**, an artist and educator, produced a series of works related to the Maltese and Irish landscape. The artist works directly from observation and uses "colour as an aid to memory and atmosphere, and gesture as a way of modelling the natural movement of the land."

Isabelle Borg is a neo-expressionist. Her landscapes show traces of the primitivistic traits of the works by two great proponents of the expressionist movement, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Emil Nolde. In her latest personal exhibition entitled 'Strange Cargo' held at the Loggia of

the Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta last January, Borg presented large canvases of landscapes taken from the repertoire she executed recently in Malta and Ireland. A strong and an emotional interesting example of the Irish landscape is *Mizen Head*, expressed with pulsating colours. The artist used orange and purple-blue tints and shades with bold dark contours which shape up this moving atmosphere. The edges of the hills activate the sky, and the swirling clouds seem to burst into rain. Yet the bright light of the sun coming from the centre of the cliffs illuminates the whole scene and produces a spectacular sight.

It is not unusual that the artist includes some strange object or situation in her landscape paintings. *Mini and Irish Elsie at Ferries* is another work which gives us an interesting facet of the Irish panorama. Borg depicted a motor vehicle and a motorcycle in a powerful setting of the Irish landscape. By using dynamic colours, Borg invokes nature and the raw energy of the surrounding, constantly changing channels between the land and the sea.

Isabelle Borg painted the Grand Harbour many times. Perhaps, this is because she lives in Floriana and the architecture of the surrounding buildings and bastions evoke in her a kind of visual hunger that drives her to explore the potential beauty of these Maltese structures. There is also the question of identity which the artist is possibly unconscious of. We know that places clearly support our identity and play a potentially important part in the symbolic and physical dimension of our identifications. It is not spaces which ground identifications but 'places'.

Borg's landscapes are the loci of strange meetings between observers and their environment and of strange journeys into hidden and



MDINA FIELDS I



MTAHLEB



FAWWARA VII



SALINI III

unknown places. For the artist, the landscape is like a person with whom she converses and meets her desires by yielding up its memories to her. There is a spiritual dialogue going on and with her shamanic skill she reveals illusive and vital things which cannot be explained by words. The artist pries with vigorous brush-strokes in an attempt to delve beneath the surface into the light and spirit of the place. Whether it is figurative, landscape or abstract, Borg's art reflects her personal experiences, making them authentic expressions of contemporary art.

**RICHARD SALIBA** is also a well known landscape painter and his love for the local environment makes him passionate to explore the Maltese landscape. He is also on a constant search to find expression in abstraction, which many times is stimulated through the landscape. When one looks at Saliba's paintings, one becomes aware of the change from a flat surface into a three dimensional one. This is seen mostly in his study of various locations on the islands representing the distinct characteristics of non-urban scenes of land and coastlines in Malta. For example, in his work entitled Fawwara, the artist shows a tiny chapel in the middle of stripes of shades of green and orange hills standing eerily desolate against a dark blue sky and sea. He successfully captures the vast terraced spaces of the fields by molding colour into undulating shapes.

The Maltese countryside is perhaps his forte and Saliba is capable of working in different moods conveying also his feelings through colour. We can notice this in many of his paintings. For instance, in Mtahleb 2, the artist uses a palette of pastel-coloured pigments which shows the tranquil characteristic of the artist. In contrast to this, if we look at Salini 3 we notice

that the mauve grass and the hazy atmosphere of the sky seem to generate agitation and commotion. Is it because the artist was feeling disconcerted that such unique scenes of the Maltese countryside are vanishing? Surely we know that in recent years the artist painted particular places which are at risk of disappearing. In fact 'Vanishing Landscapes' was the title of his last exhibition held at the Auberge d'Italie in January 2009.

One of the best picturesque sites in Malta is the view of Mdina seen from the fields below the city. Many local and foreign artists have attempted to illustrate this unique scenery but very few successfully captured the real spirit of the place. Richard Saliba is one of the few artists who effectively created with a romantic tinge the condensed atmosphere of the Mdina skyline. He repeatedly painted the Silent City in many ways and fleeting visual impressions during sunrise, in blue, in red, with golden fields, marshy meadows and misty atmosphere. Saliba's primary motif of his artistic vision of our land is not just to be appreciated for its aesthetic beauty but to introduce to the viewers these emotionally powerful and iconic images as visual reminders of our identity as a nation.

Like Isabelle Borg, Richard Saliba feels that when painting a landscape or a seascape, there is an intimate connection with the place that develops and is forever imprinted upon his memory. ■

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