Reckoning the Forces

Thoughts on the exhibition by George Muscat entitled Forces
https://www.facebook.com/pages/George-Muscat/120990823497

You cannot help but learn more as you take the world into your hands. Take it up reverently, for it’s an old piece of clay, with millions of thumbprints on it.

John Updike

Choosing clay as the main medium for creative expression carries with it a serious responsibility. For clay is not only the very matter of one of the four elements of our abiding environment (earth), but also, in order for the practice to materialise, one is lured into a process which inevitably has to embrace the other three elements (fire, air and water). Hegel’s observation that, ”through the four elements we have the elevation of sensuous ideas into thought” perhaps could not be better experienced than in the process of creation of ceramic art.

With George Muscat, such sensuous ideas start with earth’s most primal element and most humble of materials,¹ and follow a myriad of pathways that take the artist into a landscape of varying possibilities and referencing a broad spectrum of concerns rooted in modern and contemporary culture. From the way the artist stretches, pinches, moulds and forms the clay to the way he intervenes during the colouring, firing and curing stages, the work pushes the boundaries of form and function, language and iconography, expanse and space. It is through such a wide variety of concerns that Muscat manages to avoid cursory notions of style, making his outcomes highly distinctive and idiosyncratic, well respected locally within the burgeoning ceramic art milieu.

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¹ “Clay has played a crucial role in the development of the culinary arts, international trade, the invention of writing, and the construction of towns and cities. After 30,000 years, clay continues to play a vital role in our everyday lives and the advancement of civilization. Its history is the history of the human race. What started as a tool for cooking and a vessel for storage is now essential to the space program, bio-technology, publishing, agriculture, plumbing, sanitation, and more.”

Like the richness of the work's visual qualities, Muscat's process of creation is complex and multi-faceted. The artist seems to undergo extremities and manages to incorporate dichotomies in his art. He embraces the conceivably therapeutic preparation and wedging of the clay, the precision of self-restrained execution on the throwing wheel while also violently applying sharp and deep incisions in the clay, overlaid with spontaneous splashes of vibrant colour. While also swaying from the highly figurative to the purely abstract, Muscat's work respects the traditional nature of the relationship between the clay, its firing and its glazing process, while making room for rich uncertainty in result through risk taking experimentation. The variety and sophistication in the language of the end result is also due to the artist's reverence for the complexity and mysteries of the process, and a respect for the rich millennia of its history.

Long years of experience in raku firing, together with wheel throwing techniques developed to perfection have not only given George Muscat a deserved reputation amongst his peers, but have also been fundamental in developing a more conceptual language, one that is clearly concerned with current social engagement and the human condition. His heightened interest in natural phenomena has also contributed in no small way to the body of work we experience in this exhibition, an oeuvre that has evolved from a long series of exuberantly envisioned vessels, plates, hanging and free-standing work which testify to the artist's sensitivity to the richness and complexity of the world's environment.

Central to most of the current work is the artist's concern for a re-interpretation of reality. Muscat extends his love for the environment, especially for marine life this time through transferring his painted fish motifs into bas-relief. He uses the centuries old casting tradition and casts from life the freshly caught fish bought straight from local fisherman. George Muscat suspends his subject matter back into an imaginary habitat, reconfiguring composition and colour which although directly reference nature, is not intended as a tableau vivant, but perhaps more of an imaginary environmental construct which spawns from a desire to revisit past experiences. One here notices the play between the method employed, that is the capturing, or better the *catching* of the form, and the subject of the work,
the *catch* of fish. The work is given a symbolic new life through the artist's control of *fire*, this time not for the benefit of the well-known, wholesome Mediterranean delicacy, but to *smoke* his unique artwork.

This re-interpretation of reality through such a direct method of capturing the exterior physicality of nature is also applied to another two very recent and important bodies of work which form part of this exhibition, namely *Face Book* and the *Body Series*. The former twins the essence of the social networking site and the method of face casting in a potentially ongoing and never-ending process of character replication.

The artist once again uses a centuries old process, that of face casting, which evolved in ancient Egypt as an aid to portrait sculptors, and creates individual pieces that dubiously cross over the boundary line of purpose between the face cast and the death mask, the latter of which evolved in the thirteenth century to aid sculptors of tomb effigies to create exact replicas of the deceased. The main difference between one and the other is the change made in the eyes of the mask to make it appear as though the subject were still alive. Muscat plays on a common practice of collecting death masks as mementoes of the departed in the last few centuries, and pairs it with the hugely popular *Facebook* networking site, where participants can create their *own* portrait and personality, which can potentially remain alive even after the real person is deceased. The work also makes use of a *wall* as communal showcase (or is it a resting place?) for the *friends* of the artist, who, in typical *Facebook* fashion has also decided to include his own effigy, albeit in a differently coloured finish. This work becomes interactive through the inclusion of a mirror which democratically occupies the same space as a participant’s portrait and acts as medium through which visitors can interact by donating their reflection to the piece.

This work offers many complex levels of engagement and reflection for the viewer. Contrary to the typical individuality of the participants’ pages on the social network, the work is regular and homogeneous, except for two very important factors – the artist’s portrait, with eyes open wide and the visitor’s mirror. These two peculiarities visually jump out of the otherwise homogenous
renditions of individuality through interpreting all portraits in the same style and visual finish, leaving the viewer to figure out both the identity and also the status of the participant, that is if the portrait acts as a face cast, with eyes open or a death mask, with eyes closed. Like the social network, all friends have conceded to be liked by the artist through having their face replicated.

Through the Body Series, Muscat extends his interest in casting from life to include the upper body of a number of female subjects. These torsos are presented by the artist as true portraits; insights into the personal stories of each sitter manifested through uniqueness in form, pattern and colour. Contrary to the anonymity of the life-cast sculptures by the late pop artist George Segal, Muscat imbues each piece with uniqueness and character. He hints at the peculiarities of each model through depicting their personal narratives on their own torso. Although the realistic nature of this series gives it a very strong presence, it does not subscribe to the naturalism of the work of artists such as Duane Hanson, Audrey Flack or Ron Mueck. On the contrary Muscat's torsos can better be considered in the idiom of classical polychromatic statuary. While the diverse finishes of the torsos remain within the ceramic tradition, this series moves away from ceramic art’s customary aesthetic to occupy a more sculptural, figurative expression. This move is highly noticeable in most of the artist's latest work, where even his former abstractions of his wall pieces seem to be influenced by figuration.

George Muscat's work communicates so fluently the wider picture, that of the highly experienced ceramist who relentlessly works within the medium in both abstract and figurative idioms, and on the conceptual and functional frameworks. His energetic and spontaneous character is reflected in a vast and diversified output; work that testifies to the true spirit of what W.H. Auden refers to as the human clay, the pure essence of both the bodily characteristics and the utilitarian objects we have been using since the dawn of man.

Vince Briffa