Introspection in retrospect

Charlene Vella reviews the BOV retrospective on Anthony Calleja, which was dedicated to Antoine Camilleri.

One of the most awaited yearly exhibitions is unquestionably the BOV retrospective exhibition that has been held almost every year since the very first in 1999. That was dedicated to Antoine Camilleri. The Maltese artist being commemorated in what was the 20th edition of the BOV retrospective exhibition was Calleja, in 2002, an artist whose journey saw him starting out as a sculptor, and who later discovered that he had a penchant for painting, of which he is today one of Malta’s leading exponents.

Calleja’s artistic journey saw him starting out as a sculptor, and who later discovered that he had a penchant for painting, of which he is today one of Malta’s leading exponents. Calleja is known by many as a teacher. He took up a teaching post at the Government School of Art alongside Vincent Apap, an environment that urged him to work on drawings and paintings. He also took up graphic design at the University of Malta's School of Craftsman at Targa Gap, among other teaching routes, with the moveable memorabilia being the evening classes he held in his Rabat studio for eight years, moulding the artistic formation of dozens of Maltese artists, giving them the opportunity to study the nude in a constructive environment. Calleja's early works as a painter were displayed in his first solo exhibition held in 1981 at the National Museum of Fine Arts. In 1982, he then followed an intense course of painting and drawing on scholarship in the Accademia dei Belli Arti Pietro Vannucci in Perugia. This is where he formally studied the human form, a subject that was to become synonymous with his artistic production. And in 2002, he obtained his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Designing from Palacky’s University in the Czech Republic.

This retrospective exhibition adequately commemorated an important milestone in the artist’s professional career that spans almost four decades, including rejections, life-changing events such as the loss of a child and a health condition that were sure to impact on his artistic output, affecting the timbre of the palette and more. This is repeatedly evoked through the progress of the exhibition that showcased over 70 works in a variety of media. These included some older works in oil, drawings and several sculptures, but the exhibition largely consisted of acrylic paintings on paper or canvas.

Calleja’s vast output, and the large dimensions of many of his pictures, made the selection of works that would represent his artistic journey challenging. The result was a crowded room, where paintings competed for the viewer’s attention and sculptures on stands along the panels that could have been separated by several space-in-between. His works are authoritative and commanding ones that demand to be viewed with space around each work, be they portraits, nudes, still lifes, or otherwise.

The exhibition was accompanied by a full catalogue featuring a well-written essay discussing the evolution of Calleja’s artistic career; alongside images that accompany the text. It is a shame, therefore, that we have discrepancies in some of the dates as they feature on the paintings and in the captions, and that one of the key pieces of the exhibition, presumably called 'The Other Playground' as listed on the catalogue, was unfortunately omitted from the exhibition itself.

This painting portrays the artist himself following a family tragedy. Nonetheless, this retrospective amply reflects and displays many self-portraits and intimate portraits of his family members.

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