

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT ARTS



Early Hours at Crystal Palace – A Blast from the Past



COVID Lethargy

The serenity and upheaval of existence

Serenity & Upheaval is the title of CATHERINE CAVALLO's current exhibition at the Malta Society of Arts, Valletta. *The Sunday Times of Malta* discusses with the artist the various themes of the exhibition and the redeeming value of art during these harrowing times of the pandemic.

Catherine Cavallo has been synonymous in the past with peaceful rural landscapes that burst into full bloom with flowers. Although the floral theme still appears in some of your recent paintings, why do you seem to have favoured paintings about the human form in this latest set? Do you feel that the age in which we are living has got more to do with human drama? Has the beauty of nature been driven out of the general human perspective?

I was trained as a figurative painter, and that's what I predominately am. It wasn't until a decade later, in the early 1990s, that I started to explore landscape painting – an avenue I've continued to enjoy and explore. But to describe me mainly as a painter of blooming flowers is to not know enough of my art. I've always used the human figure as the strongest form of expression, because all emotions are encompassed in it.

Throughout the ages, human drama has always taken centre stage, and it does the same in art. Art mimics life, in all its beauty and ugliness.

You depict human interaction, for instance in *Procession* and *Early Hours at Crystal Palace - A Blast from the Past*, which maybe we are missing during these pandemic days. Is this a craving, a nostalgia for the recent history? Are these

works about a sense of loss and the beauty in the mundane that is no more for the time being?

I've always enjoyed depicting group scenes, sometimes in a more light-hearted way and sometimes more emotionally. I do love to look for beauty in the mundane, and I think there is a note of nostalgia in some of the works in the exhibition, but not for things that have been temporarily denied to us due to the pandemic, but for a way of living that is long gone, if it ever really existed.

The painting of the child hugging his grandmother, *My Mother and George*, could be a celebration of that same sense of loss. What significance does the image of a hug carry in this painting? Do you feel that these times are indeed very pathetic ones in which the innocence of a hug has become a recipe of death?

The hug does carry a lot of significance. It is a beautiful thing that encompasses many emotions. Here it represents solace, love, new life and loss. Death is an inevitable part of life and there is no sinister reference intended to the current situation, though I like your analogy, sad though it is.

Your caricatural work is endearing and shows essentially what really makes Maltese society tick.



Procession



Lotus Flowers

There are a number of Maltese contemporary artists who have adopted this genre of painting and made it their main way of expression. One could mention Debbie Caruana Dingli, Andrew Diacono, Steve Bonello and Saviour Balacchino. Do you feel that your interpretation of caricature is different from these artists? Is your message different from theirs?

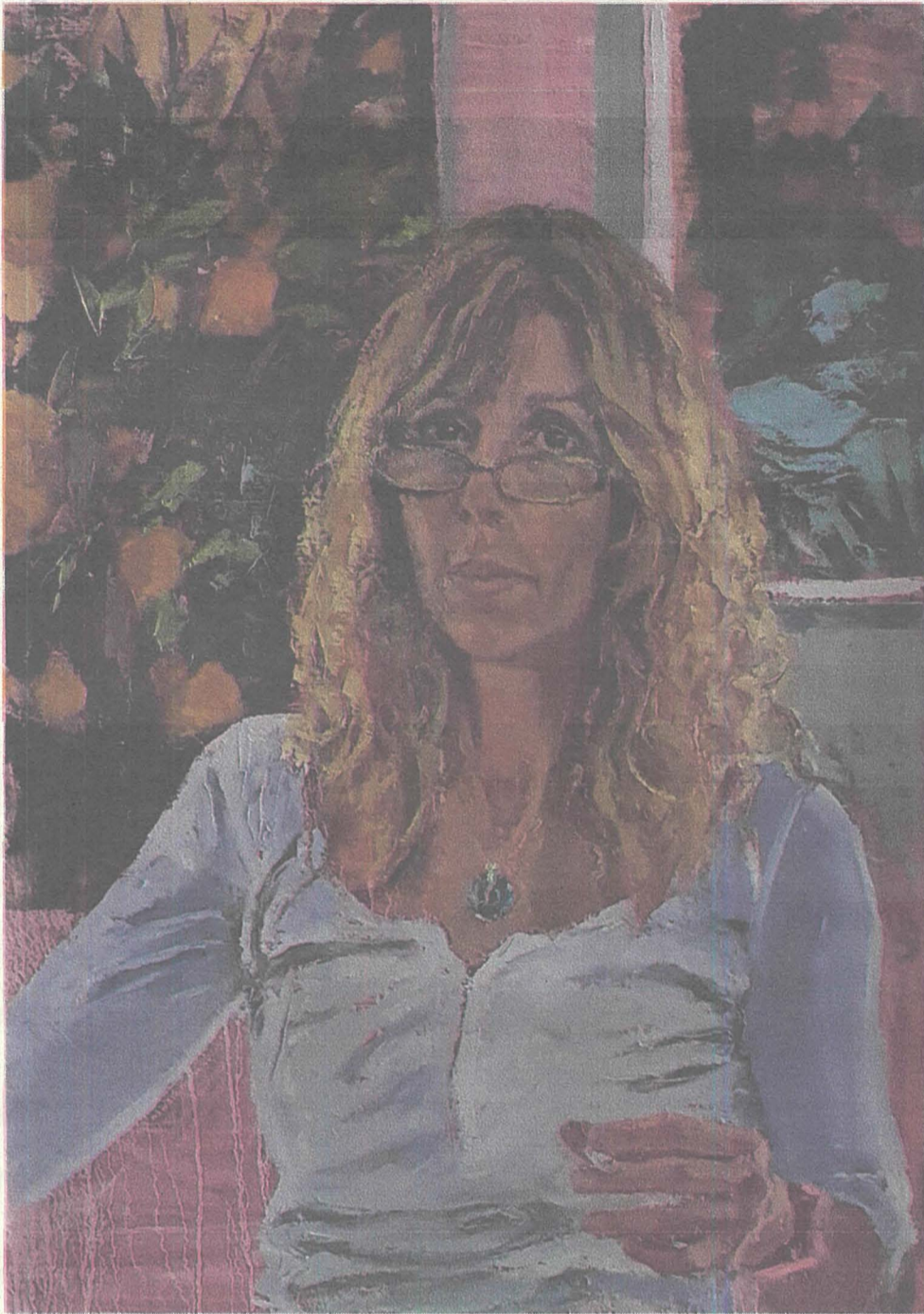
I think of my work as being more expressionistic rather

than caricatural. You mentioned four great artists, whom I think each have their own very personal and unique ways of saying their own very personal and unique things. For this reason, I find it impossible to place artists under headings.

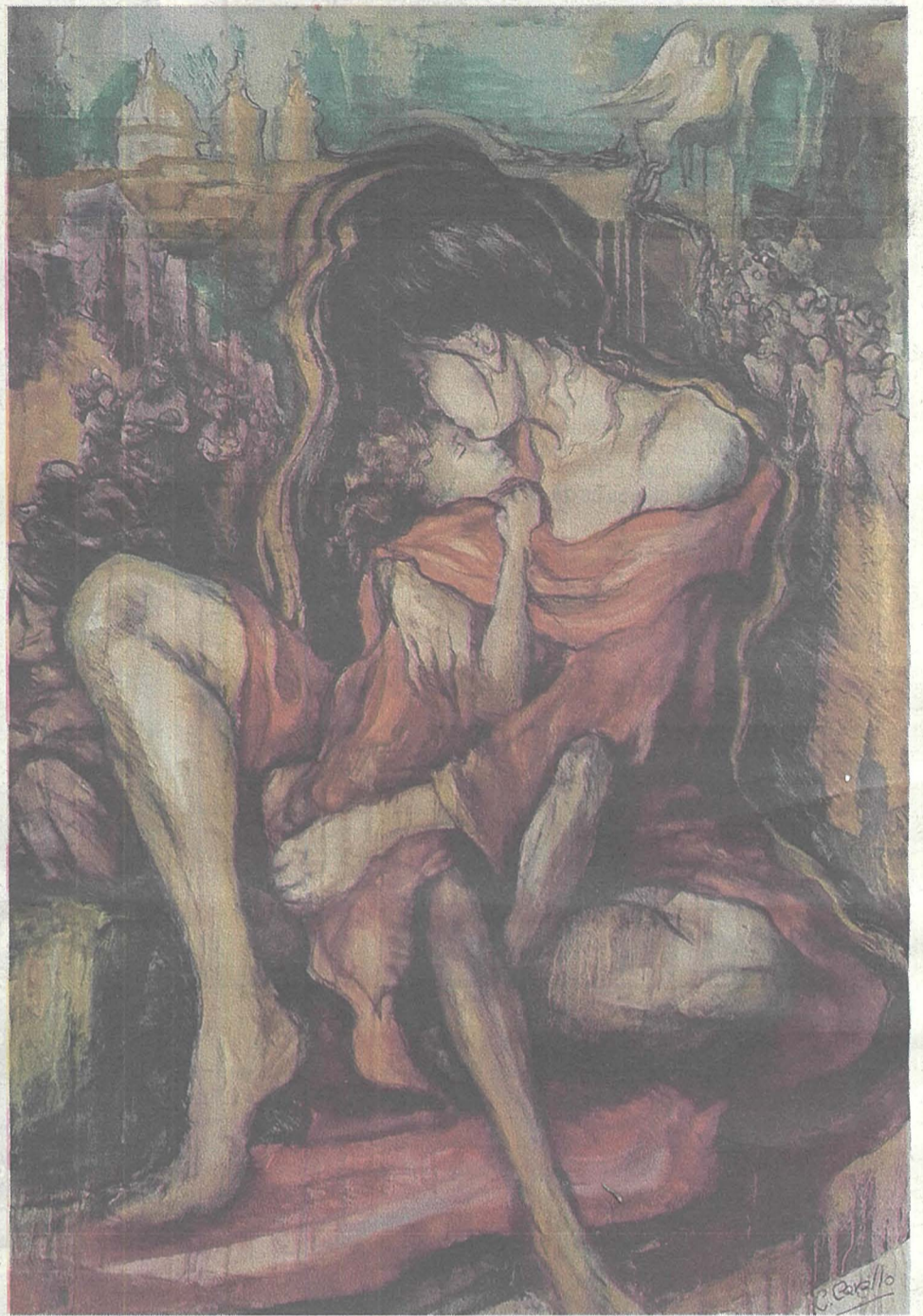
COVID-19 has dealt a huge blow to the contemporary Maltese art scene. Do you think it will recover in due course?

Could art serve as catharsis to the human pain, drama, dystopia and awful news that has become our everyday existence?

I think the art scene will absolutely recover, and hopefully be even better than before. Art in general has always been a refuge for both artist and audience, and life has always been terrible and wonderful simultaneously, and artists have always revelled in portraying this.



Self-portrait with Cigarette



Plight of the Refugees

Internationally, contemporary art has seen a resurgence of works in the traditional formats of painting and sculpture. Thematically, it is re-exploring conventional themes such as the human figure, portraiture, landscape and still life. Malta seems to be following suit as the compulsion to be cutting edge and indulge in impersonal installations are on the wane. What do you make of this?

Like everything else, art does sometimes follow trends, although art is about finding your own personal style of painting, expression and portrayal. I was told, as an art student, that it's all been done. So I say, find your own way and go for it.

I love installations and I've seen some wonderful ones in different countries, and I hope the compulsion to be 'cutting edge', as you put it, never goes away. There are many ways to be cutting edge and cutting edge can be found in all forms of art, installations included.

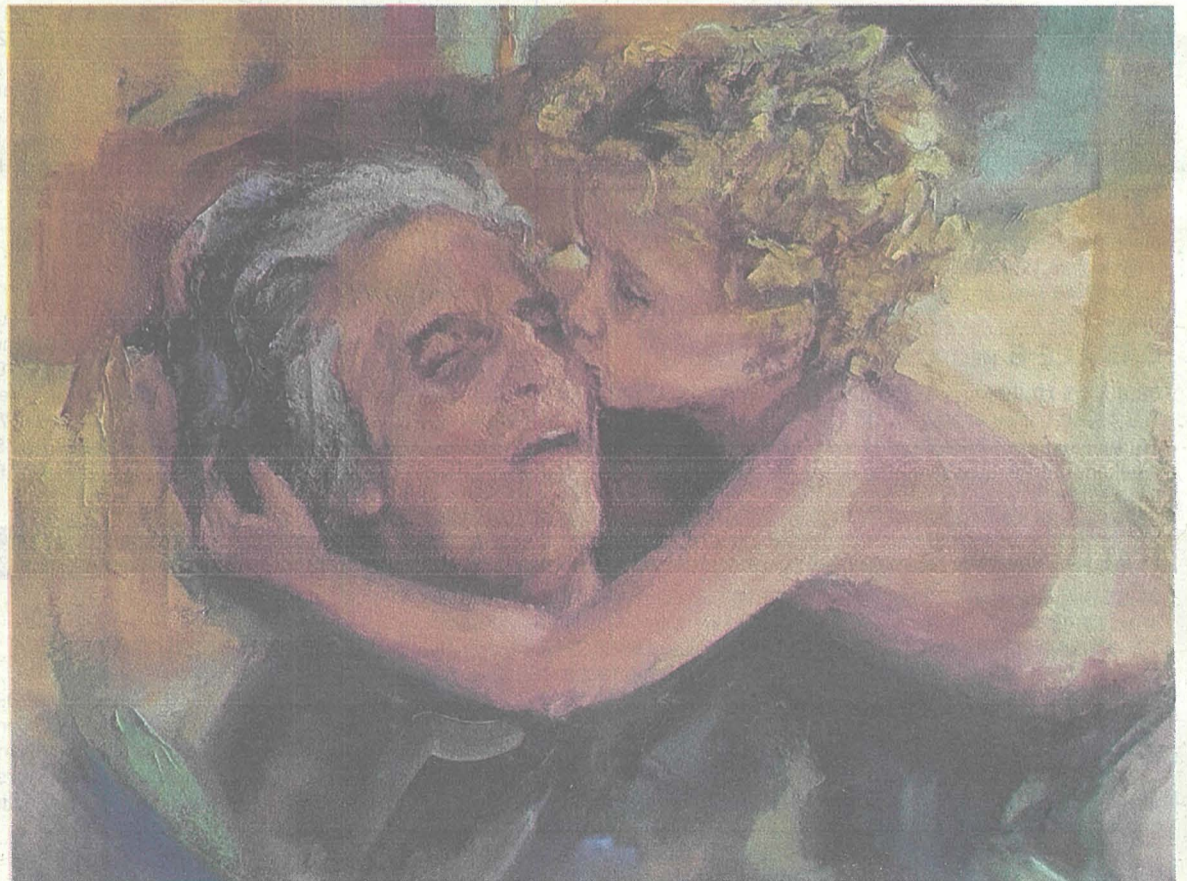
Which artists, dead or living, do you hold in great regard? Who do

you feel can be defined as your artistic soul mate?

There are and have been many, but for me, Michelangelo's works seem to be almost miraculous. I love El Greco, Munch, Goya, among others, and, through my husband, I've got to know the work of his grandfather Esprit Barthelet very well, whom I admire a great deal. Simon and I would also plan trips around overseas exhibitions. Going to London to see Lucien Freud's retrospective shortly after he died, the artist having lived long enough to organise most of it, was wonderful.

As was going to Amsterdam to see the Van Gogh/Gauguin exhibition, which we visited every morning for a week. That was bliss.

Serenity and Upheaval is open until December 23 at the Art Galleries, Palazzo de La Salle, Malta Society of Arts, Valletta. Opening hours are Monday to Friday from 9am to 7pm and Saturday from 9am to 1 pm. Entrance is free but subject to COVID-19 measures.



My Mother and George