

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION – A JOURNEY OF TWO ARTISTS

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Father & Daughter at the Chinese Garden of Serenity, 1999



Aldo Micallef-Grimaud, *Portrait of Mr. A. Cassar*, oil on canvas, 1956

Introduction

The arts have a development which comes not only from the individual but also from an accumulated strength, the civilisation which precedes us. One cannot just do anything. A talented artist cannot do just as he likes. If he used only his talents, he would not exist. We are not the masters of what we produce. It is imposed upon us (Henri Matisse in Flam, 1973:58).

Art is considered as a social construction, which is best understood when making sense of all the various individuals and institutions involved. In every different society and era, the aesthetic expression is interrelated with social structures and cultural traits. Works of art, therefore, reflect the social setting of their time in their aesthetic forms and contents. This is very much evident when looking at two generations of artists, a father and his daughter, to understand the way their artistic expressions were influenced by cultural and social conditions they experienced. These artists lived through different contexts that defined their meaning of art. During their lifetime, they experienced changes in the aesthetic value judgement; a change from the art of mimesis to expressionism, from a more objective to a more subjective definition of art.

The aim of this article is to address the sociological significance of aesthetics by bringing out both the sharp contrasting elements in the works of these two artists reflecting their *milieu* as well as establishing their commonalities as members within the same family. The artist Aldo Micallef-Grimaud (1925-2010) is renowned primarily as a portraitist, as well as for his numerous church commissions. His work stayed true to realism and technical excellence in the way he captured his subjects, most of them commissions by high society and the church. Aldo lived through a meaningful art historical context. He witnessed the changes in modes of expressions by the Maltese modern art movement, reflecting also wider social changes during the post second world war period. Aldo lived in a highly charged Catholic society that was held together by a homogenous lifestyle of shared values and beliefs, anchored in religion. Societal expectations of artists were clear for everyone and often unquestionable to those involved in the art world.

In order to study Aldo's art sociologically, this article looks at the collective activity of artistic networks of his time; what Zolberg (1990) calls the 'artistic midwives' that determined and limited artistic expression. As a young aspiring artist, Aldo and his peers were highly constrained by the Malta Government School of Arts that influenced substantially their artistic production. Also, external communal factors, such as ecclesial authorities, had an indirect influence on defining what makes 'good' art works through granting commissions only to conformist artists. Such commissions were a reliable way for artists to earn a living. Aldo dedicated his life to the arts, doing what he loved most, painting and singing. His wife and children were brought up surrounded by his art works, which occupied all their living space.

His daughter, Nadine Micallef-Grimaud had her childhood nourished both by her father's as well as her mother's, love for art. Yet Nadine lived through a different art world to that of her father. With the changes in the aesthetic value judgment, Nadine had more opportunities to exercise her own agency and to express her inner emotions and spiritual energy. Her art world runs parallel to the increased importance given to an individualised culture that fosters a belief in self-reliance and self-expression. Her art is also a reflection of her personal everyday experiences and passions. Through abstraction, her works present a juxtaposition of harmony and complexity as well as the ambivalence of turbulence and serenity at the same time.

**Aldo Micallef-Grimaud's works:
The intertwine of realism and romanticism**

"Art worlds typically devote considerable attention to trying to decide what is and isn't art, by observing how an art world makes those distinctions rather than trying to make them ourselves we can understand much of what goes on in that world" (Becker 1982:36).

At the age of fifteen, Aldo Micallef- Grimaud painted a portrait of himself (see page 78). A fresh-faced young man with a timid look, set against a dark background and looking straight at the viewer. Aldo's use of *chiaroscuro* heightens his stern facial expression. This was an exercise to demonstrate his well trained eye for detail and realism at such a young age. It was this painting that won him first prize in the RAF Arts Exhibition in 1944, and earned him a place amongst top aspiring training artists attending the Malta Government School of Arts at the time. This work does not only reflect the life of the artist, but it is also a reflection of his society. Aldo's art mirrors the shared conservative beliefs, dominant in the early 20th century, that conditioned artists like him in their work.

From as young as eleven years old, Aldo Micallef-Grimaud was ambitious and determined to seek expert advice in artistic training. The Malta Government School of Art, founded in 1925 and run by the distinguished Chev. Edward Caruana Dingli (1878-1950), and his brother Robert (1882-1949), accepted students from the age of twelve. As an ambitious young boy wanting to pursue artistic training, Aldo was accepted after he convinced Caruana Dingli of his



Aldo Micallef-Grimaud, *La Dogana*, oil on canvas, undated



Nadine Micallef-Grimaud, *Abstract*, mixed media, 2013



Aldo Micallef-Grimaud, *Still Life*, pencil on paper, Government School of Arts, 1936



Aldo Micallef-Grimaud, *Nude Study*, pencil on paper, 1947



Aldo Micallef-Grimaud, *Edward Caruana Dingli's Housekeeper*, oil on cardboard, 1946



Aldo Micallef-Grimaud, *Still Life*, oil on canvas, undated



Nadine Micallef-Grimaud, *Still Life*, oil on canvas, 2012

potential. His tutorship was under Vincent Apap and Robert Caruana Dingli, modelling under George Borg and Antonio Micallef, etching under Carmelo Mangion and painting under Edward Caruana Dingli (Cassar 2010).

Aldo Micallef-Grimaud is mainly known as a portrait painter. His portraits demonstrate his strong sense of realism. Aldo's works are a juxtaposition between realism and romanticism. As a realist artist, he sought to depict the everyday life and the ordinary, yet his great works also include romanticised versions of mythological and religious scenes. His mastery is demonstrated in the way he brought his subjects to life either with his delicate brushstrokes or with soft pastels. The portrait of his daughter, Nadine, is an excellent example of how well he captured the emotions of the sitter (*see page 92*). This reflects the rigorous artistic training he received from Edward Caruana Dingli, who emphasised a system of painting focusing on the face, set against a darker background. It is not surprising that the works of students attending the same class under Caruana Dingli were similar.

When studying the art world that Aldo experienced, one needs to take account of the collective artistic activity. Students at the Malta Government School of Art produced, under fairly tight control, studies in anatomy, in pencil and in charcoal and chalk, as well as art works in oil on canvas. They were not simply painting out of an inner, personal necessity but in response to external influences. Their works were intended for a wider purpose rather than simply as a means for self-expression. They were trained into being faithful to observation of nature and nurturing a desire to capture and render it. The traditional academic discipline of Aldo was highly conventional and symmetrical to his peers, inspired by his tutor Edward Caruana Dingli, who was arguably one of the most influential artists of 20th century Malta. The conception of art was centred on the imitation of nature that represented perfection. The course was structured with the first stage involving studying linear perspective and free-hand drawing and, if an artist proved himself, he would be promoted to the painting and modelling class. Impressionistic influences were downplayed and high priority was given to technical excellence.

It is not only through figurative art that Aldo demonstrates his impeccable mastery but also through his various still-life of flowers in vase. These works, most of them oil on canvas, are themselves an exercise in realism. Similar to his portrait paintings, the freshly picked flowers are painted against a dark background that emphasises even more, the realism of the flowers.

Societal factors influencing the production of art

“Throughout history, artistic activity has been influenced consciously by the audience of the art works” (Toffler 1970). The content and the form of art works are a reflection of their audience and patronage. Apart from cultural influences on the production of art, social institutions play an active role in the making of art. Janet Wolff (1981), in her study *The Social Production of Art*, maintained that every act done by the individual is located within a social structure. The

existence of these structures and institutions facilitates any activity of the individual whether it is an act of conformity or rebellion. The practical activity and creativity are in a mutual relation of interdependence with social structures. Wolff argued that works of art are not solely produced from the inspiration and innate genius of the artist. The making of art is clearly influenced by its relationship to various technologies, media, social systems of production, supporting personnel, training and patronage.

Additional to Wolff's theory on the autonomy of art, Vera Zolberg (1990), in *Constructing a Sociology of the Arts* stated that the artist depends on mechanisms, processes or institutions of the social structures for rewarding or penalising their works. According to Zolberg, unless artists create art works only for their own pleasure, they depend directly or indirectly on the social structures that support them. Various institutions in society are required to recognise the potential of the artist. Zolberg (1990) referred to the institutional structures as the 'midwives of art' since they can ease artistic production or abort its creation. In Western societies, these forms of constraints depended on the Church, royal families, private patronage, the state bureaucratic administration and the commercial market. These constraints affected the styles and forms in the production of art. However, Zolberg maintained that certain features of important support structures have persisted in contemporary institutions and in ideas about artistic value. This demonstrates that the perception of the public various art forms is often determined by social structures, even in modern and contemporary times.

In line with this, it can be argued that art in early 20th century Malta did not operate as an autonomous body without external influence. The Catholic Church was then a pivotal institutio, shaping and often dictating the production of art, either directly through patronage or indirectly through its permeating influence on society. Until quite recent times, the Catholic Church had a privileged position in Maltese society and enjoyed hegemonic power, even in defining 'good' art. The Maltese historian Henry Frendo (1988) addressed the importance and presence of the Church in Malta by stating that "The parochial structure was intact: religion was at the heart of Maltese life just as the church was physically in the centre of the village, and formed part of the strong social nexus by which the common people looked up differentially to the 'respectable' members of the community." (Frendo 1988:188).

Undoubtedly, this highlights the way the Catholic Church in Malta and its deeply rooted ideological web, infuses Maltese society. It works to socialise people from an early age to maintain not only mass consensus but also status quo even within the art world. Indeed most of Aldo Micalef-Grimaud's works follow the more traditional academic and conventional forms of art favoured by the Church that promised commissions ,especially for illustrating biblical scenes.

This spirit of constraint that affected all social spheres of life is highlighted by Sultana and Baldacchino (1994) who maintained that "it could feel like growing



Aldo Micalef-Grimaud working on a commission



Aldo Micalef-Grimaud work at St. Augustine's Parish Church, in Valletta



Aldo Micallef-Grimaud, *The Saintly Message*, oil on canvas, undated



Aldo, *Kristu - Christ the Saviour*, oil on canvas, undated



Aldo, *Crucified Christ and Mary Magdalene*, oil on canvas, undated

up in a strait jacket of community surveillance, given the dense psycho-social atmosphere” (Sultana and Baldacchino 1994:17).

The Church commissioned artists to produce works that harmonised with its Baroque interiors (Cassar 2010). Even though Aldo was not a full-time artist, he relied on Church commissions and was cautious not to ‘taint’ his reputation. Local ecclesiastical authorities did not approve of any of the new or alternative styles of representation. Those artists who were influenced by and promoted the new foreign and avant-garde artistic movements and forms of expressions were refuted by church authorities (Cassar 2010).

Aldo Micallef-Grimaud’s works of the Annunciation, *The Saintly Message* and *Kristu - Christ the Saviour* are fine examples of his success in religious art and his achievement in earning Church commissions. Both works are in a form of simplified stylised realism, with elongation of the figures and using a delicate palette. In the *Annunciation*, the artist depicts the biblical scene of when the Archangel Gabriel is communicating the Message to the Virgin Mary who humbly accepts with her head lowered and eyes closed. This work essentially focuses on the purity and virginity of Mary, virtues symbolised by her white robe and the lily in the Archangel’s hand. This type of elongated style in figures was introduced in the local scene by Anton Inglott, with his work *Death of St. Joseph* (1945), commissioned for the apse of Msida church and heralding the process of change in church paintings in Malta (Cassar 2010). This style was popularised by Micallef-Grimaud’s contemporary Emvin Cremona (1919-1987). In fact, Aldo Micallef-Grimaud’s composition of *Christ the Saviour* has the main attributes of Emvin Cremona’s *Sacred Heart of Jesus* (1952). It emphasises in a similar fashion the elongated figure of Christ as a source of light, giving blessing in the gestures of the hands. This new form of stylized realism, whilst not adhering to the traditional realist idioms, still satisfied the sensibilities of the local church authorities and became to a certain extent, the *de rigueur* form for religious art.

A rather striking painting is the *Crucified Christ and Mary Magdalene*. In this biblical scene, Aldo presents a solitary cross with Mary Magdalene at Christ’s feet. The fascination of this work comes from the powerful expression on Christ’s face, which engages forcefully the viewer to share the intense feelings of pain, anger and grief. Staring directly at the viewer in an enraged look, Christ’s expression indicates His excruciating self-sacrifice, represented not only in His antagonistic look, but also in the way His undressed body is hanging forcefully forward on the cross.

The figure of Mary Magdalene curled up in despair underneath the cross, weak from anguish pain, continues to magnify the viewer’s emotional response. Even though Mary Magdalene’s face is hidden, buried in the ground, her posture radiating agony. The stormy climatic condition, with a dark turbulent storm in the background, complements the anguished event. This work reveals a shift in style in Aldo’s work to a more expressive representation imbued with strong painful emotions, yet still staying faithful to realism.

The modern art movement in Malta

It has been argued by many sociologists that art, as an institution, functions as a mechanism for stability and is a safety-value for 'draining off' tension (Parsons and Shils 1951 Coser 1956). However, art can also set in motion social and cultural change. This is evident when analysing how the status quo in Maltese art production started to be challenged when some local artists started defying the conventional rules of academic painting and adopted new artistic styles that were characterising the art scene abroad.

Joseph Paul Cassar, an art historian and a practising artist himself, in his book *The Modern Art Idiom* (2010) gave an exhaustive and detailed overview of the changes in the Maltese art world in the 20th century. In this rich compilation of 20th century documentation, artistic representations and photographic materials, Cassar explained how most of the artists defying the established artistic tradition had studied at the *Reggia Accademia di Belle Arti* in Rome, and came back to Malta brimming with enthusiasm and aware of the shortcomings at the Malta Government School of Art. They were critical of the art that was being produced locally, and aspired to keep abreast with the major art movements that were taking place in Europe at that time. They understood the need for change in art to reflect its time and were inspired by the new forms of expressions. Artistic and stylistic change in Malta was slow during the two world wars but, soon after, Maltese artists trained not only in Rome but also looked at Paris and England for their artistic education. During this time, Maltese artists showed an interest in the *avant-garde* movement in Europe and started to employ new aesthetics concepts (Cassar 2010).

Parallel to other areas in Maltese society, where socio-economic and cultural changes took place at a 'slower motion' compared to the typical Western mode (Visanich 2012), the art world in such a peculiar location also witnessed a 'delay'. Nevertheless, rather than treating social change in art as a homogenising process, geared towards producing unified art worlds, art production is considered to have different historical trajectories at diverse times and places. Traditional and cultural variables are key factors in the local adoption and adaptation of Western artistic influences in Malta. Despite the 'delay' in the process, local artists in the post-war years were developing offshoots from the major movements of post-impressionism and expressionism. This was a turning point in the history of modern art in Malta, having artists working in different styles, and deconstructing the established boundaries of art. The experience that most artists obtained abroad gave birth to the *Modern Art Circle* movement.

The *Modern Art Circle* group, which was later renamed *Modern Art Group* and then as *Atelier '56*, organised collective exhibitions during the post-war years. Artists like Esprit Barthet, Frank Portelli and Antoine Camilleri were part of this movement and contributed to the introduction of social change through their art (Cassar 2010). These pioneers of the Maltese modern art idiom in the mid-1950s experimented with different styles and techniques, although mainly in abstraction. The artists of the circle were concerned with developing "a new



Aldo Micallef-Grimaud working on an allegorical portrait



Aldo Micallef-Grimaud, *Going Home*, watercolours and ink, undated

vision, a tendency to seek, investigate and explore the hidden realms of truth and beauty” (Cassar 2010:136).

The first exhibition as *Modern Art Circle* artists was held at the Hostel De Verdelin from the 17 to the 25 January 1953. Their exhibited works differed from the conservative art of the time. This exhibition ushered in the fresh trends of modernism. The initiative of the Group was to produce posters, which were to be placed in cafes and public places aimed at familiarising the public with the fresh artistic ideas. During the same period, artists like George Preca, Esprit Barthet and Antoine Camilleri showed interest in the cubist idiom.

It was clear that the Maltese political and ecclesiastical authorities were very cautious about being associated with the *Modern Art Group*. Both the Prime Minister, and the Archbishop, were invited but did not turn up for the opening night of this exhibition of the *Modern Art Circle*. However, the inauguration of the exhibition was packed with people.

In this respect, the *Modern Art Circle* remains the first pressure group to bring about cultural change in the artistic scene in Malta. Nevertheless, these works and their producers found no fertile ground and were often refused in exhibitions and cut out from Church commissions. Their aesthetic values were identified as a subculture in which they manifested defiance and opposition to prevailing aesthetic value judgment at that time. Some art critics and the general public spoke about this movement negatively. In a newspaper letter reply under the initials E.M and entitled ‘*Returning the Attack: Lack of competence in Modern Art*’, the author quoted a statement of Fortunino Matania:

Modern painting will one day be in museums like ancient instruments of torture, to show the depths to which art fell. The unconventional standard of modern art is due to lack of competence (E.M. 1952:7 in Cassar 2010).

It can be argued that Aldo Micallef-Grimaud was more of an observer of these changing artistic styles rather than an active participant in the *Modern Art Circle*. Joining the circle meant that the public and the Church authorities would associate him with anti-establishment artists. Thus, Aldo was more cautious and remained grounded on classical realism especially when working on church commissions. Nevertheless, this does not mean that he did not find inspiration from major movements of post-impressionism, cubism and abstraction. As a matter of fact, Aldo did take part in a collective exhibition with members of the *Modern Art Circle* at the *Second Malta Trade Fair Exhibition* in 1953. Moreover, Aldo took part in the 1958 *Triennial Art Exhibition*, which showcased Maltese contemporary art (Cassar 2010). The purpose was an initiative to expand the definition of ‘good’ art by popularising contemporary trends of local artistic expression.



Aldo Micallef-Grimaud, *Landscape*, oil on canvas, undated



Aldo Micallef-Grimaud, *Landscape*, oil on canvas, undated

Freeing the brushstrokes: Aldo's more expressive works

In another self-portrait, Aldo Micallef-Grimaud presents to the viewers an older version of himself. Dressed in deep yellow hues and standing sideways, he turns his head towards his audience. The style of this work is much more expressive than his first self-portrait done at the age of fifteen. He uses thicker brushstrokes set against a dark background. Aldo, here, is interested in capturing the visual sensation of the moment, focusing on the quality of light and the changing colours. He does not only bring himself to life on canvas but also captures a feeling. It was in the second part of his career that Aldo allowed himself to open up to new artistic forms, more impressionist thick strokes that aim to capture the fleeting moment of everyday life without idealisation.

Very good examples of his expressionist works are his various countryside landscapes. These works provided a window for him to express himself more fluidly, in a more sketchy fleeting effect, providing a freedom that was not present in his earlier works. He often used watercolours to capture the movement and tranquillity of the Maltese countryside. With the use of rapid brushstrokes, Aldo presents the visual impression of the scene whilst still producing a faithful study of nature.

Some of these works are topologically accurate, whereas others are more unreal, driven by the artist's flair to express himself. Just like impressionist painters, who were primarily concerned with the changing light and atmospheric effects, Aldo had a certain fondness for the capturing the changing atmospheric conditions of the Maltese landscape. Claude Monet, in one of his letters clearly explained this experience; "I persist in a series of different effects but at this time the sun sets so quickly that I can't keep up... the further I go, the more I see that I'll have to work hard to succeed in rendering what I'm seeking: 'instantaneity', especially the outward appearance, the seam light diffused everywhere" (Monet in Maldonado 2004:41).

Nadine Micallef-Grimaud - Her subjective, feminist and individualised art

Trained as a painter and a floral designer from a very young age, Nadine Micallef-Grimaud projects to us an aesthetic experience into her prospects, ambitions and emotions, mostly through her semi-abstract works. Nadine's upbringing fostered by her parents' love for art, was central for developing an artistic flair herself. Her father Aldo was her personal mentor and was greatly influential in her creative endeavour. Nadine's childhood was surrounded by her father's art. She recalls nostalgically how, as a child, she used to enjoy observing diligently her father working in his studio, using his paintbrushes, and drawing along with her other family members on family outings. Her mother Mariuccia, an internationally-renowned floral artist, also nourished in her the love for the arts. Clearly inspired by her mother, Nadine also ended up making a name for herself as a floral designer. In effect, Nadine and her siblings Glorian and Mario were all immersed into this cultural capital, and grew up to regard this love for the arts as second nature. Her family background shaped her appreciation



Aldo Micallef-Grimaud, Shepherd at San Blas, watercolour, 1995



Nadine Micallef-Grimaud, with her father at Benghajsa, 1965



Nadine with her mother Mariuccia, an internationally renowned floral artist



Nadine Micallef-Grimaud, *Christmas Installation*, 2012

of the arts and her dispositions, as well as influencing her future ambitions. This situation is very much in line with what Bourdieu (1977) meant when he conceptualised the term *habitus* to explain how one's tastes and dispositions are embedded in the family background. Norbert Elias (2000 [1939]) also emphasised the importance of one's *habitus* as a constituent part of what makes the individual's life chances. For Elias, childhood is the main 'transmission belt' for the development of the *habitus*.

"... It is the web of social relations in which individuals live during their most impressionable phase, that is childhood and youth, which imprints itself upon their unfolding personality in the form of the relationship between their controlling agencies, super-ego and ego, and their libidinal impulses. The resulting balance ...determines how an individual person steers him or herself in his or her social relations with others ... However, there is no end to the intertwining ..." (Elias, 2000 [1939]:377).



Nadine Micallef-Grimaud, *Seascape Sculpture*, ceramics, 2004

Nevertheless, Nadine is also highly influenced by her social *milieu* and by the changes in the social, cultural and economic conditions. Unlike her father, who was taught a more conservative and academic form of art and the imitation of nature, Nadine was born in an era when Maltese artists started to show interest in, and employ, some of the latest *avant-garde* styles in European art. During these last fifty years, the local art scene experienced a number of innovative reinventions of art by various artists. Primarily, the *Modern Art Circle* pioneered the promotion of modern art trends, aimed at redefining art. Following its revolutionary footsteps were art groups like *Start* who in the 1990s, exposed the art of installation to the Maltese public.



Nadine Micallef-Grimaud, *Abstracts*, mixed media, 2013

Instead of using art to satisfy the needs of the patrons or wider audience, art has become more spontaneous; an emotional and even subconscious creation. According to Niklas Luhmann (2000), the 20th century *avant-garde* art 're-includes what it excludes'. He maintained that the function of art is no longer a representation or idealisation of the world. In the course of modernity, art experienced movements like expressionism and abstraction, becoming more autonomous and shifting the emphasis to self-reference (Luhmann 2000). Maltese art moved away from easel painting and figurative representations to a more expressionist reflection of the individual. This of course, needs to be explained within a social context. There is a growing emphasis, in contemporary society, on the individual as opposed to the community, *i.e.* the institutionalisation of a more individualised society in late modernity. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2008 [2002]) claimed that individuals in late modernity have more choice to live a 'life of one's own'. Individuals have increased choices and alternatives on how to devise one's own life away from traditional constraints. Similar to her contemporary artists, Nadine had her-coming-of age in a society less determined by rigid traditional roles when compared to that of her father's.

Various local artists were experimenting and developing works that were inspired from major post-impressionistic movements. In effect, whilst observing

her father's eye for detail and realism, Nadine employed an expressive style in a variety of genres including landscapes, portraiture, surreal figurative work as well as abstract techniques. Art for Nadine holds a kind of mythical self-understanding used to communicate her emotions.

Maternal representations – The infinite affection of the mother and child

The image of the affection between the mother and her child is represented in a number of Nadine's work. Having her childhood embedded in the Christian faith, Nadine executes this affection in various works by depicting the *Virgin Mother and Christ*. Here, the emphasis is on depicting the Christian Western tradition of the *Virgin and the Child*. However, different to her father's conformist religious paintings, in *My Madonna and Child*, Nadine presents a rather unconventional Western image of the *Madonna and Child*, that expresses affection and the intimacy binding mother and infant. This work is a perfect example of Nadine's ambivalent position in working on a classical representation of the *Madonna and Child*, yet interprets it in an exceptional way in a monochromatic blue tone. Her focus is not on the detail to mimic beauty in realism but on the tenderness in the way the Madonna is holding and supporting the baby. Their bodies are intertwined together, almost forming a single body to symbolise the intimacy between the two. This is accentuated through the curvatures in the brushstrokes, emphasising the simplified figure of the Mother holding her Child. This is a work rendered with an intensity of feelings from an artist who is herself a mother, and thus this representation is in part autobiographical.



Nadine Micallef-Grimaud, *My Madonna and Child*, oil on canvas, 2010

In another work, Nadine interprets the scene of the Holy Mother holding in a loving, yet painful way, the face of her dead Son after crucifixion (see page 111). The face of Christ recalls that of Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1499) in its depiction of Christ's head resting peacefully on his Mother's hand, rather than emphasising signs of agony. The mystical light falls on the Mother's face heightening her compassionate expression, reminiscent of Munch's *Madonna* (1895), with her head leaning backwards and eyes closed. This is not a work that symbolises death, but rather an execution of a powerful feeling that demonstrates the strong bond between a mother and son as the Madonna wraps Him up in her veil and tenderly caresses His face.



Nadine Micallef-Grimaud, *Salome*, oil on canvas, 1998

The female figure features in many of Nadine's works. This can be understood as signifying the timeless dignity of the female nude and its grace and beauty. However, Nadine uses the female figure as a reaction to the traditional representations of women in art as objects for the male gaze. These feminist issues relates to broader transformations that have been occurring in the last two decades of the 20th century in Malta. Nadine's rendering of the female figure reminds the viewers of how women were portrayed almost invariably from an androcentric perspective for their beauty for most of Western history, and rarely as independent rational beings. The allegories of vanity, depicting the female nude with unearthly elegance for the male spectator are a testimony of this traditionally male-oriented society.



Nadine Micallef-Grimaud, *Away From it All*, oil on canvas, 1996



Nadine Micallef-Grimaud, *Abstract, Caught in a Storm*, acrylics, 2013



Nadine Micallef-Grimaud, *Sea Storm*, oil on canvas, 2012

Nadine's attributions in this work are similar to the anonymous female activist group named 'The Guerrilla Girls' who used posters and public appearances to influence gallery owners, museum curators, and male artists to promote feminist ideologies. They wore gorilla masks to focus on the issues dealing with women's social role, rather than on their visual appearance. Such feminists have been successful in publicising the plight of oppressed women, and their cries have resulted in more women choosing careers in art than ever.

Nadine's feminine figures represent a protest to women's historical exclusion from formal art worlds because of women's confinement to domestic roles. The history of art itself is riddled with sexism, mentioning only male great artists within a patriarchal structure of institutional power. The few women painters were mainly daughters of established masters, such as the sixteenth-century Italian Marietta Robusti, daughter of Tintoretto (Harrington 2004) and the 17th century caravagesque painter Artemesia Gentileschi, daughter of Orazio Gentileschi (Gombrich 1989). Women painters were even more constrained in the form and content of their work than their male counterparts. They were permitted to work on small-scale oil or watercolour paintings, and debarred from commissions such as frescos and church panel-painting (Harrington 2004). Their work needed to demonstrate their socially constructed feminine virtue of modesty, diligence and composure, and to depict women in domestic interiors. Nadine's painting of *Nostalgia* is a reaction to all of this and symbolises female strength. In this work, Nadine presents a semi-abstract nude female torso, and like *My Madonna and Child*, it is also in blue monochrome. The figure is turning her back to the viewer as she embraces a child and leaving behind her possibly a failed relationship, with a torn photograph of a man at her side. She is seated on a golden platter with her hair flowing to the left, possibly expressing a sign of getting away from the past. Next to the figure there are two pears signifying femininity and usually associated with sensuality although in this case the pear is also a sign of strength.

A series of storms

In her series of paintings showing storms at sea, Nadine moved away from figurative representations and instead depicts a world that is full of turbulent movement. Nadine's free brush strokes give us a sense of blurred motion and turbulent confusion. Her paintings seethe with energy and drama. These works, bearing their inspiration from Turner, create a dramatic effect through the raging seas, the gust of wind and its impact on the waves. The blue monochromatic effect, an influence from Picasso's blue period, with elements of rough relief texture, emphasises the power of the stormy seas. These works reflect and express emotions of futile efforts to combat the forces of nature in an autobiographical manner. The work *Away From it All* presents a fertile ground for technical experimentation by using mixed media. Here, Nadine presents the calm after a storm, with a solitary boat sailing away into the horizon, away from the stormy seas. Such an atmospheric scene conveys various strong esoteric and emotional meanings; the unsettling feeling of not knowing where a new journey that has just begun is going to take you, or the calmness, the serenity, after the storm.

Abstract works - 'All that is solid melts into air'

In her abstract works, Nadine uses colour and brushwork to convey natural light effects and present her emotions on canvas. Using the style of abstract expressionism, Nadine frees herself completely from the object and presents a fascinating visual experience. Her abstracts are vivid but also delicate. The interplay of contrasting colours reveals the abstract qualities of these works. Her abstract works demonstrate an outward manifestation of her emotions, thoughts, feelings, fears and dreams.

In Nadine's abstract works, the viewer can see the diffusion of colours, melting together and dissolving everything that is solid. This can be interpreted as a reflection of the contemporary late capitalist society, which is constantly shifting to a more individualised world.

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Engel (1992 [1848]) prophesied that "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober sense his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind" (Marx and Engel (1992 [1848]):6).

They were referring to the way nothing is left solid or permanent in a capitalist society and everything is reduced to money and to making profit. Moreover, the individual lives a life of his own and has to find ways to survive in an individualised world. Nadine's abstract works are a window to her individualised existence, using the canvas to express her inner thoughts and feelings. Her experimental works of paint dripping and dabbing added a new dimension to her art. Her works, sharing similar attributions to the abstracts of Jackson Pollock, communicate directly to the viewer.

Whereas artists like Aldo Micallef-Grimaud relied on schools of art and produced a rather uniform technique focused on technical excellence in their creation of beauty, artists in late modernity are occupying an individualised space with little or no restrictions and boundaries. In view of the changes in aesthetic value judgement, artists like Nadine, living in an individualised life, are finding refuge on the canvas where they can let out their emotions.

Conclusion

Sociological analysis of art perceives art and artists from their social and historical context. It is conventional wisdom that the definition of art as well as the markers of what is beautiful, are socially constructed. In effect, 'the eye of the beholder' is culturally conditioned. Various factors contribute to the production of art. These circumstances come to the fore when making sense of the societal context of the two artists. Aldo Micallef-Grimaud was brought up in a conservative school of thought that good art is founded on classical realism. His artistic training did not allow him much space for personal interpretation and individual expression. During his lifetime, he produced various portraits and religious pieces well renowned for their technical excellence in realism. However, Aldo's long artistic career evolved through time. His later works were highly inspired by the changing European trends in art, and the inclination to focus less on the art of mimic and more on expressionism is obvious. Despite the fact that Nadine Micallef-Grimaud had her primary artistic training



Nadine Micallef-Grimaud, *Abstract Sea Reflection*, mixed media, 2013



Nadine Micallef-Grimaud, *Abstract*, mixed media, 2014



Nadine Micallef-Grimaud, *Abstract*, mixed media, 2013

rooted in her father's classical representations, she has quickly moved away from this genre and experimented with more spontaneous and emotionally charged representations. She experienced a different art world compared to the traditional constraints of her father; it is an art world where artists achieved unprecedented creative freedom. For her, art is more of a subjective experience to express her inner thoughts, angers and frustrations. Living in the era of late modernity, with increased emphasis on the self, Nadine's art is autobiographical and revolves around herself.

Changes in art production create new patterns of reception and new definition of what is considered as art. Cultural change in art includes the process of using new media and techniques, which expresses insights, values and emotions through new art forms. These new values act as a way to alter the culture of that particular society. The works of Aldo and Nadine are a manifestation of the change from the art production to satisfy the communal good, to the form of art that satisfies the individual.



Aldo Micallef-Grimaud, working on Nadine's portrait Nadine, soft pastels, 1985

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