

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

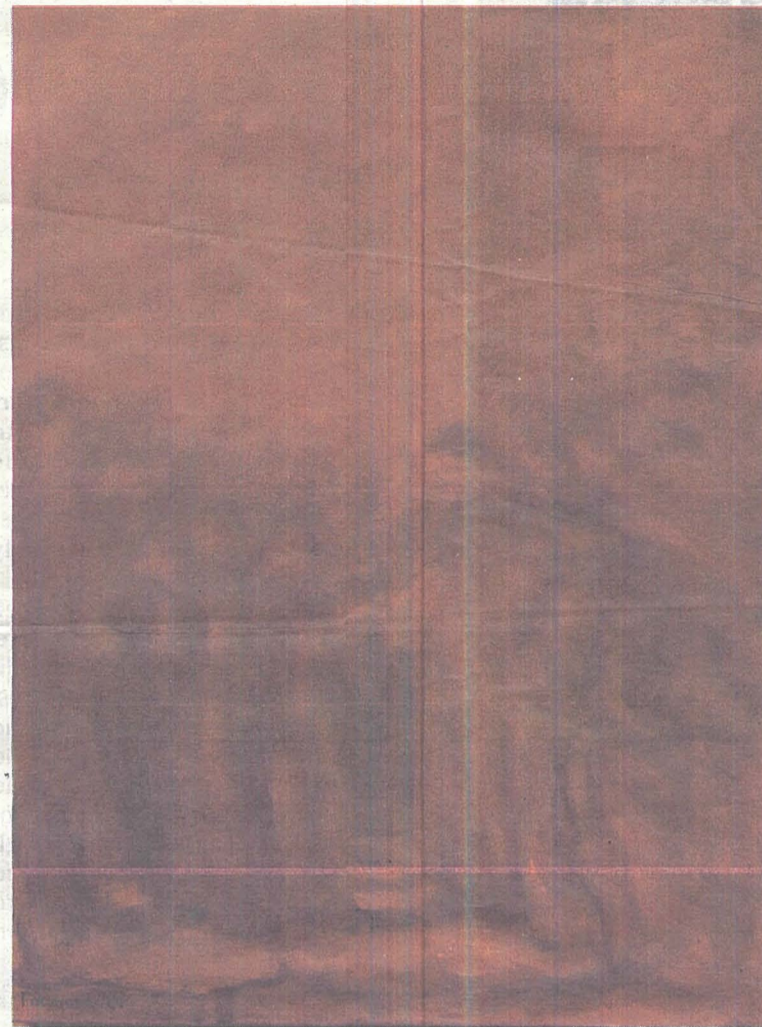
ARTS



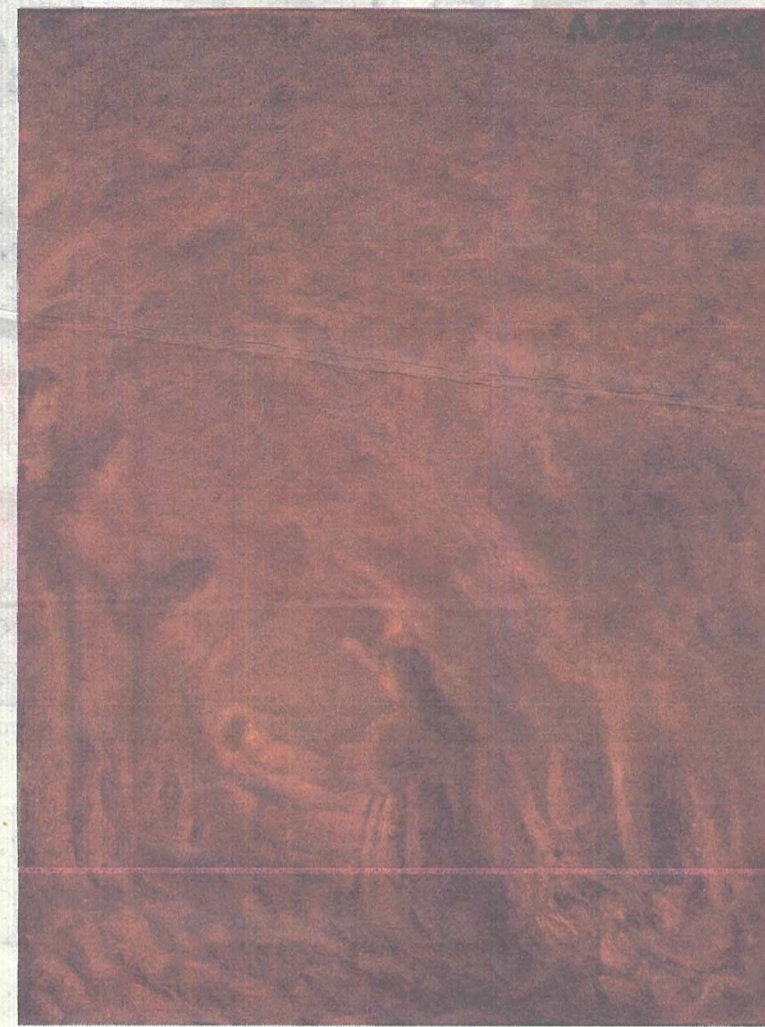
The Assumption of the Virgin



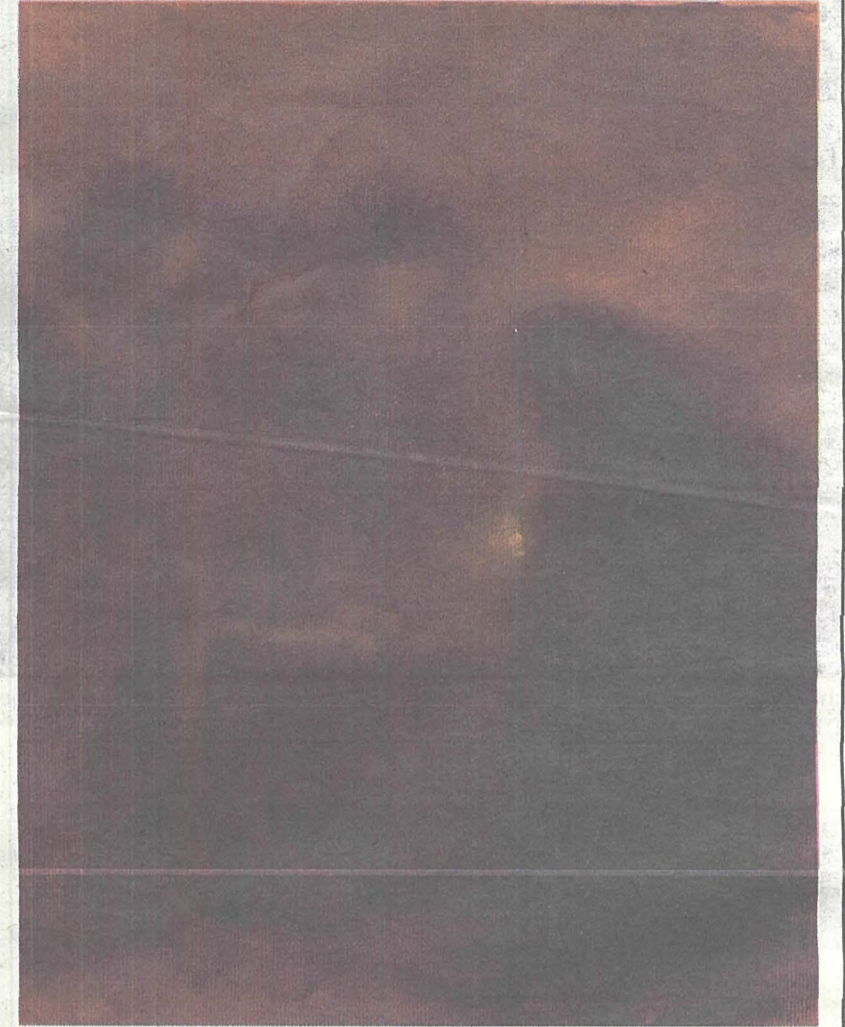
The Walk to Emmaus



Christ and the Children (2)



Nativity (5)



Nativity (4)

Transforming faith into spiritual energy

JOSEPH AGIUS

Sacred art in Malta has experienced difficulty in ridding itself of the shackles of the Baroque era as far as Church commissions are concerned as the cumbersome shadows of Caravaggio and Mattia Preti conditioned its development. In the latter half of the 20th century, Emvin Cremona managed to achieve a balance between the acceptably modern and a monumental classicism easily understood by the churchgoers and that fitted within ecclesiastical parameters.

Anton Inglott's Death of St Joseph for Msida parish church and Giorgio Preca's famous crucifixion were exceptions to the rule but met with contrasting fortunes. The studio art in this genre of Carmelo Mangion, Josef Kalleja, Antoine Camilleri and George Fenech, among others, demonstrates the loss to the legacy of possible church art.

To find a contemporary artist in our country solely devoted to the genre is certainly unique. Aaron Formosa's oeuvre does not deviate thematically from the strictly spiritual. The focus is not on just the narration of Biblical episodes



Aaron Formosa

that have become entrenched in our psyche like a worn-out cliché. Many times, the spiritual message of the particular episode is most of the time elusive, concealed amid the technical bravura of the artist in portraying unnecessary detail or in the glamorisation of the story to satisfy preconceived embedded notions of its dynamics.

Having studied philosophy (Formosa holds a master's in that subject and teaches it at Gozo's Sir

M.A. Refalo Sixth Form), Formosa releases us, through his art, from the physicality and the solidity of our human condition by liberating the narrative from constraints and limits, and transforms the whole story etched in our memories through the gospels, to an intimation of it as a whispering metaphysical alternative.

The Gozitan artist eliminates all the unnecessary ingredients of theatricality to arrive at a rarefied essence of the actual

episode. He is not interested in adding strata to the story. He is an alchemist who filtrates the base elements out of it, thus arriving at a timeless impression of its glowing substance.

The French 19th century Symbolist artist Odilon Redon similarly reduced the Biblical narrative into its contemplative empirical form. The real pull of the works lay in the supernatural light that emanated from them. In Redon's words: "There, in the pure and simple nature of the tone, in the delicacies of *chiaroscuro*, is the secret of the entire work, a completely picturesque invention which incarnates the idea and gives it flesh and bones, so to speak. This has nothing to do with anecdotes."

In just the same way, Formosa delivers us from the anecdotal and immerses the compositions in a preternatural twilight, the time of day that is pregnant with meaning and silence as day turns into night. These works are like flickers of candlelight, before the pitch black of night drowns them out. It is self-explanatory that Formosa chose *Twilights* as the title of his exhibition.

His series of four paintings titled *Christ and the Children*,

evokes the elegiac mood of Rembrandt's *Simeon in the Temple*; the golden glow that emanates from the Christ child is suggestive of regal, divine power that bathes Simeon in its wake. Formosa, however, immerses all of the protagonists, Christ, children, the crowd, the buildings and the trees, in a homogenous glow, perhaps delivering a pantheistic message that, nonetheless, all creation is inherently divine.

"Formosa delivers us from the anecdotal and immerses the compositions in a preternatural twilight"

The *Nativity* series of paintings have a haunting otherworldly quality that shrouds the divine birth as a union between heaven and earth. In *Nativity 5*, the human protagonists merge like stalagmites in the grotto, as they watch over the newborn child peacefully resting. The roof of the

grotto is suggestive of heavenly hosts of angels, meshing the narrative into one whole – earth meeting heaven above as a message of universal salvation.

Formosa sometimes refers to art history for inspiration as in the series on *The Assumption of the Virgin* where Titian's masterpiece is revisited. The vibrancy of Titian brushwork is replaced by Formosa's mellow palette which imbues the icon of Venetian Renaissance into a silent tenuous memory of it.

The three protagonists in *The Walk to Emmaus* are huddled amorously in a way reminiscent of how Slovene artist Zoran Mušič shaped human figures into his compositions by organically integrating every element into the tapestry of his landscapes. The two disciples are earnestly discussing recent events and expressing their sadness to their fellow traveller along the road to Emmaus. The Gozitan artist poignantly captures their dismay in a painting where he has summed up the expectant mood in a green twilight.

Formosa's *Supper at Emmaus*, the second chapter of this story of hope and salvation, strongly evokes Rembrandt's *The Supper*

at Emmaus (c. 1628). In the Dutch Golden Age master's work, the focus is on the interplay between the reaction of one of the disciples and the silhouette of the 'exhausted' Jesus. The other disciple is shrouded in the darkness, kneeling in the knowledge that this Jesus who has indeed triumphed over death while the tavern owner is in the background.

In Formosa's narrative, Jesus transfers his spirit into the loaves of bread on the table which are out of the viewer's perspective. The dark silhouette of Jesus, as though worn out through the execution of the miracle and about to vanish into thin air, complements the transfixed glances of the two disciples and the tavern's owner in that moment of stark realisation that something of supernatural relevance had just occurred. The emphatic power of the moment of transubstantiation is captured sublimely by the Gozitan artist in a composition that enhances the drama of the Biblical episode.

In a composition of golden ochre and green, Formosa's *Deposition* illustrates the moment when Christ is laid down to rest. The semiotic relevance of the two colours adorns the painting with



The Supper at Emmaus. PHOTOS: J. CORDINA

implied meaning. Here is regal divinity (the ochre) still glowing although the soul has parted. The green twilight symbolises hope in resurrection and in a new dawn for humanity.

One can perhaps discover references to Titian's *The Placing of Christ in the Sepulchre* and his earlier *The Entombment* of 1559. The desperate anguished movement of Mary, St John, Mary

Magdalene and the cassocked Joseph of Arimathea in the Venetian master's painting is replaced in the Gozitan artist's work by a subdued and resigned calm. This adds a measure of solemnity that one finds also in George Fenech's interpretation of the same theme.

Twilights invites us to contemplate on famous New Testament episodes that are among the cornerstones of Christianity. Like

Anton Inglott last century, Formosa very effectively filters off the superfluous in the narrative build-up of the gospels to reveal these episodes as murmurs, as introspective prayers that resonate with extraordinary spiritual relevance.

Twilights is hosted by Il-Haġar Museum of Victoria, Gozo, between February 27 and April 6. Entrance is free but COVID-19 restrictions apply.