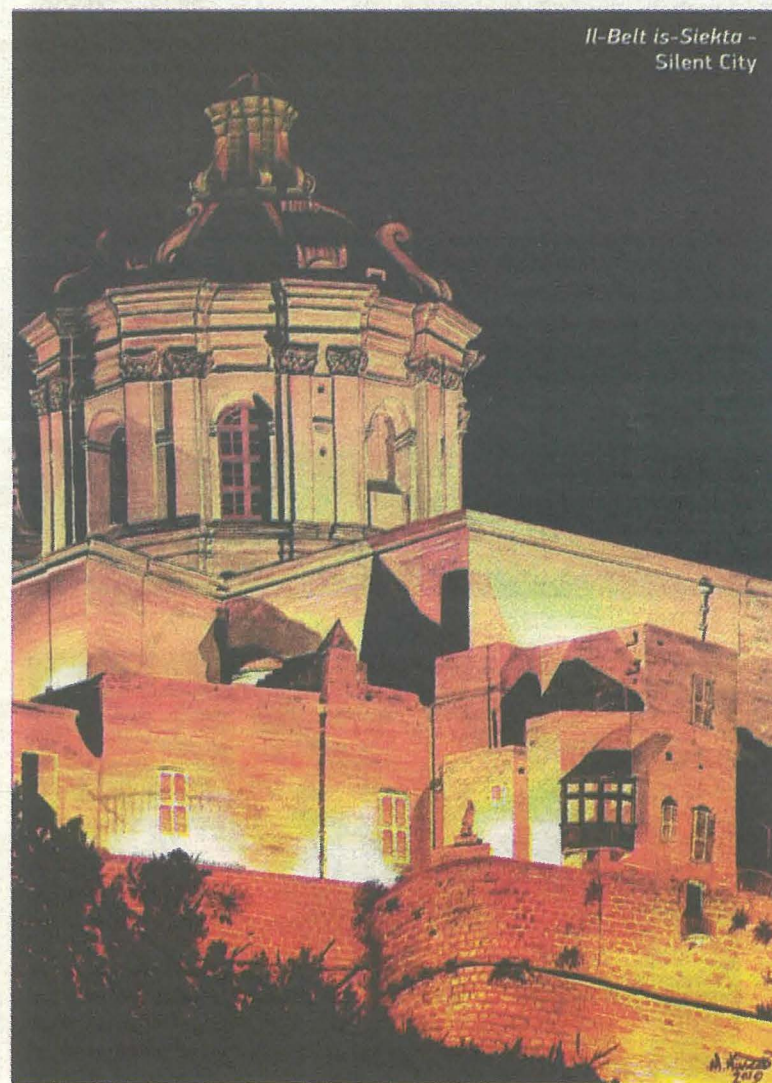


ARTS&ENTERTAINMENT VISUAL ARTS

Painting the light fantastic

Local Maltese artist **MARK MUSCAT** is painting Malta in a whole new light. His solo exhibition *Tiżwiqa* opens in Mosta next weekend at Razzett tal-Markiz. Ahead of the opening *Times of Malta* talks to the artist about his striking work.



Il-Belt is-Siehta - Silent City



LAURA SWALE

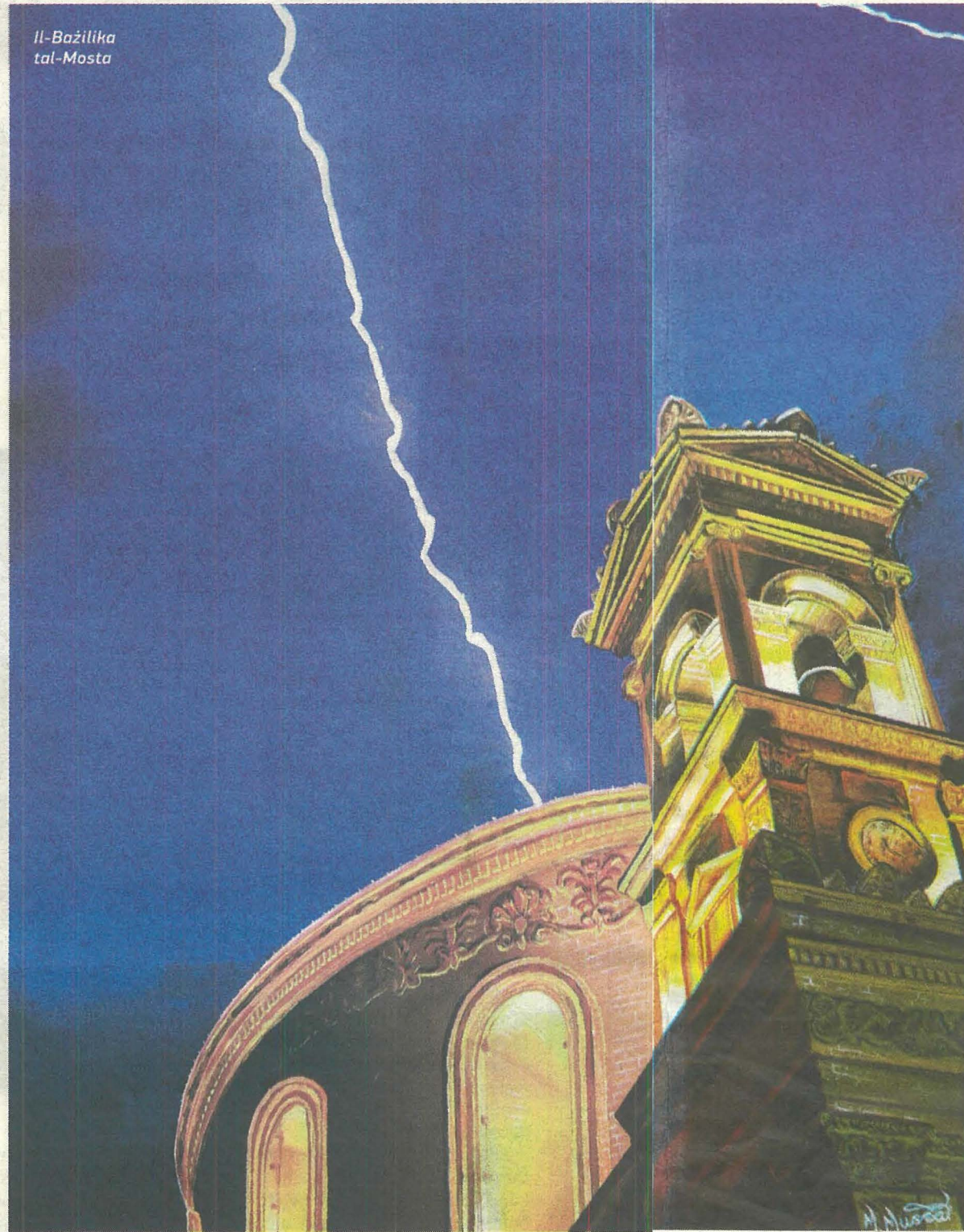
Mark Muscat first came to my attention when he posted a painting in my Facebook group Malta Artists. Pictured from the ground looking skyward, *Il-Bażilika tal-Mosta* stands firm against sharp fork lightning in a chill-inducing display of heavenly power. Pardon the pun, but it really struck me. It was like no watercolour I'd ever seen before.

And that's probably because it wasn't a watercolour at all. Ooops. As I later discovered, he used acrylics. Considering I've spent a lifetime painting and many years teaching art, I'm a bit embarrassed I got it wrong. So, a disclaimer if I may. Although acrylic is thought of as a thicker, more opaque medium, it can nonetheless be thinned-down and used in light washes to create watercolour-esque effects, like those in Muscat's translucent firmament.

Muscat is a founding member of the Malta Artists group, which is great for spotting talent. Indeed, you wouldn't be reading this article if I hadn't seen *Il-Bażilika tal-Mosta* and earmarked Muscat for coverage if ever he had a show.

His drawing technique is nothing unusual. Although well-drafted, (they are intricately rendered in near-photographic detail) his architectural sketches must look prosaic and bare before being adorned with their magical cloaks of colour and light. It is Muscat's preference for night-time scenes, combined with his treatment of artificial light, that make his paintings somehow rare and bewitching.

An entirely different, but equally arresting animal is his monochrome work. Reminiscent of black and white photography, the secret of its strange allure is elusive. But when it comes to his full-colour work, the elegance and drama with which he illuminates these majestic facades elevates his style from mere photorealism, to something more evocative and otherworldly, ensuring it remains current and relevant within the genre.



Il-Bażilika tal-Mosta

Like the majority of fine artists in Malta, art is something Muscat does in his spare time. This passion is often relegated to 'hobby' status due to the challenges associated with eking out a living from it; artists must not only stand out, but be savvy self-promoters. Despite some notable exceptions, commercially successful fine artists in Malta are few and far between. Most artists work everyday jobs, and treat art as a pastime which might occasionally bring in some extra income.

But then, it tends not to be about the money; most artists are motivated by creativity and practise art for the stimulating experience, the satisfaction of the end result, and (let's be honest) the positive feedback or acclaim it might garner. In Malta at least, fellow artists are usually the first to support and encourage each other by acknowledging good work. The visual arts community is warm, welcoming and generally has your back.

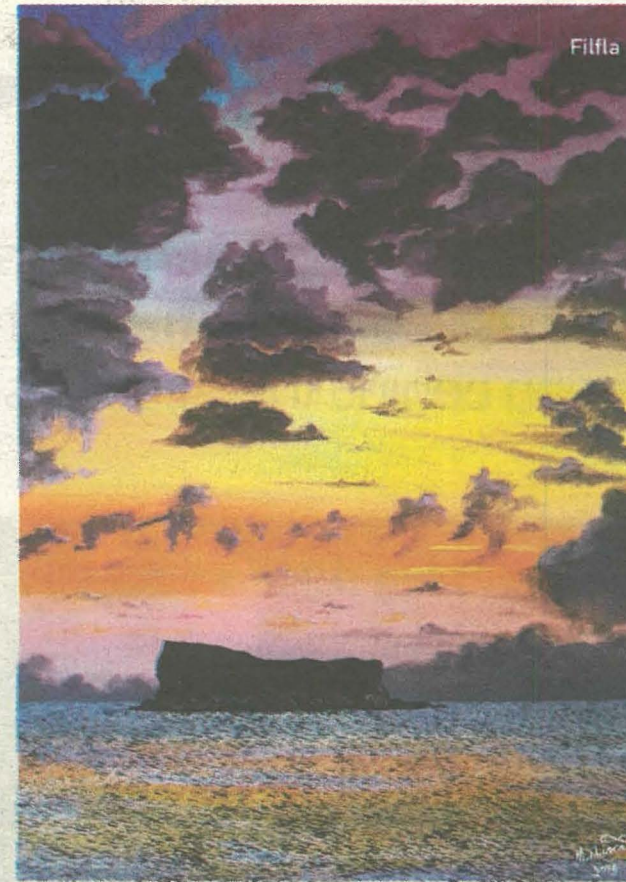
Considering Malta's artists must be extra-disciplined to find time for their art, it's a real achievement to produce enough quality work to merit a show. Hats off to Muscat then for this exhibition, in which the beautiful country he grew up in serves as his muse. I congratulate him on this achievement and we

open our conversation with my introductory question.

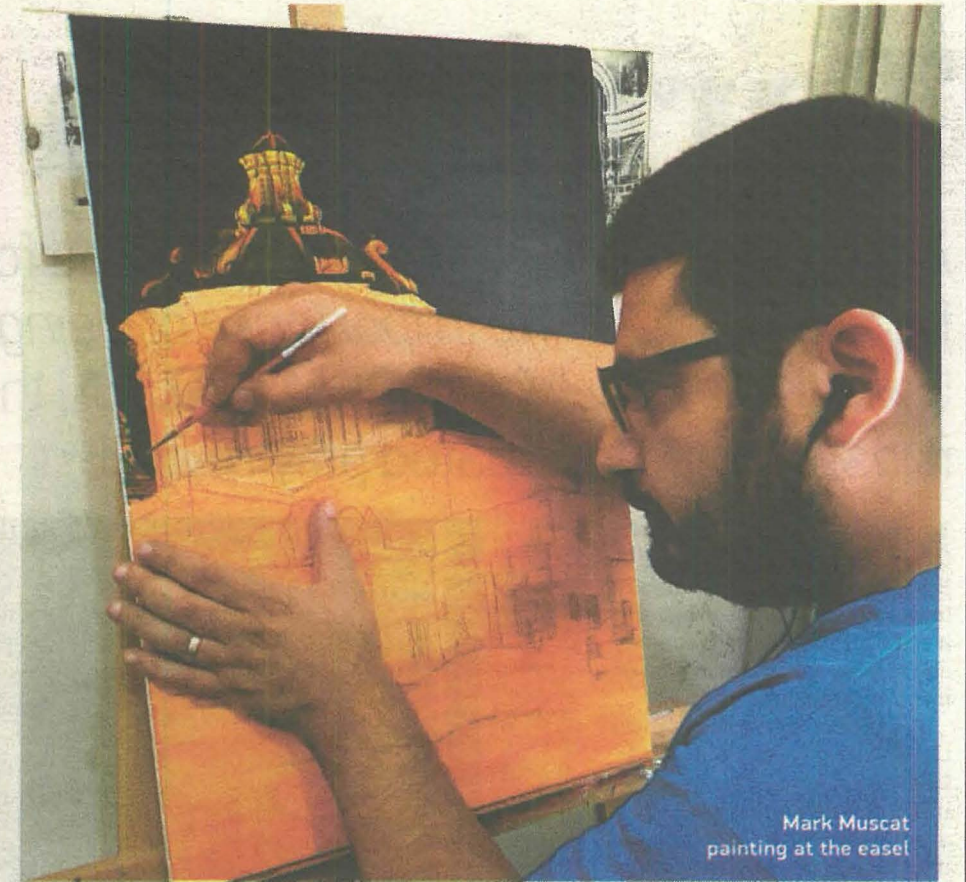
"The elegance and drama with which he illuminates these majestic facades elevates his style from mere photorealism, to something more evocative and otherworldly"

Mark, can you tell us a bit about yourself?

"I was born in 1982. I am married with two children and I work full time as a travelling salesman in ironmongeries and marine shops. Obviously I like to paint but I like to read too. I'm also a fireworks enthusiast and in the summer I visit local village feasts to meet my friends and watch the firework shows."



Filfla



Mark Muscat painting at the easel

In this exhibition there are three paintings made this way."

What can you tell us about the exhibition?

"The show is curated by Ms Valentina Lupo and its title *Tiżwiqa* translates into English as 'Variety.' I chose it because I am presenting a variety of colours, methods and subjects close to my heart. Twenty two of the thirty paintings are for sale and some are available as prints on canvas. Most are new and this is the first time they are being exhibited."

The work in the show is all inspired by Malta. What is it about this country that inspires you so much?

"In Malta we have a lot of beautiful scenery, buildings and architectural stone carvings. I'm proud that I am Maltese and that's why I like to paint Malta. The paintings in the show fall into three main genres: surreal art, landscapes and seascapes, and architectural art. This last one is closest to my heart. It is difficult, however, as I have to be very precise and cannot afford any deviation from the original. It requires the utmost concentration and dedication to study the fine detail of the shadows and light, be it natural or artificial. I also like the details of the deterioration one finds in the soft Maltese limestone, especially in the stone carvings which enhance Maltese architecture."

I understand your interest in art goes back a long time, and that you even won some competitions as a child. When and how did you start painting?

"From a very young age, I was interested in art and I liked to paint. At the age of 18, I had my first solo art exhibition. Since then I have participated in various collective exhibitions. I had a break from art which lasted nine years, and in 2009 I started painting again. For the last three years, I have been taking art more seriously and finally I'm having my second solo art exhibition."

Do you prefer any particular medium or techniques?

"My favourite medium is acrylic on canvas, but sometimes I like to experiment with other mediums mixed with acrylic, such as heavy structured gel. Other times I use other natural materials in my paintings to achieve my desired results."

How has your artwork evolved over the years?

"I started off using pencil and charcoal and acrylic on canvas, but then I began to introduce other materials to make the textured background I desired. I even tried to achieve a 3D effect using low relief and high relief."

artists who like to discuss and give you their opinions. By sharing ideas and information, we can learn from each other. There are also those artists who are a bit conservative, but every artist has their own abilities and talents. In Malta and Gozo we have a good number of well-established and talented artists."

How are you feeling about the upcoming show and how do you hope your work will be received by the public?

"I'm very excited about the exhibition. It's been a lot of work so I'm very

much looking forward to it. I hope that many people will come and that it will be a success. Special thanks go to my curator Ms Valentina Lupo, my wife, our families and friends for their help and support."

Muscat is also keen to acknowledge and thank Joe Bartolo and the committee of Mosta's philanthropic NGO Talent Mosti for hosting the exhibition. They have known each other since Muscat's first exhibition at the same venue 20 years ago. Speaking of Muscat's more recent work, Bartolo says "When I saw his paintings, my first

thought was that he had begun photography, but they were paintings!" Indeed, Muscat's ability to surprise will no doubt continue as he enters this exciting new creative chapter, and I, for one, will be watching with interest.

Tiżwiqa Art Exhibition by Mark Muscat is open at Razzett tal-Markiz Mallia Tabone, Mosta from February 2-16, Monday to Friday 6pm to 8.30pm, Saturday 9.30am to 12 noon, 6pm to 8.30pm, Sunday 9.30am to 12 noon, 3.30pm to 8.30pm. View Mark Muscat's portfolio on his Mark's Art Facebook page.