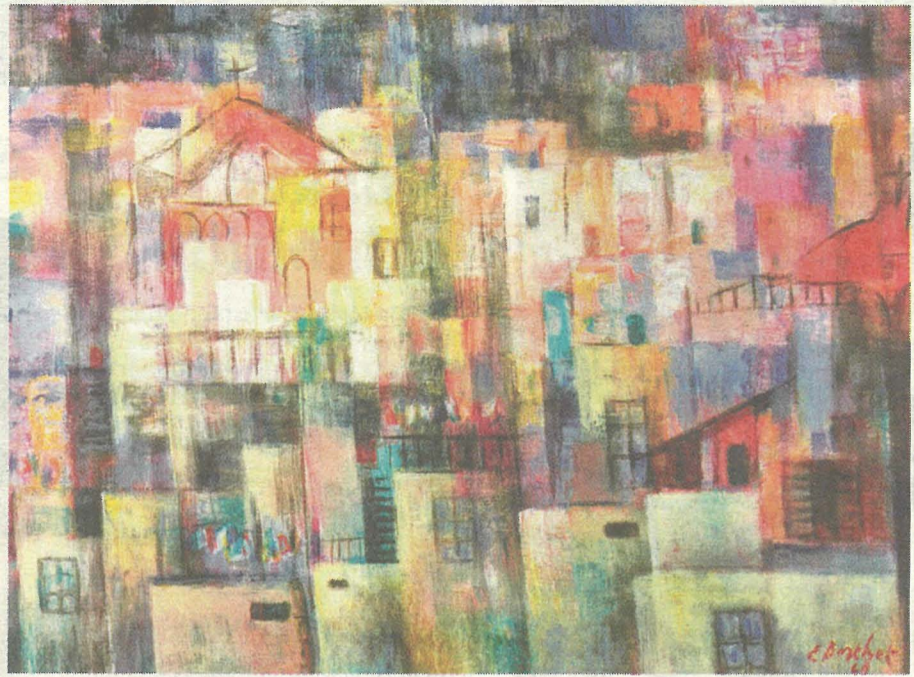


## ARTS &amp; ENTERTAINMENT BOOKS



Still Life



Rooftops

## Esprit Barthes – a colourful life

To mark the centenary of the birth of **Esprit Barthes**, an exhibition next weekend offers unprecedented access to nearly 130 of his paintings, many previously unseen. **Esther Lafferty** talks to its curator **E.V. Borg** about this rare opportunity to see such a large collection of his work.

Next weekend, on November 16 and 17, *Esprit Barthes, 1919-1999, A Critical Appraisal*, takes place at the Cavalieri Art Hotel in St Julian's. It is the first time such a cross-section on his work has been on show. Chosen and curated by art critic E.V. Borg, the exhibition includes many paintings which have been borrowed from family collections and have never been shown publicly before.

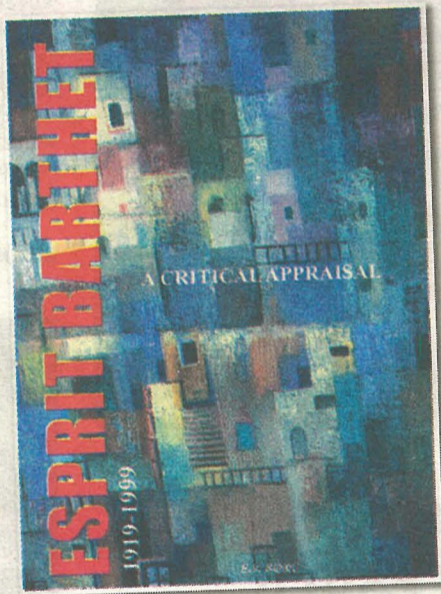
While he has studied and appraised the work of many other artists throughout his career, Borg has a particular interest in Barthes. Borg was taught by Barthes as a young man at the Lyceum in Ħamrun in the early 1960s, and Barthes's instruction and enthusiasm during these school art classes encouraged him to follow a path in art and art criticism.

"Barthes broadened my horizons and set me on a path that encompassed art, philosophy and life and how they are inextricably linked," smiles Borg. "Art for me is life!"

**"When I was at school, he used to say 'everything is a cube' and my friends would laugh because they didn't understand"**

Borg has since appraised Barthes's work over many decades and it is therefore fitting that he curates this retrospective, paying homage to Barthes's extraordinary artistic output and celebrating his influence on Maltese modern and contemporary art alongside his contemporaries Antoine Camilleri and Emvin Cremona.

"Barthes was a prolific artist, producing hundreds and hundreds of pieces from portraits, which sold like hot pastizzi and made him rich, to landscapes and much more," explains Borg. "In the early 1950s he was experimenting with cubism and the



abstract for example. In the 1960s art and art education in Malta was primitive, so having travelled to Rome where he saw innovative ideas and materials, Barthes introduced new working practices and methods to Malta.

"Barthes believed still life was the basis of all art, regarding each painting as a construction," explains Borg. "He used them to teach perspective and proportion this way, and still lifes were an exercise, for him, of continual study. He was a very meticulous man.

"When I was at school, he used to say 'everything is a cube' and my friends would laugh because they didn't understand."

"However, geometry is the building blocks of all nature and life, and there's a perfection in cubes, cylinders and pyramids. It was because of the way Barthes saw and used these shapes that he became such a great artist."

From an enormous variety, Borg's careful selection promises an exhibition that showcases Barthes's talent and versatility. It includes choice pieces from each genre,

sections including sensual nudes, formidable self-portraiture, landscapes, abstracts, sacred art and also Barthes's iconic colourful rooftops.

"Despite his classic background and some melancholic episodes, Barthes was a romantic at heart and he found joy in light and life."

"This was apparent in his work," explains Borg. "His palette altered over the course of his career from darker shades to his famed use of brilliant colour, or stained glass luminosity. Towards the end of his life Barthes also created sculpture, which integrated painting with found objects and materials such as metal and plastic. They were a surprise to both the people who had followed his work and, I think, to Barthes himself!"

While the eclectic mix of art on show offers a wonderful snapshot into the breadth of Barthes's talent, a wider selection of his work is included in Borg's new illustrated book *Esprit Barthes: (1919-1999) A Critical Appraisal*, which includes the exhibition catalogue. The book is a deep and thoughtful analysis of both the pieces in the exhibition and Barthes's wider artistic practice, accompanied by hundreds of illustrations, sketches, paintings, and photographs of the artist himself, his family and his studio.

Barthes's work drew on the art of artists worldwide, and in Europe in particular, and Borg discusses their influence upon him. Barthes was, for example, particularly inspired by Cézanne, whose colourist approach resonated strongly with him and Borg, interestingly, compares a still-life of an enormous table by Barthes with a similar painting by Cézanne.

In its pages he includes discussion too, of a Barthes landscape, its style inspired by Van Gogh, and contrasts this with other Barthes landscapes painted using alternative techniques.

Over 400 pages long, Borg's volume is both a detailed exploration of the man behind the paintbrush and a wonderful



celebration of Barthes's place among the greats of 20th century art and the legacy he has left behind.

Researched over five years, and with a foreword written by Ugo Mifsud Bonnici and Joseph FX Zahra, the book includes a timeline of the artist's career, several catalogues and brochures dating back as far as the 1930s, and essays and previous appraisals of several of Barthes's exhibitions in the late 20th century.

Just as it is a magnificent overview of Barthes's art, life and philosophy in vivid detail, it is also the pinnacle of another life-long passion, that of Borg for Barthes's art and influence, on whom he is the indisputable authority.

**The exhibition is open on November 17 at the Cavalieri Art Hotel in St Julian's until noon, at which the book *Esprit Barthes, 1919-1999, A Critical Appraisal* will be launched. A smaller exhibition of approximately 50 works drawn from this larger collection will be held at the House of Representatives in Valletta between February 12 and March 12, 2020.**