

Lifestyle & Culture

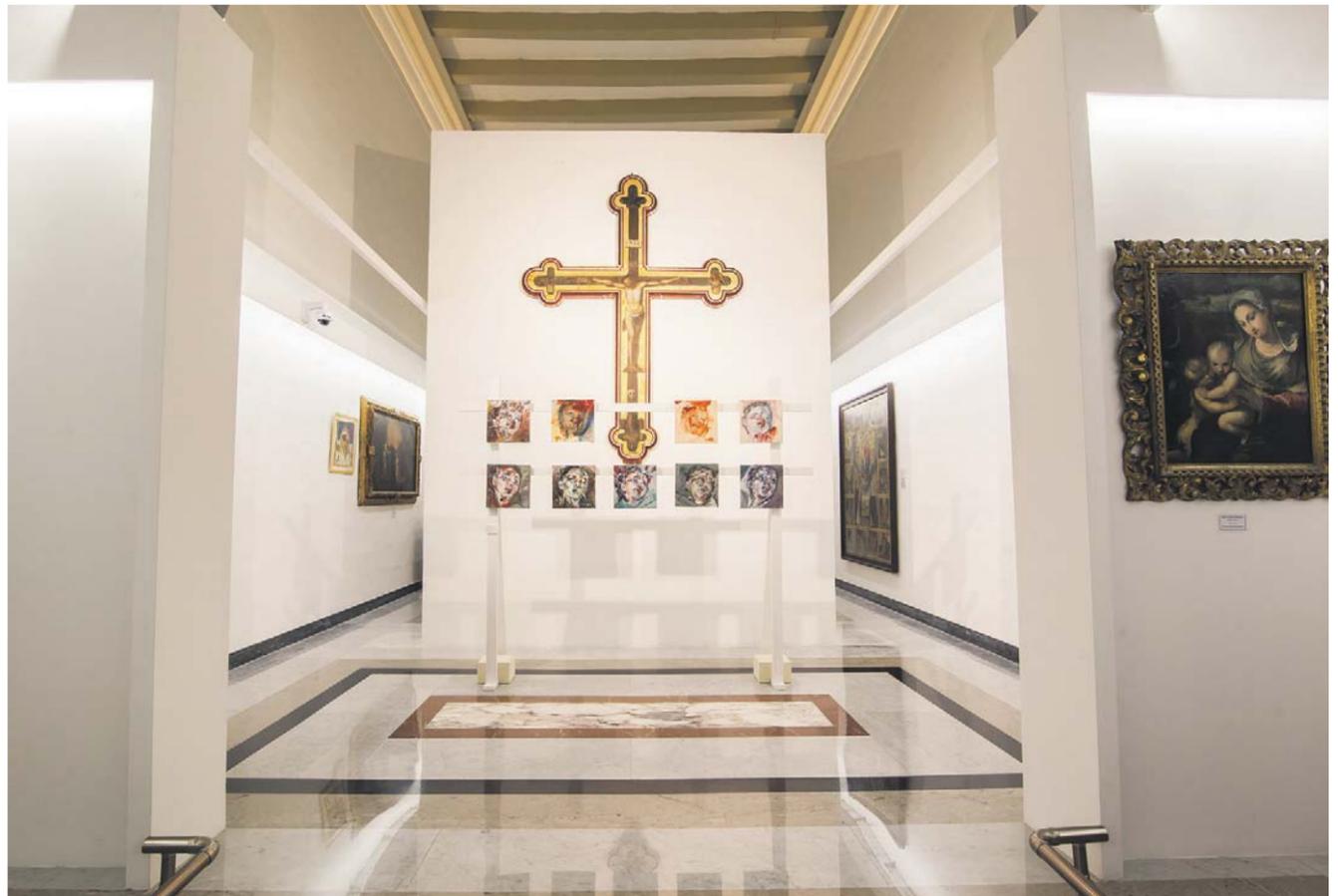
Free DOOM

■ Alexandra Mara Camilleri

Contemporary art functions within various brackets of society. Mostly envisioned nowadays as a product of the elite, used to evoke enjoyment within the private spaces of individuals, the pedagogical aspect of art is seemingly lost. Echoing Claude Matisse verbatim about 'armchair art', this sentiment seems to have somewhat won over the art world during the past decades. In hindsight, the APS Mdna Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale is trying to fight against this form of apathy and inertia by contributing a didactic conversation between the past, the present and the future.

Art, for centuries, was seen as a political tool utilised by leaders to evoke or disprove of a message. In many ways, this aspect has translated itself en masse in today's newspaper caricatures and political cartoons that circulate. The 'politicness' of art remains imbued in certain artworks and platforms, however the reach perpetuated by these cartoons triumphs over traditional art. How many can say that they visit galleries, both local and abroad, in search for the new contemporary art message? Not a lot. While the Baroque regime (and it was a regime, by all accounts) had its political message indoctrinated into the church, a social and cultural gathering space for all – be it poor or infamously rich – was virtually the only source of news for many. Our modern world has the media, the Fourth Estate, to replace this to a certain extent, with one tempered difference: the necessity of freedom of speech. Going hand in hand with freedom of speech and expression is the hostility one, many or all express towards controversial pieces. To mind springs the seminal example of Guernica, completed by the Spanish giant Pablo Picasso in 1937. The artwork itself inspires freedom of speech and action, but of more interest to this argument is the tapestry commission by Nelson Rockefeller, nowadays hanging in the Headquarters of the United Nations in New York. When in 2003 a press conference was given at the Headquarters, addressing international press, a blue curtain concealed Picasso's jarring lines, elongated screams and torpid shapes. The Basque imagery of nationalism, the fight for freedom and rallying to arms, so celebrated during the Second World War by Allied countries, was found inconvenient. In the end, the compositional factors were just a facet of the pesky nature of this painting, as the message of the artwork conflicted with the Bush Presidency's decision to invade Iraq. In many ways, artists, either dead or alive, can be censored.

Politics is an everyday facet of our lives. It dictates our way of present and most importantly our future. Wit and strength combined, the Mdna Biennale continuously sharpens its ideology and message, to include as many forms and expressions as possible, whilst keeping aesthetic quality in mind. This year's theme will focus on the Mediterranean Sea as a space of conflicting spiritualities, ideologies, doctrines and philosophies. With a repertoire of local and international artists, all focusing on the theme 'The Mediterranean: A Sea of Conflicting Spiritualities', different resolutions will emerge to this motif.



Gulja Holland's 'Dreams of a Child' at the 2015 Mdna Biennale



Looking at Michael von Cube's works exhibited at the last Mdna Biennale, the series reads as a narrative, taking the struggles of life as an immigrant as the central scope. Composed of watercolour on a broad expanse of paper, the fragile quality of the technique and medium come to the fore as intrinsic aspects of the artwork. Like windows onto a scene, the narrative is captured in still moments, accompanied with text, speech or signs. As stated by the artist, von Cube adopts a 'reportage-style approach'. In so many ways, one can infer a relation to newspaper political cartoons. The directness and forthright of this series is perhaps the most obvious link. Malta, which incurred waves of immigration on-and-off, had its fair share of racist and intolerant polit-

ical voices over the past. The purpose of art, exhibitions and any instalment of work should be to uphold both the truth and sanctity of freedom of speech.

Another politically charged piece in the 2015 Mdna Biennale was the portrait series presented by Gulja Holland entitled 'Dreams of a Child'. Based on an internet-sourced image of a brutalised child in Gaza, Holland developed an expressive sequence of still portraiture that evolves accordingly to colour and brushwork. Other than that the images are completely identical. Exhibited around a sixteenth century crucifix, which forms part of the extant collection at the Cathedral Museum in Mdna, the faces mimic the traditional iconography of cherubs, peering at saintly figures amidst clouds. However

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the softness is non-existent. The portraits are presented in a horizontal fashion, comprised of two rows – as if they're lined up against a firing squad. The boldness of this message, delivered to an island in the Mediterranean Sea, also showcases the state of globalisation that continuously develops.

In many ways, art is there to give a voice to many issues – be they environmental, political, social or religious. In so many ways, art will continue to be censored in overt or covert ways, as predicted by the many examples of cancelled art shows and artists of this year (*Jian, Rape: Gender Violence Cultural Codes*, Beijing; Ai Wei Wei; the covering up of nude sculptures in the *Musei Capitolini* to accommodate a visiting Iranian delegate, and much more). Contemporary art, especially in the West, should be weaponised and used to counter this infringement on expression.

The APS Mdna Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale will be open from 13 November 2017 to 7 January 2018 at the Mdna Cathedral Museum. The exhibition is supported by APS Bank. For more information visit www.mdnabiennale.com