



**‘A short drive from Valletta, high on a hilltop, looms the famous medieval, walled citadel of Mdina, Malta’s ancient capital. Its medieval battlements face down to the valleys below, rising upwards and peaking at the dome of the magnificent Cathedral of St Paul.’**

## THE MALTESE TRADITION

The idyllic island of Malta is changing, and investing heavily in its arts and culture industries. Ahead of the first Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale, Tani Burns and Andrew Hancock - founders of ARTNAKED, a London based arts consultancy who partnered with the Biennale - explain why Malta is rapidly positioning itself as one of Europe’s great art capitals.

‘Jewel of the Mediterranean’ and, no doubt, an increasingly coveted destination in the travellers’ bucket list. Recently host to CHOGM 2015, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, Malta presented itself anew to HRH Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of York, who together revisited the setting for their honeymoon in St Paul’s Bay. Heads of State from throughout the Commonwealth gathered to build bridges of cooperation on an island that has served throughout history as a bridge between North Africa and Europe. In October 2016, Valletta plays host again, this time to the 7th World Summit on Arts and Culture, under the theme “At the crossroads? Cultural Leadership in the 21st Century”.

The depth of Malta’s rich heritage is well-known – written into its architecture and very infrastructure. Moorish structures sit side-by-side with those from the Baroque, Rococo and even neoclassical periods – and the prominence of the church as a social bedrock is evident in the decorated cathedrals and glittering altars established in those earlier periods. The position of the artist, as was the case in many Mediterranean countries was dictated by this fact, around the 16th-17th Centuries – a time when the Church was searching for a stylistic alternative to Mannerism in religious art that was tasked to counter the threat of Protestantism. No better example can be given than that of Caravaggio, whose painting ‘The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist’ was completed in 1608, commissioned by the Knights of Malta as an altarpiece which still hangs in the Cathedral of St John in the heart of Malta’s capital city, Valletta.

But the country has not been well-known in the past for its contemporary art scene. This is changing, and in 2015 Malta’s Culture Budget saw an increase of 25%, from €30 million to €46 million. Spurred on by the announcement that, in 2018, Valletta will be taking on the title of European Capital of Culture, developments in the cultural and artistic infrastructure of the island are going into overdrive, with regeneration projects giving a new lease of life to historic neighbourhoods and buildings – within a fresh and exciting new contemporary scene. Focal advances in the lead up to ‘V18’ include the Valletta Design Cluster, a first-of-its-kind initiative which will be established at the Old Abattoir site, Strait Street (which will soon become a brand name of art, culture and entertainment for the region) and MUŻA,

Malta’s new museum of art and a flagship project for the V18 project.

In light of these broader cultural developments, Malta’s annual festivals are garnering significant international attention. The Malta Jazz Festival celebrated its 25th year in the summer of 2015, and the Valletta Film Festival will return again in 2016 following the success of its inaugural edition in June. Presenting emerging and established talent in the world of cinema, VFF also offers a global perspective, in sections such as ‘Without Borders’ – focused on Scandinavia in 2015, and in 2016, the cinema of the Middle East. 2016 also sees a new strand of Art Film, co-curated by ARTNAKED and the VFF Directors.

A short drive from Valletta, high on a hilltop, looms the famous medieval, walled citadel of Mdina, Malta’s ancient capital. Its medieval battlements face down to the valleys below, rising upwards and peaking at the dome of the magnificent Cathedral of St Paul. This is the scene of a new, exquisitely curated contemporary art biennale, the Mdina Cathedral Biennale of Contemporary Art, which launched this November and runs until January.

Set against the extraordinary backdrop of the city’s baroque architecture – evident throughout its winding streets, palazzos, chapels and, of course, St. Paul’s Cathedral – it has enabled already a stimulating modern environment, in which works of art by artists from diverse cultural backgrounds are displayed together under one central theme: ‘Christianity, Spirituality and the Other’. The thematic approach is profoundly important, playing a central role in the overarching conception of the Artistic Director, Dr. Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci (simultaneously the Artistic Director of Strait Street) – to establish the Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale as a spiritual space of and for creativity. Against the backdrop of the city’s baroque splendour and its silent cobbled streets (Mdina being ‘The Silent City’), the Biennale is unlike anything Malta has seen to date. Fired up by the enormous growing interest in the cultural life of the country, the Biennale is drawing the best international art and attention to the island, as well as providing a platform on which Maltese artists can develop their work and concepts within the global context of the international contemporary art scene.

International works represent an impressive roster of artists including





Adam Chang, Natala & Valerya Cherkashin, Vincent Come, Bernard Cousinier, Michael von Cube, Philippe Desloubieres, Adam Dix, Andrew Hancock, James Alec Hardy, Christian Jaccard, Lena Lapschina, Kacha Legrand, Valera Loredana Longo, Frederique Lucien, Patrice Pantin, Denis Pondruel, Gildas Le Reste and Richard Shields. Nobel-winning playwright and pronounced atheist Dario Fo has also visited Malta to exhibit some of his latest theatrical and visual work as part of the Biennale, with an exhibition about St Francis of Assisi. From the small and exquisite Chapel of St Peter in Chains, along the cobbled streets, through the great halls of the Cathedral and its underground vaults, into the sacristy of St Paul's Cathedral and right up to its high altar, international contemporary art is in constant dialogue with the city, its history and its spirituality.

We at ARTNAKED are proud to have played a part in the first Mdina Biennale, and we look forward to the next instalment in 2017, which will lead directly into V18. As Creative Sponsors at the birth of this exciting addition to the contemporary art landscape, we have presented a careful selection of artists from the UK and internationally, chosen for their ability to respond intelligently and essentially to the theme, as well as deep knowledge of their long-standing artistic development: Adam Dix, Madeleine Fenwick, Andrew Hancock and Richard Shields (UK); Sergei Isakov (Russia); and Lena Lapschina (Austria).

We brought a small but well selected group of artists to Mdina, and hope that alongside the other artists being exhibited we can allow a Maltese audience and more international art-lovers a deep, rich and exciting contemporary art viewing experience. Given the strong and inimitable expression of faith on the island, our selection of artists was completely singular to this occasion.

Richard Shields, a Manchester-based artist, presents for the first time *The Madonna in the Blue*, created following his first visit to Malta in early 2015 and made using chalk dust on baize pool tables. Andrew Hancock, co-founder of ARTNAKED and practising artist (featured in the K&C Review in 2012), also created several new conceptual abstract paintings for the biennale in his studio in Malta, integrating into his work the very fabric of the island – its raw materials, limestone dust, chalk and found objects –

he incorporates, along with the spirit, the inextricable bodily existence of the land.

"Malta to me has been a lifelong family home and spiritual retreat" says Andrew Hancock, co-founder of ARTNAKED. "Being privileged in the making of these new artworks for the Cathedral Biennale, I am symbolically acting out ritual observances that stem from profound Catholic traditions in addition to certain art historical and theological ideas and practices. I am painting as part of a real pilgrimage and in my own manner making art as a religious obedience."

As the cultural and luxury markets of the Maltese islands develop alongside one another, the Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale stands in position to flourish, growing in prestige and attention year on year. From the heart of the citadel, the 5-star boutique hotel Xara Palace Relais & Châteaux upholds the potential for Mdina to become a real centre of cultural and luxury life across the island, with its restaurant The de Mondion gunning to take the country's first Michelin Star. Other restaurants in the vicinity, such as The Medina (judged Best Restaurant Overall in Malta in 2015), set in an original Norman residence amongst the honeycombed streets of Mdina, truly set the standard and are becoming destination establishments for lovers of gourmet.

From this ancient settlement from its high vantage point, you can look down and across the island as its inhabitants have done for over 6000 years – but, now, with a new perspective. Malta's modern cities, Sliema, St Julian's, Mosta, and Valletta, have opened up fully to the international world, with much to offer culturally and artistically as it braces itself for a greater role at the crossroads of the Mediterranean.

The Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale, with APS Bank as Main Partner, runs until 7 January 2016. For more information visit <http://www.mdinabiennale.org/>. For information on arts curatorial and programming organisation, ARTNAKED visit [www.artnaked.co.uk](http://www.artnaked.co.uk)

