

Lifestyle & Culture

A Tanti-Preti-Mdina Dialogue

■ Alexandra Mara Camilleri

This article will be a first for myself. Not only will it be discussed (sometimes) in the first person, it will also encompass my first interview, conducted with Darren Tanti, an artist of burgeoning fame and keen talent.

Darren Tanti, known for the candid portrayal of modern consumerism, is a returning artist to the APS Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale, having participated in the 2015-16 edition through the submission of two colossal paintings. Exhibited in the underbelly of the Mdina Cathedral Museum, the visceral aspect of both the paintings' subject as well as the location was explicit throughout. Tanti explained this space as the innards of the whole building, which was apt for his representation of his argot figures and pixelated organs. The hyperrealism imbued in his style is further emphasised through the seemingly unnatural hues of his palette.

When asked about his latest international endeavour with the Malta Pavilion for the 2017 Venice Biennale, Tanti stated the differences and similarities between the two projects. The 2017 Malta Pavilion, entitled *Homo Melitensis: An Incomplete Inventory in 19 Chapters*, was a symbiosis of the Mediterranean dynamics of Malta, married with the ever-changing identity of the islands. The curators, Raphael Vella and Bettina Hutschek, sought to create an image - an inventory - of what is essentially Maltese, whilst dealing with issues of contemporary object-based curating and museology. The decision to include contemporary art alongside artefacts from national and private collections is also reflective of the Mdina Biennale's position on current curatorship. Tanti presented an 8-year old painting of his sister, painted with the attributes of a modern female. Her striking pose is forward in perception and almost ruthless. Viewers fluent in Christian symbolism interpret the symbolic nature of the straw hat mostly as a halo, yet this feature can be taken just at face value. This oxymoronic aspect is rife within Tanti's oeuvre. Tanti confessed that the painting itself was chosen, not himself as an artist. The curators saw the imbued imagery within this portrait of his sister as being akin to both the manifesto of the Maltese Pavilion, and of that of the 2017 Venice Biennale. The importance of the narrative and dialogue within the space is a crucial aspect for Tanti. Sensitive to the aura exuded by his paintings, Tanti differentiates between a salon, a biennale, a gallery exhibition, a house, and a bazaar. Space, as he states, influences the paint-



ing and vice versa.

Regarding this year's Mdina Biennale edition, Tanti chose a loftier venue - one of the grand salons in the upper floor. Recently remodelled and reopened, Tanti's work will brush shoulders with several giants of the Maltese Baroque age, such as Mattia Preti, Antoine Favray and Mario Minniti. One of the first things Tanti declared was the honour he felt to have this opportunity to reflect, showcase and have a dialogue with these salient figures of our history. Tanti also expressed admiration for the curatorial intent present

within the Mdina Biennale, especially the intense emphasis on the usage of a living space. Tanti will be presenting an original piece greatly indebted to a triptych painted during his youth. This triptych, presented during the artist's exhibition called *Omen* in 2012 at St James Cavalier, depicted three figures in varying states of undress, portrayed in a crucified manner. The central figure, robust and rugged, is portrayed with a mix of symbols. The turban and the Jewish plaits may seem to be aimed at the on-going conflict within the Mediterranean,

yet taking a Maltese slant to it, I somehow envision the turban to act like the traditional kerchief worn by stone masons, as well as the torn jeans. The figure on the left, a hermaphroditic figure bearing the artist's self-portrait, is tied down by the expectations of rural life - symbolised through the festive banners. The female figure on the other hand depicts the consumerism of modern life.

Tanti acknowledged the change in his style over the years. While *Omen* was completed during his early twenties, the artist has experienced a

“

The figure on the left, a hermaphroditic figure bearing the artist's self-portrait, is tied down by the expectations of rural life - symbolised through the festive banners.

”

number of changes through his oeuvre. The hyperrealist strain is kept, however it is tempered through new ethics and effected aesthetics. Concerning this year's submission for the Mdina Biennale, Tanti confessed that the theme, as always, was what drew him towards the project. His strive to create dissonance and harmony, protest and resistance, is a key aspect that arises throughout his work. Tanti may have mentioned that he may revisit the triptych of crucifixions, but the exact details remain a complete mystery to me. As always, Tanti is an exciting artist, one that always pushes the confines of the artistic language, narrative, and meaning.

For more information on the APS Mdina Biennale, visit www.mdinabiennale.com