

Lifestyle & Culture

Abstracting the Mediterranean: Fluidity and the politics of space

■ Nikki Petroni

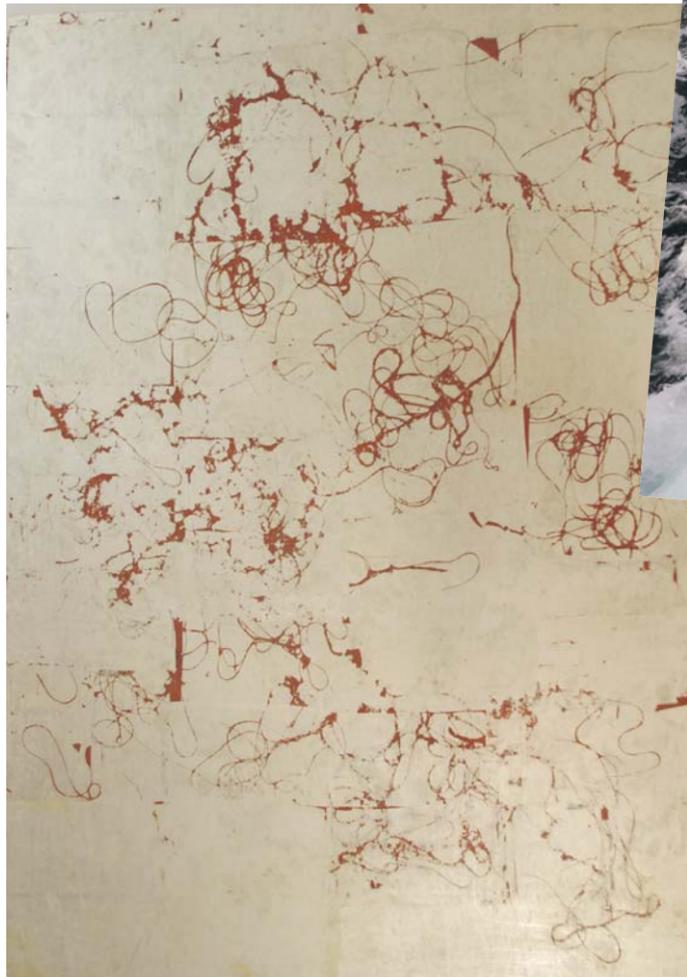
Abstraction as a visual language has the capacity to elicit that which cannot be articulated. It distances itself from figuration precisely because the latter is intelligible; it portrays the familiar from which we may identify specific or symbolic associations, offering a sense of clarity even if scenarios are not actually seen in the objective world. Versatile and unrestricted, abstraction has been exploited by artists from different periods and cultures. There is evidently no termination to the process of extracting meaning from the elaborate, however it is a great challenge to maintain the relevance of abstraction in contemporary times.

Some artists participating in the 2017 APS Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale have decided to confront the past and present possibilities of the language, and the results are conceptually intriguing as well as visually compelling.

James Alec Hardy, a British video artist, incorporates values of distortion and imperfection to evoke the dynamism of a volatile sea, a space that symbolises change as a natural constant. Disorder emerges as the actualisation of one's human and socio-political experience, yet his ethereal use of colour relinquishes the pessimism of the unknown. Designed to be installed in a cavernous space, amongst the fragments of ruins in the basement of the Mdina Cathedral Museum, Hardy's video weaves through the gaps of history and memory, reigniting the spirit of the past in a language that speaks to contemporary viewers. His return to the Mdina Biennale following the 2015 chromatically-choreographed video-crucifixion piece signifies a continuity of dialogue with the city's identity as transformed by the contemporary intervention into the quasi-archaic spaces of its tangible and intangible heritage.

The digital medium and use of electronic equipment in his work transposes the concept of ruins and the sense of loss, beautifully recognised as imperative to cultural and art historical memory by Alois Riegl and Walter Benjamin, to the discarded objects of modern communication.

Merna Liddawi, a highly-captivating artist raised in Jordan within an Orthodox tradition, reinvents the divine image of the icon in abstract paintings that embody the spiritual. Like the art of her predecessors who strongly conveyed a metaphysical god-like aura through abstraction, artists such as Henri Matisse and Mark Rothko, Liddawi's works portray simplicity with a harmony of colours and undefined forms. The themes of her works tackle the concept of



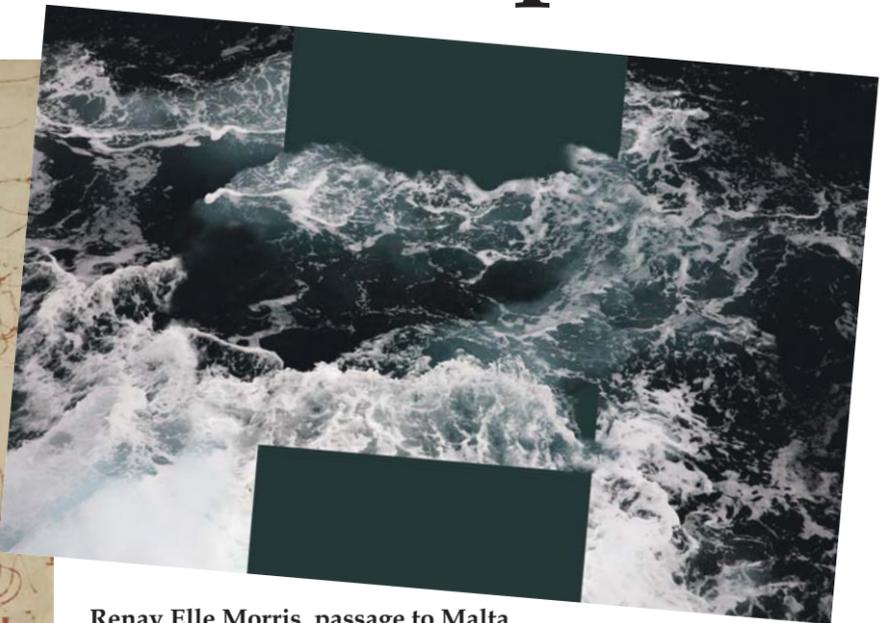
Merna Liddawi - White Light 3

genesis through dialogues on minimalist colour and luminescence, as well as other subjects that allude to the spiritual and incomprehensible. Liddawi was recently awarded a top prize for painting at the 2017 Florence Biennale.

Renay Elle Morris is an American photographer and designer based in New York City who works with photo-manipulation. Her visit to Malta inspired her to create images that convey

the mythic depth of a sea that surrounds the island and has been the main source of its historical narrative-evolution. She juxtaposes photos of artworks and other objects with those of the sea, overlaying them with vivid colours that invoke the mind to wander and lose track in the chromatic depths of calming movement.

I would like to quote Morris' poetic words that succinctly grasp the essence of the



Renay Elle Morris, passage to Malta

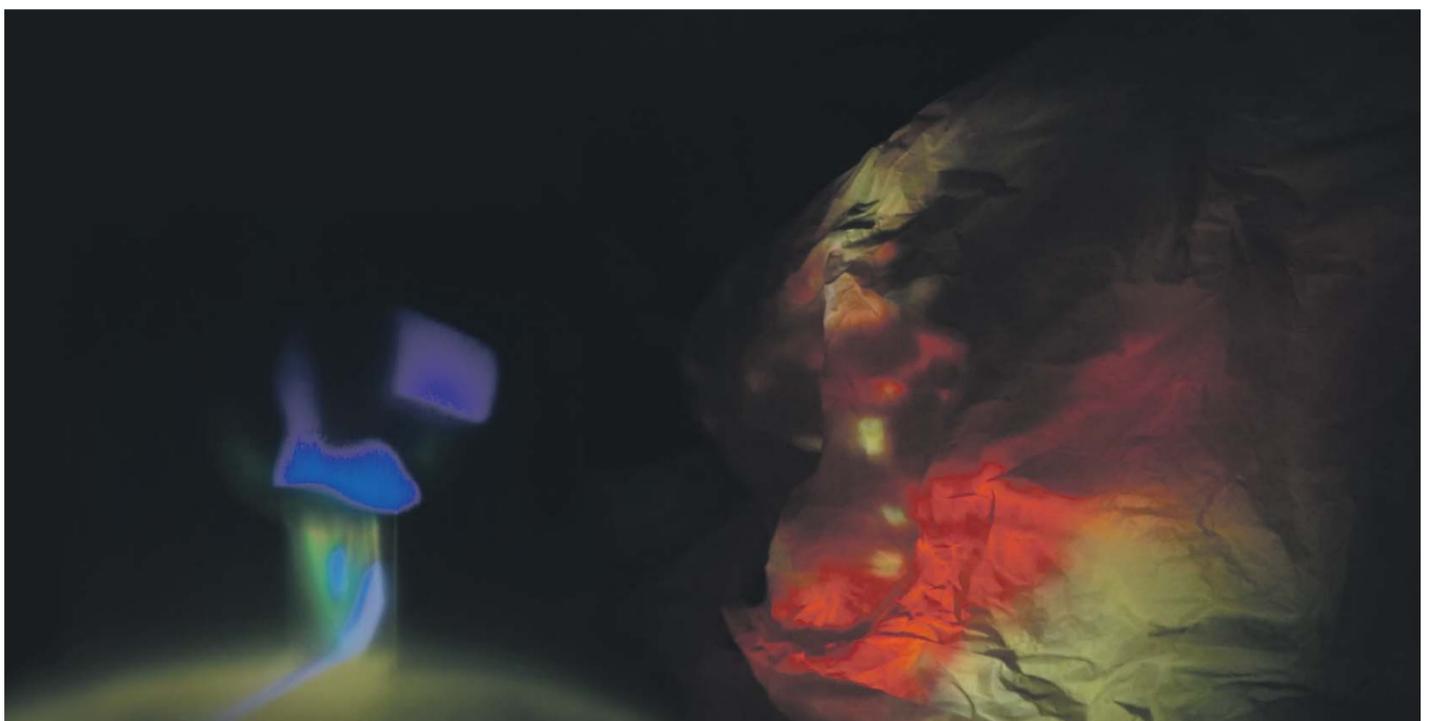
Mediterranean:

"The Mediterranean is a sea that boasts a trove of hidden secrets, a glorious energy, it is littered with shards of glass that illuminate its shores, and while what is lost in its depth remains mysterious, we know it continues to lure and seduce with its limitless power and chaotic verse. We know that it also found play in battles between barbaric states, as merchant ships passed one another in sea-lanes and in ordinary souls of diverse origins seeking salvation, life's liberties and freedom through faith, all the while clinging onto overloaded transports. And what prayers were said when the sea was angry and those lost their way only to be forgiven and allowed to continue on in uncertain currents, finding relief in its calm, its grace."

Our sea has been the central source of inspiration to the artists of the 2017 APS Mdina Biennale. 'The Mediterranean: A Sea of Conflicting Spiritualities', the theme of this year's exhibition,

was chosen by Artistic Director Dr. Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci to incite debate on the contemporary contentions surrounding Maltese waters. The three artists discussed here reveal the unbounded ends of contemporary art in spite of overlapping approaches to visual utterance. This is at the core of the project's objective; to explore the contemporary in relation to the traditional and the art of the past, exposing audiences to new aesthetic routes that speak for and about us today. The backdrop of the Mdina Cathedral Museum, a historically-loaded space that is much more demanding for artists than a neutral white-cube format, makes the experience of viewing the various projects all the more riveting.

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



James Alec Hardy - 171111 (video still)