

Lifestyle & Culture

Suprahuman



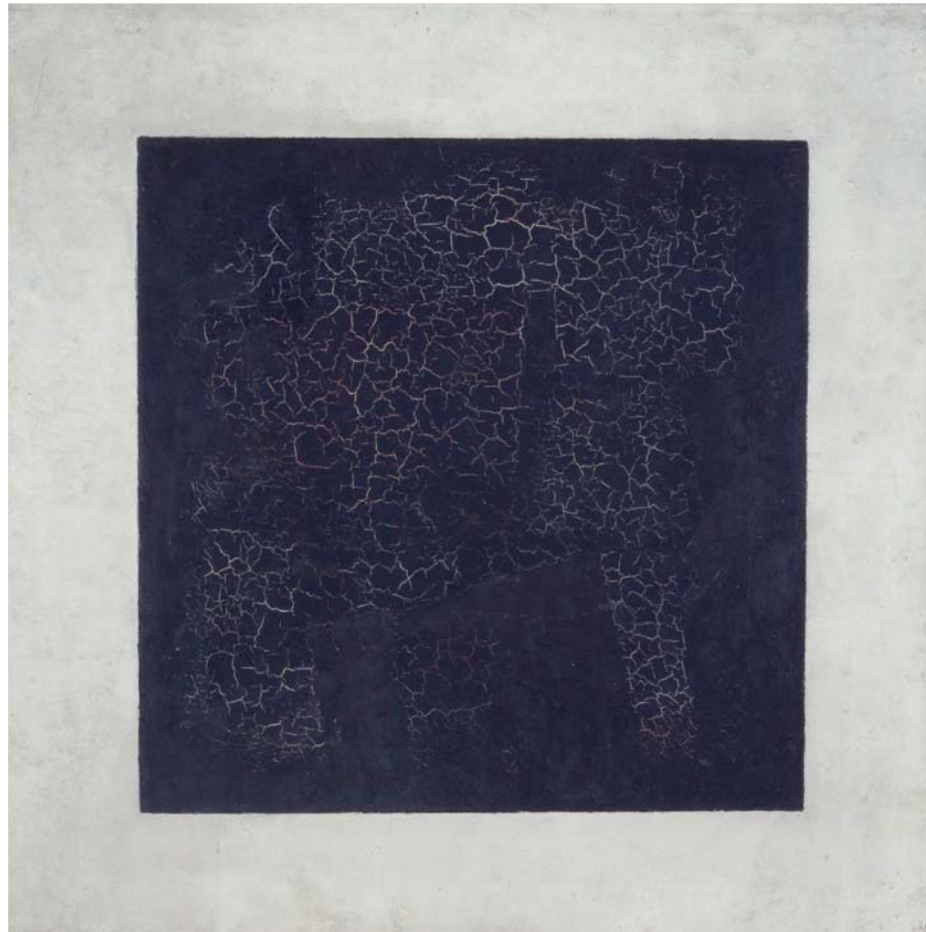
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The APS Contemporary Art Mdina Biennale, opening in March, is at the helm of discussing the nature and role of an artist in the contemporary, political and environmental space. Art and nature have coexisted since the very first age of Man.

Our very first work of art emerges from the prehistoric cave art of Lascaux and Altamira, wherein mankind's first artist committed the natural world to paint. In many ways, this relationship between man, art and nature continued to evolve throughout the centuries in a number of ways, meanings and styles.

From the times of the Greeks, with the fabled Zeuxis painting a bunch of grapes so realistically that a flock of birds attempted to feast on them. This contentious relationship between nature, art and artist is a predominant theme. The nature of man, to subordinate, control and trick what is naturally free and untamed, highlights man's relationship with nature. The unruliness and wild aspects of nature's glory, while awe-inspiring and beautiful, are in turn digested and forever locked in place through the stillness of painting. This aspect continued to evolve, with the era of the Renaissance and the Baroque continually exposing this immense interest in dissecting and objectifying the wonders of nature. This example is best explained through the changing of garden landscaping styles. As years progressed, the Absolutist and rectilinear style of Baroque gardens was meant to illustrate the mastery of Man over Nature. This spilled over into Baroque paintings as well, with the paintings of Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) and his contemporaries showing the growing interest in capturing nature. A marked interest in placing human action within their natural surroundings was expounded by Poussin, built upon the tradition of the Renaissance Venetian masters. This interest in the natural world saw a new impetus and importance being placed on landscape paintings, finding a place in the hierarchy of painting.

Nevertheless, as Pablo Picasso precisely sums it: "Through art we express our conception of what nature is not." Art provides a distant and diluted image of nature as represented in paint, canvas, ink or stone through the artist's eye. In the 20th century, art's relationship with nature changed. The pursuit became a manner of understanding and representing the decay and growth in art. Clement Greenberg in his essay, *On the Role of Nature in Modernist Painting*, published in *Art and Culture* in 1961, argues that the relationship between art and nature was changed forever through the pictorial deviance of Picasso. In his words, the Impressionist tried to resolve this emerg-



Kazimir Malevich, 'Black Square' 1915, oil on linen, 79.5 x 79.5cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



Nicolas Poussin, 'Blind Orion Searching for the Rising Sun' 1658, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

ing rift, however, Picasso's groundbreaking style forever changed our perception of it (Greenberg, *On the Role of Nature in Modernist Painting*, 172). In other aspects, certain artists refuted nature completely such as the case of the Suprematists, led by Kazimir Malevich (1875-1935).

In several ways, the APS Mdina Biennale 2020 is attempting to answer the statement given by Greenberg at the end of his essay on Nature in Art: "This is the kind of imitation of nature that Cubism handed on to abstract art. Where abstract painting (as in the later works of Kandinsky) fails to convey this Cubist – or at the very least Impressionist – sense of the resistant plane surface as a likeness of the visual continuum, it tends to lack for a principle of co-

herence and unity. Then only does it become the mere decoration it is so often accused of being. An only when it becomes mere decoration does abstract art proceed in a void and really turn into 'dehumanized' art." (Greenberg, 174)

Through past editions, the APS Mdina Biennale has attempted, albeit indirectly, to answer these questions. In the past edition, this topic was dealt frequently in both peripheral and direct ways. The theme of the previous edition was, *The Mediterranean: A Sea of Conflicting Spirituality*. While spirituality is the running theme which connects all editions of the APS Mdina Biennale, the past edition dealt more with the political aspects of the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, the geographical, natural and

oceanic values of the Mediterranean were vital and central aspects of the theme. These aspects were highlighted in several works of art especially seen in James Alec Hardy's and Clint Calleja's works. Hardy's work celebrated the cultural historical fabric of Malta, with a highlight placed on the subterranean archaeological debris found in the basement of the museum, coupled with the phosphorescent light installation created by the artist. While historical finds do not qualify as natural phenomena, the importance of their incorporation within our collective psyche as vital pockets of our natural landscape is important. Calleja's piece focuses more on the plight of the displaced African people and their struggle while travelling to safer lands. While the work of art emphasises the humanity, or lack thereof, of these episodes, a certain slant towards the power of nature can be ascertained. Calleja exhibited a broken up boat with a number of Maltese surnames inscribed into the side. The shipping vessels used by these displaced people, left for days out at sea, may end up crushed and destroyed by waves. The potency of nature, impartial in its destruction, is a powerful aspect of this piece.

As Professor Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci has stated in his article, *Isla, Insula, Insularity and the Arts: with a footnote on St Paul and Sancho Panza* (published 2016): "Besides the literal meaning of insular as a geographical meaning of land surrounded by water, isla, one must also understand insularity as insular space, that is 'the context, the social and spatial relations' of the isla in question." In many ways, our anthropological, cultural and historical attitudes are formed and conditioned by natural conditions. Man's quest to subjugate and enslave nature as an extension of the human experience, rather than an important conditioning and independent factor, is clear in our art, architecture, lifestyles and ways. The concept of nature, as viewed from art's point of view, is a view that needs to be translated, decoded and reproduced so as to be properly engaging, appreciated and endorsed. The creation and preservation of natural vistas, fictive or real, is subject to the whims and decisions of patrons, artists and the elite. Thus, man's need to control nature is validated through art, as the recreation and representation of the intangible and infinite wonders of nature into a static work of art underlines man's attitude that he is above nature. This attitude has continued to evolve, from Baroque gardens to the nihilistic character of contemporary art.

To what extent is contemporary art dehumanised? Is humanity separate from nature? The role of the artist cannot and should not be extrapolated and removed from nature. While a definitive answer is impossible to be achieved, the underlying urgency for a new sense of understanding and action is needed.

For more information visit www.mdinabiennale.com

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