

Lifestyle & Culture

Contemporary art in Mdina

Moving forward by looking at the past

■ Hannah Dowling

The APS Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale is an ongoing project that dates back to the early 1990s and which takes place every two years. It is to return once again in March of next year. Ideas are continuously progressing and maturing, thus allowing every edition to flow holistically to the next, whilst simultaneously differing from previous editions.

Perhaps one of the most memorable editions during its formative years was the 1994 Mdina Biennale, which saw a number of artists partaking in exhibiting their work under a general and universal theme. Since then, it has taken a new direction. From a small exhibition, the 2015 edition entitled 'Christianity, Spirituality and the Other' proved to be innovative by setting aims and expanding to a large-scale international event. Whilst declaring all art to be spiritual within this modern environment, it also aimed to give a new ideological character, as well as new definitions. Moreover, it also aimed to expand and become vaster than before, by allowing the exhibits of more artists, although this resulted in less space. Contrarily, the 2017 edition entitled 'The Mediterranean: A Sea of Conflicting Spiritualities' inverted the previous notion of 'more artists, less space' and accepted much fewer artists, thus allowing for more space. With the APS Mdina Biennale being a constant learning curve, the team behind it, led by artistic director Professor Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci, are continuously looking to expand and innovate their approach, whilst maintaining their eye for detail in order to harmonise this large exhibition. For these reasons, the 2017 edition welcomed collaborations with international museums, namely MuCEM in Marseilles, which presented two contemporary video works from their collection. These were then complemented within the Maltese context, by the contemporary work of local artists Esprit Barthelet and Frank Portelli.

What is interesting to note is that throughout the years, the APS Mdina Biennale is always searching to improve and reinvent, but something that has remained constant throughout is the common theme of spirituality. Essentially, this declaration for all art to be spiritual, comes from the vision of the artistic director himself. Schembri Bonaci believes that the biennale is "a spiritual space of and for creativity", where every artist explores mankind's relationship with existence and presents their own vision of this idea. As a result, it is interesting to note the local and international interpretations of such a theme, especially when taking into



Detail of an installation by Vincent Côme

consideration the different cultural backgrounds they come from.

Schembri Bonaci has been the director for the past two editions and is to return once again with his team for the 2020 edition, along with a few new additions. Under his direction, a number of events were held as a means of promotion, both during the build-up and during the months of the biennale itself. For instance, the 2015 edition saw a vast spectrum of events including a jazz evening, symposium, as well as an organ recital, all of which showcased both local and international performers.

Essentially, having this biennale held in Malta, what draws international artists and visitors alike to form part of this exhibition is the location it is held in. With Malta itself being a picturesque island of hidden beauty, the APS Mdina Biennales are held in what is possibly one of the areas with the greatest history; Mdina. The town's sheer elegance and past conveys the true insight of what Malta has to offer, but what is remarkable about this choice of location for the exhibition is not only this factor, but the remarkable contrast the biennale itself portrays – the endurance and modern spirit which this exhibition offers takes place in a town brimming with history and character. The 2020 APS Mdina Biennale is to house artworks across three floors of the Mdina Cathedral Museum.

APS Bank has proudly continued their partnership with the Mdina Biennale, a relationship established from the 2015 edition. In the words of Professor Schembri Bonaci, the APS Mdina Biennale will; "provide a platform for several talented artists to share their impeccable and very relevant works." This enthusiasm of collaboration is very much reciprocated by APS, whose officials have expressed enthusiasm to support a project



Installation by Victor Agius

that contributes to and shapes the development of contemporary art in the Mediterranean.

In addition to the beneficial collaboration with APS Bank and perhaps due to the vast amount of team members coming from the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Malta, the University also provides a number of people to help with this project. This collaboration has been done for the past two editions of the APS Mdina Biennale and is to be

done again for the upcoming 2020 edition.

Every year of the APS Mdina Biennale has been a success, for it truly complements the cultural scene in Malta, which is constantly growing and improving. Moreover, this project not only maintains the dynamics of the cultural scene, but also serves as a merging point between the past and the present. Therefore, it is for these reasons that it is important to look back at the achievements and suc-

cesses of the previous editions of the APS Mdina Biennale, in preparation for the latest edition, because every edition serves as a continuation from the previous one, even though it may be a new beginning for some artists and team members alike. Essentially, what is important to note is that as a team led by Schembri Bonaci, the aim is to create a holistic view and link not only amongst the works of art, but also between one edition and the next.



Video installation by James Alec Hardy

Photo: Elisa von Brockdorff



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Information Meeting

Thursday 1st August 2019
at 5:30 p.m.
at the Saint George Preca Hall,
Catholic Institute, Floriana