

Lifestyle & Culture

Unearthing metal: a distance in time



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In a society that has been disrupted from its natural lifestyle, more often than not, a certain dissonance is bound to occur in the once perfectly orchestrated symphony.

The whole 20th century, with World War I, World War II and other significant events, witnessed exactly this. As a result of this unprecedented upheaval, Europe and Malta experienced a radical historical change that took its toll on society and art alike due to its unprecedented nature, thus posing different aesthetic reactions to the public. While some chose to embody silence, others strove to find an alternative reality, or rather, an alternative artistic language, in the case of artists. Certain Maltese 20th century artists were precisely an exponent of such, as is the case with Josef Kalleya and Toni Pace.

Toni Pace, among others, embarked on a quest for authenticity in the arts, and did so through the journey towards a new visual language. Pace in particular is a true exponent of this because of his radical departure from “traditional” Maltese art, in idealistic terms. Whether Pace was aware of this or not, with his metal sculptures he challenged the establishment in a multiplicity of ways; through his choice of welding rather than sculpting and constructing his sculptures as opposed to modelling them. Essentially, Pace’s method of working was in fact one commonly found in the construction industry, but not yet exploited in the artistic field, as opposed to stone which was utilised in both. Prof. Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci heavily underlines this argument in his latest publication *Metal and silence: A quest for daringness and authenticity in the arts* (Horizons, 2020). He further explains that it is due to this rebellious aspect of Pace that the latter was seen as a misfit within the local artistic circle, thus resulting in his metal sculptures being lesser known than the works of his peers. In fact, Clint Calleja believed that Pace’s metal works “were a shock for those who believed that there was only one traditional way of doing sculpture”.

Despite this, Pace’s artworks were not only able to utilise the raw industrial material of steel



‘Ballerina’ 1966, mild steel, 185 x 30 x 30cm, Private collection

and raise its status to that of an artistic material, but in doing so he was also able to encapsulate the true essence of the identity of our nation and its Mediterranean surroundings. Therefore, he may have been going against the establishment with his choice of medium, but his subject matter says otherwise, for his *Sea Urchins* and *Prickly Pears* quintessentially capture the Maltese identity.

Essentially, Pace’s metal works were not appreciated by Maltese society during the 1960s for he was far ahead of his time. While it has been argued that Maltese art lagged behind in comparison with the developments of contemporary international movements, Pace was very much in line with

such developments. Evidently, his metal works very much coincide with those of the American artist Tony Smith. As discussed in Schembri Bonaci’s work Pace’s welding technique echoes that of Lynn Chadwick. Moreover, Chadwick’s angularity in his figurative metal works echo that of Pace’s *Ballerina*, among other works.

Pace’s avant-garde way of thinking was far too advanced for the contemporary Maltese society, which drove him to return to the traditional, thus abandoning his quest to establish a new language. His way of creative thinking was not met with the society of the time, but this does not mean that he did not leave an impact. Not long after Pace’s own experiments with metal, Gabriel Caru-

‘Sea Urchins’ 1965, mild steel, 73 x 30 x 30cm, Private collection



ana also began to delve into the multitude of possibilities offered by this medium. Though society was very much critical of Pace’s developments, his creativity and radical artistic statement were recognised by Giovanni (J. J.) Cremona, who supported Pace as a rebel in Maltese society. Cremona himself was harshly critical of his surrounding environment, thus giving Maltese art the definition of being “characterless”, but for him Pace stood out as a cut above the rest, to the extent that he was the first to display Pace’s works to the public in 1980. Since then, the works have rarely been exhibited. However, the upcoming APS

Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale will be placing Pace’s metal sculptures at the forefront of Maltese modern art history through a dedicated exhibition.

Unearthing metal: A distance in time will exhibit the very sculptures that challenged the conventions of beauty, art production and materiality as they will be collectively displayed within the context of the Mdina Cathedral Museum, thus posing a paragon that exceeds conventionality because of the diverse historical periods represented by the museum’s collection. In this exhibition, curated by myself, with the assistance of Dr Nikki Petroni and under the artistic direction of Prof. Schembri Bonaci, Pace’s works will come together in a beautifully intertwined compositional play of light and atmosphere, transforming the spaces which they are to inhabit, thus, not only unearthing a master of metal sculpture, but also an integral part of Maltese modern art history.

Unearthing metal: A distance in time will form part of the APS Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale, running from 13 March until 18 April at the Mdina Cathedral Museum from Monday to Saturday, 9.30am to 5pm.

For more information visit www.mdinabiennale.com



‘Crescent Moons 3’ c. 1964-66, mild steel, 88 x 50 x 25cm, Private collection