

Lifestyle & Culture

Contemporary Art and the Senses

■ Audrey Rose Mizzi

In art museums, quite often, a visitor sits and admires a particular work from afar. However, how can such museums invoke our other sensory responses? Art has drastically changed in the twentieth century especially in the post-World-War II era. Wars, genocides, protests and rulers inspired artists to visually explore what could have happened, what could have been, or else to convey a message that could not be put into words or said out loud. Paradise as it once was painted cannot be achieved without change. Masters such as Picasso and Warhol have tried to create works in response to such changes as well as endanger change, but, are their messages unheard by contemporary audiences? *Guernica* can be considered visually disturbing by a viewer in the Museo Reina Sofia yet it shows a reality that is being lived nowadays. Warhol, on the other hand, creating visually pleasing prints of different animals that were on the verge of extinction. He titled them *Endangered Species*. Nonetheless, have things really changed from then?

Can art be done differently in order to elicit audience responses from difficult subject matter? Can art become a multi-faceted experience by evoking senses to stir the necessary reaction from the visitor? The experience of interacting with art is fast changing, even though art is still being produced using traditional media. The audience is no longer simply visually challenged but confronted with concepts that deal with sound, smell, tactility and taste.

The APS Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale has challenged its visitors' senses in many different ways in previous editions. Artistic director Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci has always held a dynamic vision of international contemporary art exhibitions. Selected artworks have fulfilled such aims. For ex-



Artwork by James Alec Hardy at the 2017 APS Mdina Biennale - Photo: James Alec Hardy

Artwork by Victor Agius at the 2015 APS Mdina Biennale. Photo: Victor Agius

ample, visually pleasing and colourful were displays by James Alec Hardy. Hardy uses electronic equipment in his installations as a physical element to an abstract concept. His video in-

stallations are a marvel to look at and in some, Hardy also incorporates sound. In 2015, his installation, set in the grand staircase of the Mdina Cathedral Museum was an intriguing interaction of colour, movement and sound. The visitor was first attracted by the sound of static coming from Hardy's installation but then they are also visually pleased to see primal symbolic forms of circles, squares, triangles and lines on a constant loop. The same experience was repeated in the second edition, were the Byzantine remains within the subterranean vaults were transformed into an ethereal space. Hardy used old televisions and magnifying glasses to increase the projections within the space. This unearthly ambience allowed the visitors to view the area as another dimension. The sound of static echoed throughout the dark room in an almost disturbing yet attractive manner.

Sound can also be manipulated to become a piece of art on its own. It can convey a message without even one visual to explain what is happening or why it is happening. *structures [mdina]* saw Robert Stokowy roam around Mdina and absorb the spirit of the city through its soundscape. As Stokowy explains, "...the spirit is what gives life to the physical structures but also the intangible, immaterial nature of the structure itself." Through his research in writings, drawings and diagrams with sound recordings as raw materials, the artist managed to create an installation that captured sound of the city of Mdina and its character. Visually, the visitor saw only the bare walls of the beautifully constructed subterranean vaults. Nothing interfered with sound except the interaction of a few people passing by. The visitor could simply stand in the room for a few minutes and ex-

perience Mdina through the artist's research. It would then influence their perspective on the city and how they connect with Mdina and its history.

Tactility, on the other hand, is difficult within a museum context, however, it cannot be ruled out. An artist that works with earthly materials can evoke that tactile quality that the visitor is not used to seeing in more refined sculptural representations. Victor Agius encompasses just this with his *Aktar San Pawlijiet* in the 2015 edition of the biennale. With his use of raw clay, soil, ceramics, stones and pebbles, straw and twigs amongst many other materials, he gives that tactile quality to his sculptures that the visitor would want to just touch and feel the hands of the artist at work. In this case, it's not only the subject that intrigues them but the beauty of the man-made texture of the sculpture itself. Agius worked with mud and soil to create different forms of St Paul, an important figure in Malta's past. The crude material used not only shows the texture that comes out in its purest form, but also shows the frailness and fragility of the sculptures. The ruggedness of the representations almost invites the visitor to touch and experience the sculptor at work.

Art experienced with all five senses can resonate an experience that will only leave the audience wanting more. They cannot simply stand there and admire works of art. They have to interact in a dialogue that is far greater than a gallery space or a room within a museum. The all rounded experience has to be overwhelming enough to attempt to bring about change. The 2020 editions of the APS Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale will display digital works such as video, sound and light installations according to the direction conceived by Schembri Bonaci for the upcoming exhibition, with the assistance of Nikki Petroni, Tonya Lehtinen, Alexandra Camilleri, Hannah Dowling, and others.

Malta's blade runner all set to compete in Paralympic classification

Antonio Flores, Malta's one and only blade runner, is training 12 hours a week as he gears up for this month's competition in Paris where he hopes to qualify for Tokyo's Paralympics next year.

"Training is going well and I'm feeling very motivated and happy to be going on this journey," he said, as he prepared for the important competition being held between August 26 and 31.

Prof. Paolo Catalfamo, GlobalCapital chairman and Italy's 400m champion for under-18s, joined Flores during his training session at the Malta Amateur Athletic Association track in Marsa to follow his progress.

GlobalCapital is the sole sponsor of Flores's trip to classify in Paris, after Prof. Catalfamo saw the young athlete's crowdfunding appeal in the media and came forward to back him.

"I could see myself at his age. I had dedicated my life to running and sacrificed a lot for it... Antonio has an even bigger challenge, and I was deeply touched by his strength and determination not only to train every day, but also to collect funds to make his dream possible," Prof. Catalfamo said.

During their meeting Flores also



Relaying dreams... GlobalCapital chairman Paolo Catalfamo (left) presents Antonio Flores with the financial support he needs to realise his Olympic dreams and take part in this month's classification process in Paris

showed Prof. Catalfamo his latest acquisition – a sprint specific blade, which he has been training with and which he hopes will help secure him a spot in Tokyo 2020.

Flores, who was born with clubfoot, said: "Having a blade which is comfort-

able, powerful and efficient not only helps me from the physical aspect but also boosts my morale and confidence."

Before he makes to the Paralympics, Flores has to undergo an assessment process in Paris where he will also need to meet the stipulated timings to qualify for the



Antonio Flores (left) showing Paolo Catalfamo his latest acquisition – a sprint specific blade, which he has been training with and which he hopes will help secure him a spot in Tokyo 2020

100m and 200m races.

Asked what message he had for those waving the flag for his classification, Flores said: "Persevere and have faith in your potential. We are more capable than we think we are – don't set yourself boundaries."