

Nude or Naked?

One of the most striking happenings at the Malta Arts Festival this year is the visual art presentation *The Life Model – Between Nude and Naked*, which can be experienced at No. 68 Gallery in Valletta till the end of the month. COLIN FITZ spoke to curator Patrick J. Fenech about the inspiration behind the project.



The Life Model – Between Nude & Naked runs till July 31 at No.68, St Lucy Street, Valletta. Opening hours: Monday to Friday, 10am-1pm and 2pm-6pm, Saturday and Sunday, 10am-1pm. Admission is free.

The nude, as a conceptual and artistic category, always involved the notion of a visual ideal abstracted from the reality we confront in our everyday lives. Or at least, that's the way an artist would put it.

In everyday terms, to most people, a painted, sculpted or photographed nude is not real... it's art. We simply leave it at that, confining the 'nude' to a detached space we call 'art' and experiencing the 'naked' in the mundane chore of showering or in the raw excitement of private love-making... or the often publicly condemned but privately embraced pornography.

The Life Model – Between Nude and Naked exhibition, part of the Malta Arts Festival, is seeking to promote a public debate by looking at the history of our acceptance of nudity and the bareness of the naked body. Viewing the exhibition, I am also made aware that the body is the source of our deepest pleasures and traumas – our experience of the world is set by the way we experience our bodies, however uncomfortable that may make us feel.

Patrick J. Fenech, the curator, is a practising artist and photographer. He is a visiting lecturer

of photography at the Faculty of Art Education at the University of Malta and is an active member of 'Start', a Maltese contemporary art group.

"I started off young, painting with my dad and then under the mentorship of the late Esprit Barthelet. In the 80s I took to photography and the medium just carried me away.

I was awarded a scholarship and spent four years studying in Italy and London. I haven't put brush to canvas since then and most of my current work is photography-based, along with sculpture and installation art. This year I took part in an international exhibition called 'Here There & Everywhere – Anticipating the Future for Art' in Boston, Massachusetts, and showed a photography montage at the NY ARTS Venice Pavilion in Guidecca at this year's Venice Biennale. Without art I would be a man on the edge," smiled the curator.

The seven artists exhibiting in this show, Vince Briffa, Anton Calleja, Jeni Caruana, Patrick Dalli and Alexandra Pace from Malta, Astrid Steinbrecher from Germany and Zygimantas Augustinas from Lithuania, come from different genres of visual art practices.

"The choice of this group was not easy. There are several good visual artists I would have liked to add to this list, but time and budget constrains trimmed my list down to seven. The idea is to start showing, in Malta, collectives with a global perspective in mind and possibly also trans-cultural elements. I wanted to establish a balance between the artworks and the narrative, where the statements of the artists and the dialogues between the artefacts can coexist," Patrick explained.

Why this subject?, I asked.

"Festival director Mario Frendo suggested we do something connected to the nude, which is an recurring topic in art. So I came up with the idea to regenerate the old debate of why are some subjects of paintings described as naked and some as nude?"

"Also, the new wave of Realism in painting, and the expansion and diversification of Realism in sculpture, witnessed by numerous influential art events in the west is creating 'The Comeback of the Human Figure.' I put it to the curator that the subject, whether nude or naked, is still quite taboo, or even a childishly humorous, in our mostly conservative island.

"Well, I discussed my idea about the theme of the show with all the artists so they could follow some guidelines. It was up to them if they wanted to shock or embrace taboos," he replied. Patrick seems to want to leave it to the individual to choose whether to be shocked or endorse what they see.

"I simple want to make people aware of current trends in contemporary art and engage the audience in public debate and look at the history of our acceptance of nudity and the bareness of the naked body and how this can sum up everything to which we aspire and everything we most fear."

And what about art in Malta, in general?

"Some time back a friend of mine and the artist Norbert Attard were in my sister's dining room, discussing a newly acquired abstract painting. They decided on a little experiment... they called a stone restorer who was working in the house for his comment. The man stared blankly at it, rolled up his sweaty t-shirt and uncovered a tattoo on his arm. 'This is art,' he said, before going on his way.

"As another art colleague, Ruth Bianco, put it in a recent edition of *The Sunday Times*, 'the confines of an island, with its limited experience, cultural inertia, and misdirected resources will always be the driving force for a parochial and isolated stance in world culture.' When considered within a global perspective, I think Maltese creativity and art at the moment are unfortunately confined to a limbo."

Patrick's dark outlook on the general local situation is possibly a reference to the eternal struggle to get resources diverted to the encouragement of artistic endeavour. But, perhaps the healthy debate being provoked by the collective works in the presentation he has just presided over, will continue to add to the slowly growing awareness of the need for this country to nurture a spiritual dimension to go with the rabid materialism and monoculture that is so quickly engulfing it. ▶



THE CURATOR ON THE ARTISTS



VINCE BRIFFA

A master in the art of video, Vince has contributed a fascinating piece of work using multiple projections of appropriated Hollywood clips in a video loop. *Between a Kiss and the Naked Truth* uses the kiss as its running metaphor and leaves the viewer to imagine the act of seduction as a continuation device.



ANTON CALLEJA

Especially known for his nude paintings, Anton contributes six new paintings to this show. In all these works the female life model is cocooned by sinews of colours, the debate of whether they are nude or naked is provoked endlessly. The exception is a painting, in very subdued colours, where the same model appears in different poses as if transposed from a sketchbook.



JENI CARUANA

Jeni's nudes emanate from the earth and are therefore abounding in deep reds and ochres. Her work seems to generate interest in feminist theories that review the use of the female/nude/body in contemporary and historical art. She revisited history through the artistic investigation of pre-history. Feminism confronts the issue of pre-history, and women revisit pre-history to claim a history of their own.



PATRICK DALLI

Until recently a student of Anton Calleja, Patrick has been an assiduous painter and in a short period of time has come up with a collection of nude paintings that provoke thought and discussion. His nudes are mainly asexual, although in some cases the voluptuousness of his Maltese female models hints towards a shy eroticism... they are perhaps, at first glance, like chunks of meat left on a butcher's table, but there seems to be a hidden truth underlying the paint, like Egyptian sarcophagi ready to reveal their mysterious content.



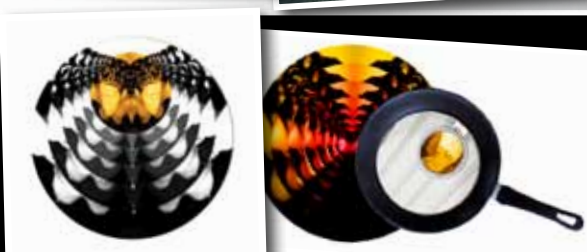
ALEXANDRA PACE

When Alexandra showed me her proofs for her photography pieces, I was relieved, as, up till then, the exhibition was leaning to much on the female life model. *Time to Kiss the World Goodbye* are two large photographs showing a group of male nudes with villain and hero masks prancing around naked in a dance as an epilogue to life.



ASTRID STEINBRECHER

A German artist who lives in Vienna, Astrid's multi-piece work for the Malta Arts Festival brings the relationship of her own naked body into focus and discourse. *Home of Pandora* and *Pearl in a Shell*, mainly photography montages, show in a humorous and ironic way, how it feels to be caught in a typical female role of being an artist, a mother and a housewife, permanently fluctuating between acceptance and denial.



ZYGIMANTAS AUGUSTINAS

Zygimantas is perhaps one of the most interesting contemporary Lithuanian painters and draughtsman, with an impressive command of human anatomy. As Alfonasa Andriuskevicius, an influential art critic notes: "How does he manage to paint like 17th century Dutch painters, 19th century French painters and Lucian Freud at the same time?" He juggles around with realism and intentionally 'betrays' his subject leaving the viewer with an enigma. **C**

