

*IRREGULARITY, an exhibition of paintings and digital prints by JP Migneco at Valletta Contemporary, 3 March – 6 May, 2023.*

## **IRREGULARITY**

When one considers the rich interplay of etymological meaning-making between the noun-title and the works presented, one cannot help but notice an interesting play on the title of JP Migneco's exhibition, *Irregularity*, which makes a clear reference to a contemporary reality that is also deeply rooted in the country from which he is originally from, Malta.

In the early 14th century, the term *irregularity* originally related to a violation of Church regulations governing the admission to clerical office. The term was derived from the Old French *irregularité* and the Medieval Latin *irregularitas*, both of which stemmed from the Latin word *irregularis*, meaning *not regular*.<sup>1</sup>

The definition of *irregularity* has expanded to include *anything that is irregular* by the late 15th century. Its meaning as a state of non-conformity or departure from accepted norms in the context of regulations or standards arose in the 1590s. The term also started to be used to signify an aesthetic value, an absence of symmetry, or the absence of regular or uniform qualities in the 1640s.

The words “irregularity” and “regularization of irregularity,” which refer to the sanctioning of illegally constructed buildings and structures after a monetary payment as a penalty, are frequently used in Maltese jargon, mostly in the context of journalism and particularly within the environmental lobby and the construction industry. In a country where natural land is progressively being eaten up by construction development, sanctioning is highly contested, as the regularisation of any illegally built structure poses an intriguing challenge to the pristine landscape and to how we process it as part of our collective memory. This highly contested act strains and even at times sabotages the intricate relationship between human beings and their physical environment<sup>2</sup>, while emphasising the profound impact that landscape has on our wellbeing and our cultural and historical consciousness.

Such *irregular* buildings, often existing as unauthorised structures, disrupt the established order and historical continuity of a landscape. Yet they also bear witness to the evolving human imprint on nature, reflecting shifting social dynamics and economic aspirations and challenging our need for adaptation. The regularisation process of such buildings in and of itself poses various concerns about sustaining the delicate balance between preservation and progress in the light of our finite land resources. The act also heightens the tension

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.etymonline.com>

<sup>2</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, Vintage, 1996.

between preserving the collective memory encoded in the virgin landscape and accommodating the demands of a changing society.

Migneco appropriates the connotations of *irregularity* and turns them into an action, a verb transported to contemporary meanings. While still aligning the term with its historical origins, he gives it further value and relevance by creating allegiance with local environmental matters and technological imagination.

Thematically, JP Migneco's work navigates this delicate dynamic by showing us images of landscapes and rock formations that are taken directly from the pristine landscape and that are part of the Maltese psyche. However, using a rendering method inspired by modern visualisation tools, the artist figuratively *regularises* these terrains. The alteration in the visual organisation of the landscape appears to be the artist's way of communicating to the viewer how important it is to approach the environment in its freshly portrayed form with a nuanced awareness of the past, but seen through senses of the present. The spectator is made more aware of the potential effects that regularisation may have on our collective memory by such a shift in the site's aesthetic attributes. It seems as though Migneco's action alters how the spectator and the landscape interact, resulting in a *virtual regularisation* that has no impact on the actual landscape but only the version of it that the viewer remembers.

The work also sheds light on the way we currently address the genre of landscape painting in order to arrest image memories that speak through the language of present-day visualisation. Migneco's hybrid method is both elegant and time-consuming. It fuses traditional painting techniques and digital methods to place us in the middle of the enduring realism conundrum, teasing us to decide if what we see in front of us is indeed a photograph or a painting of a photograph.

The paintings begin as photographs of vistas, stretches of terrain, or rocky outcrops that capture an exact and in-depth representation of the subject. They are then reduced and dispersed using fractalising software into zones of pure chromaticity. Migneco's work largely pulls from the pointillists in its method of slicing up delicate detail, texture, and lighting conditions while keeping us in the comfort of a familiar image that begs for abstraction yet resists it. His technologically derived images serve only as a starting point for his paintings, which he then meticulously reproduces in paint on canvas through traditional painting methods.

The artist does not conceal himself behind his method. His meticulous workmanship reassures us that what we are looking at up close is actually a painting. The delicately applied brushstrokes lose their detail as we step back to take it all in, and the artwork's well chosen color palette once more causes us to think of it as a genuine photograph rather than

a painting. Since Migneco's colour fields are larger and more pronounced than the smaller dabs of paint normally used in pointillist work, the customary viewing distance required between Migneco's work and its viewer needs to be increased in order to completely perceive the larger fields of colour as a realistic image.

Migneco is well aware of this play in the way the viewer perceives his work. Moreover, he teases the viewer further by challenging the notion that paintings derived solely from technical images may appear overly mechanical or devoid of the artist's personal touch, overlooking the organic and expressive qualities that make traditional artwork unique. The artist challenges this inherent cultural bias and does not hide the fact that his paintings inherit the limitations and biases of cameras and digital renderings, such as distortion of colours, flattening of perspectives, or even alterations in the lighting conditions. This he does with visual conviction and compositional certainty.

Ultimately, JP Migneco's paintings go beyond the conventional depiction of landscapes and provide a profound analysis of the complex interaction between nature, human civilisation, and technology. His skillful use of grid patterns as metaphors for digital landscape simulations and built environment models pushes us to consider the division and interconnection between these domains. These representations, adapted to reflect ideas of separation in an increasingly complex technological world, stimulate both intellectual inquiry and emotional resonance. Through his artistic vision, Migneco encourages us to re-evaluate our place within the environment and consider the profound impact of our actions on shaping the world we inhabit.

Vince Briffa