

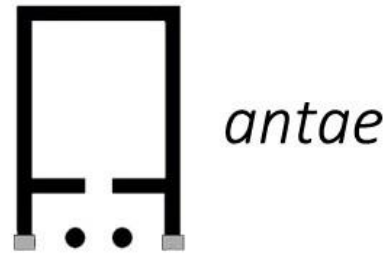
Magic, Poetry, and Production: A Conversation with Jesmond Vassallo

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Magic, Poetry, and Production: A Conversation with Jesmond Vassallo

Christine Caruana

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Stepping into the studio, the fragrance emanating from a dark solution being swirled in a container provides a warm welcome. Jesmond Vassallo now pours this concoction into a funnel covered with filter paper. There is a moment of hesitation as he selects, from the array of pots and tins in front of him, the container best-suited for the job. The small group of visitors—students of conservation studies—huddle around the table and observe attentively. One might be forgiven for mistaking this with some sort of ceremony, because in some ways it is: Vassallo is making ink.



Figure 1. Making ink.

As the pitter patter of the liquid hits the vessel, Vassallo explains that he is making ink from the pine tree. The granules which he started off with were sent to him from Italy and he is following an old recipe for the process which he once found in a book. Ink-making is something he has been doing since the early 2000s. He has also made ink from his own catch of cuttlefish in the past, and he still has plans to experiment with other materials to make ink

for his drawings. It is clear, from the effort he puts into researching these techniques, that Vassallo is highly invested in the quality of the materials with which he works. He explains that through this independent hands-on way of obtaining supplies, he learns a wealth of information that is difficult to acquire through other means.

The conservation students seem to agree since, for them, seeing what must have gone into the making of the ink that they so painstakingly attempt to preserve is a rare treat. The presence of the students in the studio is indicative of the openness in Vassallo's attitude towards his art; he jumps at the chance to debate and share knowledge. It is evident that the art he produces is not meant exclusively for individual consumption, but that he is interested in its communicative powers. In fact, he thinks of art as a pictorial language and—perhaps as a result of this perspective—his first independent exhibition, back in 1997, was titled 'Semantics'.¹ Pragmatism of this kind also explains the eclecticism in Vassallo's endeavours: his ability to work with ease as a painter, sculptor and lithographer using a variety of techniques.

Since art is one of Vassallo's "languages" (he mentions, *en passant*, that he is currently re-visiting his French), he is acutely aware that others have spoken it before him. In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', T.S. Eliot remarks that a poet must be in 'a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality'.² These words resonate with Vassallo who prefers to think of art as a process—never as a finished product. Visual art is a language, he says, which has been in use for thousands of years; he notes how a staggering number of people have contributed to the development of this language. However, it is significant that those who were game-changers had a personal vision or message they were focused on delivering. To be able to offer something of value in this way, the visual artist—like the poet—must undergo the process of de-personalisation to which Eliot refers. Eliot famously describes this process as being akin to that undergone by 'a bit of finely filiated platinum [when it] is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide'.³ This is a striking piece of visual and tactile imagery from chemistry—one that would not be out of place, in a literal sense, in Vassallo's studio of experimentation.

Vassallo is of the opinion that this transformative de-personalisation process may be attained through a rigorous and disciplined immersion into the study of technique. Here, a re-visiting of the notion of "art as language" seems to be in order: it is technique, not art, which must be understood as such. Once technique has been honed as close as possible to perfection, the artist might then transcend its language so as to create visual poetry with it.

¹ Exhibited by the Mosta Local Council in 1998.

² T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (San Diego and New York: Harcourt, 1975), pp. 37-45, p. 40.

³ *ibid.*, p.40.

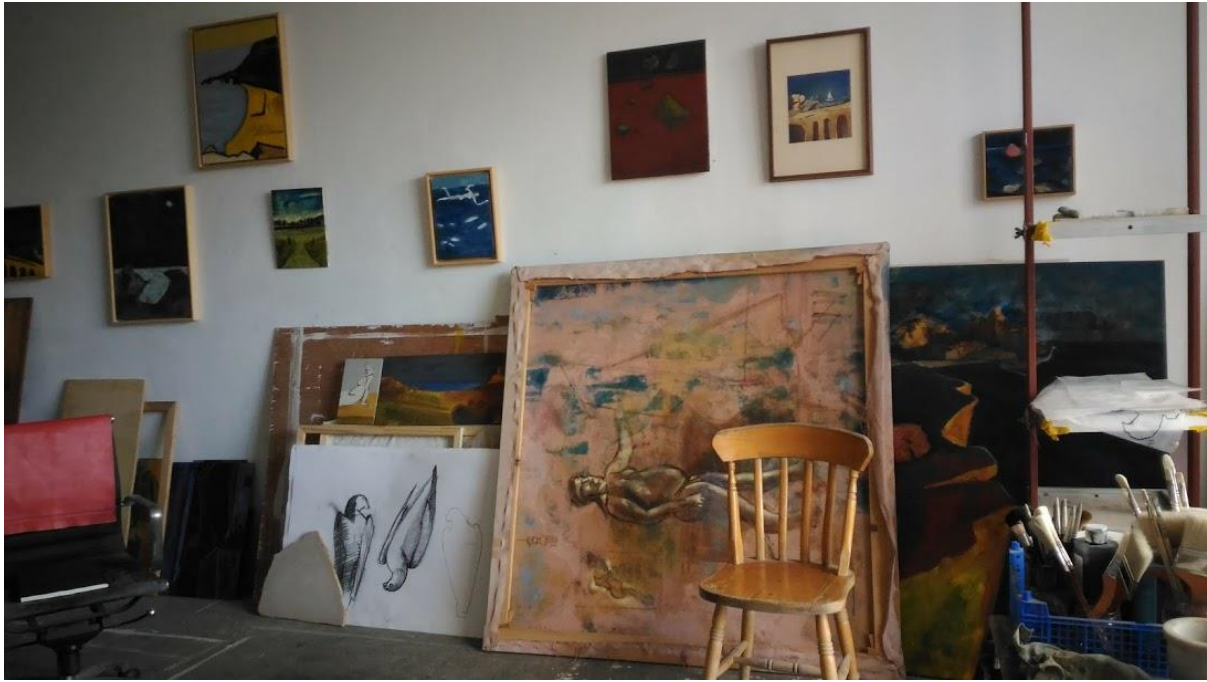


Figure 2 and 3. Vassallo's studio.

During his stay in Italy, while studying at the *Accademia di Belle Arti* in Carrara between the years 2000 and 2004, Vassallo felt particularly susceptible to external artistic influence. At this time, he actively sought to go to the places where the artists he admired worked. In Rome, he visited the studio of the painter Alberto Sughi, renowned for his existential realism and his canvasses of dark colours with vacant, haggard-looking people. In Venice, he served as apprentice to the professional etching printer Diego Candido Cattarin. Here he frequented the studios of Emilio Vedova and Zoran Mušič, while also interning at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection museum. Vassallo did not manage to meet Mušič himself, who was suffering from ill health at the time and nearing the end of his life. Yet, although there is no presence of Mušič's unsettling ghoulishness in Vassallo's style, Vassallo's figures transmit a similar sense of spectrality. This is particularly felt in his underwater swimmers, who seem to glide seamlessly through shades of blue in their white or black ethereality.

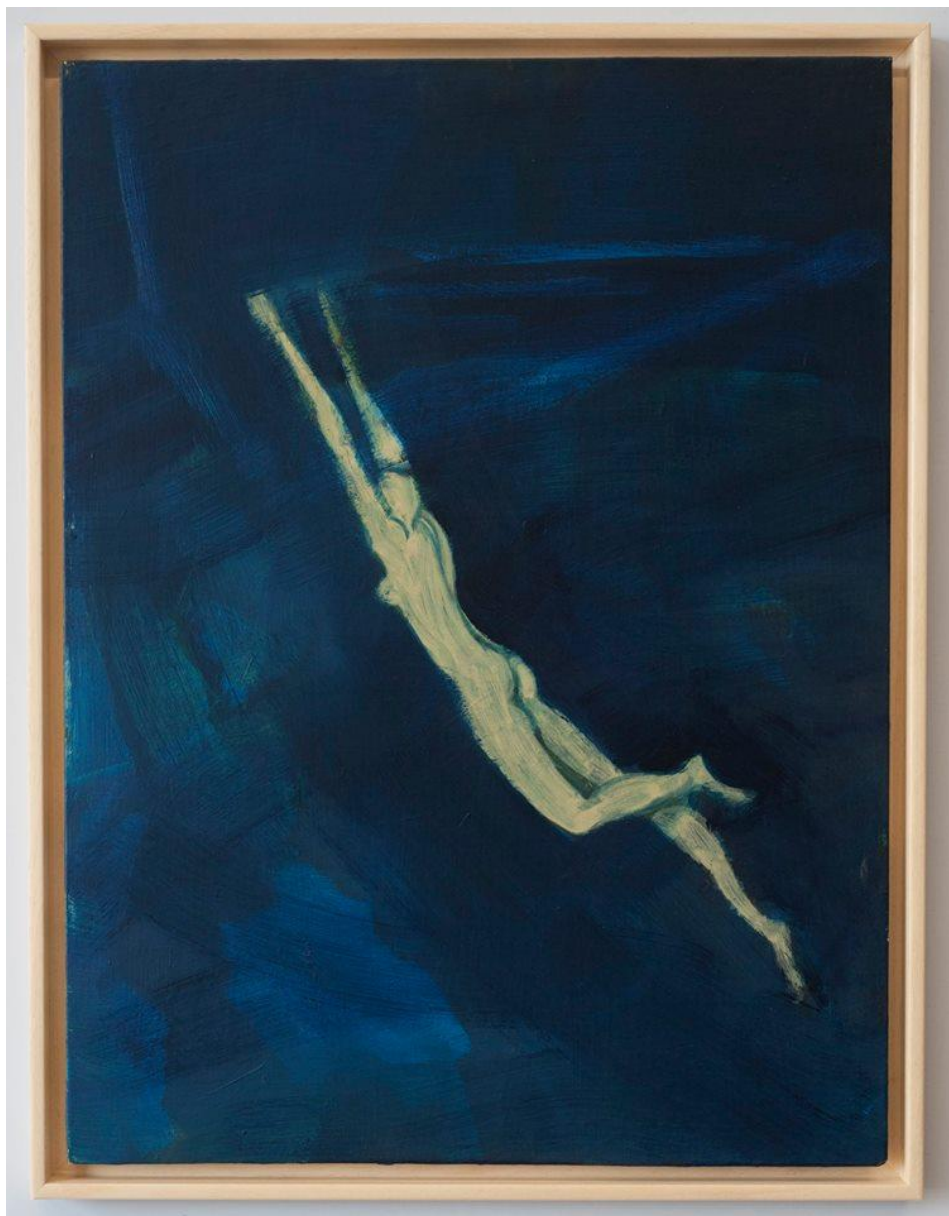


Figure 4. Swimmer.

While in Malta during his formative years as a student, he frequented the studios of major artists like Antoine Camilleri, Esprit Barthet, and Ċensu Apap. In later years, he visited the studios of Raymond Pitré and Pawl Carbonaro. Vassallo acknowledges that, particularly in the works he produced before 2004, the impact of these artists is evident. More recently, Vassallo met the wife and daughter of the late sculptor Giacomo Manzù: an experience which meant a great deal to him.

Although Vassallo the student was consciously open to the influence of others, he already had a clear vision of the type of art he wanted to create. Having finished his B.A. in History of Art from the University of Malta with the aim of being accepted at an Italian academy of art, Vassallo moved to Ravenna. However, upon realising that his focus there was being forced too heavily in the direction of the avant-garde, he decided to find somewhere better-suited for him. Consequently, after just three months in Ravenna, he moved to Carrara in Tuscany. Given Vassallo's fervent belief in the value of figurative art and Carrara's international reputation as centre for sculpture, this decision proved to be a rewarding one.

While the critical debates surrounding the validity of figurative art have lost some of their spark of controversy since the 1980s, the pursuit of figurative art remains something of a bold move to this day.⁴ I ask Vassallo whether he ever finds it limiting, and he is quick to answer in the negative. He believes that when an artist uses the human body as a means to empathise and to express some of humanity's profoundest emotions, the message conveyed by that art can be a powerful one. This is not only something he feels as an artist, but also as a spectator when confronted by art that is spiritually moving. He reels off a list of artists here: Michelangelo, del Sarto, Caravaggio, Francisco Goya, Egon Schiele, Horst Janssen, Vincenzo Gemito, Medardo Rosso, Auguste Rodin, and Hokusai. The works of these artists, he feels, is the opposite of limiting. Humans are designed, he observes, to connect with the image of their own body—to the extent that, placed in front of a mirror, a human may spend hours scrutinising the reflection. Of course, the interaction is not always a positive one of self-admiration; one might be full of opprobrium; the point, however, is that there tends to be some level of engagement. Vassallo believes that, once the necessary artistic techniques are mastered, figurative art is capable of transmitting a message to people in all their diversity.

In order to trace the development of an artist's style, one can look at how the technique changes over time and how different media are used. However, because there are certain subjects to which Vassallo gravitates, it is interesting to see how even his perception of these same subjects changes alongside the use of media and technique. With the human body featuring so heavily in figurative art, it is unsurprising that one of Vassallo's first major exhibitions in Malta was titled 'Bodies'. The exhibition took place at the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta in the autumn of 2007. Along with Gilbert Calleja and Robert Zahra, Vassallo presented a set of drawings depicting the human form. It is clear that these works were not created with quaint ornamental intentions. They capture the human body in its

⁴ 'By the 1980s, the *arte povera* movement had become passé, and was overcome—as was much of Italian abstract art—by a revival of figurative art. The move toward a new figurative art emerged most dramatically at the 1980 Venice biennale, setting the tone for the 1980s and subsequent decades'. Charles Killinger, *Culture and Customs of Italy* (Westport, CT & London: Greenwood Press, 2005), p. 182.

abjectness—naked, and often faceless. Were it not for the varying thicknesses of the lines that constitute them and the motion of the line strokes, these bodies would look devoid of human spirit. As they are presented in a vacuum, with no surroundings or references to a world around them, they seem to represent what Giorgio Agamben termed 'bare life'.⁵ Sprawled, animal-like, on the paper, they suggest an existence that is voiceless. Agamben writes that 'animals are not in fact denied language; on the contrary, they are always and totally language'.⁶ Such beings are not conscious of the split between the semiotic and the semantic, between the system of signs and discourse in general. Vassallo's humans transmit something of this atavism; it is his own artistic language, however, which speaks.



Figure 5. Bodies.

⁵ See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, ed. by Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. by Liz Heron (London and New York, NY: Verso, 1993), p.52.

When in 2011 (together with Calleja and Zahra) Vassallo revisited the human as a subject in ‘Bodies II’, the grammar of this artistic language changed. He deliberately chose to present paintings and etchings rather than drawings, and to use colour in his work. Here, the bodies also have a locus and a context. They become, in a sense, more human.

The individual’s relationship with everything that is external is explored in Vassallo’s art, and it is also considered by him in the process leading to its production. He explains that when he is drawing a person—be this a friend or a model—active collaboration is important. The tiniest indication that something is off can detract from the quality of the art. If the model does not feel comfortable enough to pose statically, for instance, this influences the artist. Unlike the figures in ‘Bodies’, Vassallo perceives the artist as a kind of sponge, constantly absorbing the surrounding elements. When embarking on bigger artistic collaborations, therefore, it is vital that an agreeable and supportive atmosphere is maintained. By way of example, here, he refers to a fulfilling project he undertook about two years ago involving 14 sculptures in blown glass.⁷ This would not have been possible, he says, without a strong collaborative spirit among all those involved.

Surroundings are not only an influence for Vassallo, however: he often chooses these as his subjects. When asked what he enjoys to depict most, he refers to the quotidian: the landscapes he knows and those of his travels, his friends and their emotions, the books he reads, the museums and the exhibitions that he visits. Sometimes, he observes, the subject seems to choose the artist. This is often the case with landscapes, as our location and “there-ness” is often decided for us by factors outside ourselves. One is born into a geography (or, as Martin Heidegger puts it, ‘thrown *into a world*’).⁸ It is no surprise, therefore, that Malta features prominently (though not exclusively) in his works—not least the view from his own studio, which consists of the Mosta industrial estate, the valley of Wied il-Għasel, Santa Margerita, and a glimpse of the sea at Baħar iċ-Ċagħaq. This vista also includes the infamous Mosta bridge, which is a recurring subject in his work. In a 2014 exhibition titled ‘Landscapes’, which took place at Opus 64 Galerie in Sliema, Vassallo presented a diverse collection of art. This included a series on the Mosta bridge in which the structure is almost unrecognisable as the same object in two of his paintings. Looking at ‘Mosta Bridge iii’, it is ironically difficult to think of the bridge as the subject of the work; here, it functions more as a pathway to the tall buildings in the top right portion of the canvas. These blocks (and two lone, but also large trees) are presented from the perspective of somebody looking up towards them, making them look towering. The beige and the brownness of everything—except the bright blue of the sky—transmit an aridity and a sense of desolation. To misquote T.S. Eliot: ‘Unreal City, / Under the brown [dust] of a [summer] dawn, / A [cloud] flowed over [Mosta] Bridge, so many, I had not thought death had undone so many’.⁹ By contrast, the most imposing object in ‘Mosta Bridge 2013’ is the bridge itself—or, rather, the stygian blackness within its arches. The colours are darker here, and even more monochromatic in their

⁷ This was a private commission.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh, rev. by Dennis J. Schmidt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), p. 185.

⁹ T.S. Eliot, ‘The Waste Land’, in *T.S. Eliot (Collected Poems) 1909-1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), pp. 51-76, p. 55.

greyness than in 'Mosta Bridge iii'. The atmosphere, however, is more tranquil. Perhaps this is due to the nocturnal setting which has a mellowing effect on the countryside (here devoid of buildings) that surrounds the bridge from this angle. As often found in Vassallo's works, there is a small presence of bright colour amid the darkness—this time, bright yellow on the side of a hill—which makes the scene pop. In a painting like 'Mosta Valley', points of brightness are present in the form of circular patches in various colours, scattered around two trees in the top centre. The glowing lights accentuate the almost wood-like atmosphere of this natural environment while suggesting even something of the magical.



Figure 6. 'Mosta Bridge iii'.

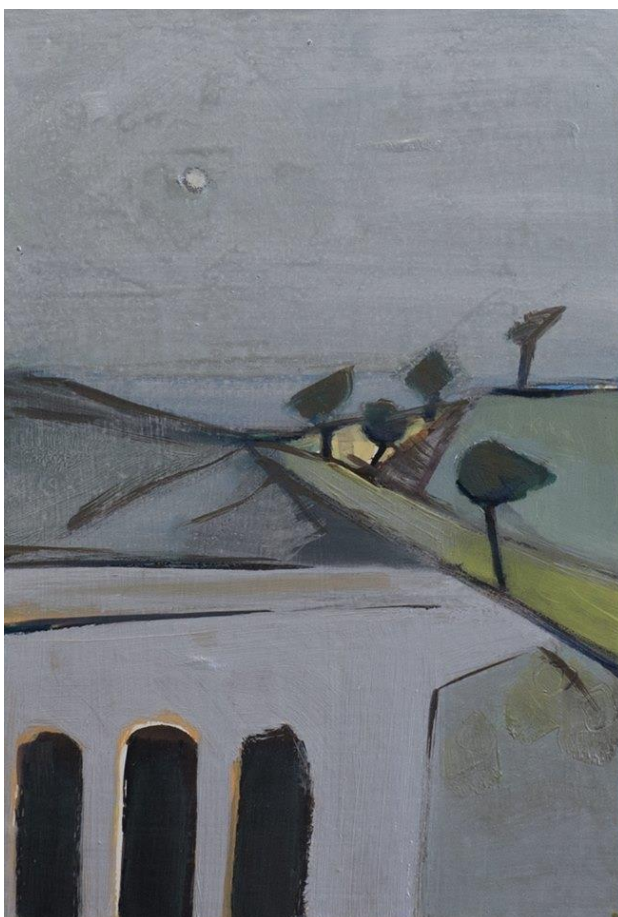


Figure 7. 'Mosta Bridge 2013'.



Figure 8. 'Mosta Valley'.

Dark (albeit warm) colours seem prevalent in most of Vassallo's output as well, and there is a density to the pigments which intensifies the static state of his subjects. This stasis allows his landscapes, in particular, to acquire a certain monumentality. A painting like "Mgarr" (2014), for instance—with a vibrant yellow on the horizon, shining like a lamp amid the coarseness of the huge rocks in shadow—has an intensity of deep time about it. Vassallo admits that, since he prefers to begin a work by designing with ink or charcoal first, the darkness inherent in these materials often seeps through to the final work. Another reason for the prevalence of dark colours in his work is his fascination with sunsets. At this time of day, the type of light that is present is particularly challenging to capture. He admires artists like James Whistler, who excelled at nocturnes in painting after dark. Vassallo mentions that he currently finds himself using brighter palettes in general; however, his desire to revisit this special mood has not abated.

For Vassallo, the magical in art is not only limited to what the end-product conveys; he is equally impassioned about the process, particularly lithography. It is fair to say that there is no established tradition of lithography in Malta, and Vassallo himself was not too familiar with it until about three years ago. This was back in 2015 when, while in Rome, he was able to use lithography. Before this, in 1997, he had started doing etchings and using intaglio techniques in order to produce original prints. Since 2004, after his studies in Italy with Silvia Montanelli, he took up these printing techniques professionally. The printing press he acquired for this end belonged to the Maltese mural artist and fine art painter Frank Portelli. However, the novelty of lithography captivated him in a special way and he asserts that there is no going back, now that he has understood what it can offer him. The technique, he says, is founded on the basic chemical observation that oil and water do not mix very well. In the late eighteenth century, Alois Senefelder—a German actor and playwright—chanced upon a way of exploiting this fact so as to create copies of his theatrical works. From this process, a series of "impressions" are obtained. In technical terms, this is called a *series*. With this invention, Senefelder revolutionised technology. As Walter Benjamin writes:

[W]ith lithography the technique of reproduction reached an essentially new stage. This much more direct process was distinguished by the tracing of the design on the stone rather than its incision on a block of wood or its etching on a copperplate and permitted graphic art for the first time to put its products on the market, not only in large numbers as hitherto, but also in daily changing forms. Lithography enabled graphic art to illustrate everyday life, and it began to keep pace with printing.¹⁰

Vassallo returns, as he often does, to the source of the technique—trying to understand the fundamentals by learning from old practices. The reference, in this case, is Senefelder's classic 1819 treatise, *A Complete Course of Lithography*. Although over the decades the materials used for lithography have evolved considerably, Senefelder's principle has

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. by Harry Zohn, ed. by Hannah Arendt (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), pp. 217-252, p.219.

remained constant; Vassallo explains, for instance, how William Blake followed more or less the same process to produce his wonderful *Songs of Innocence, and of Experience*.¹¹

Space and time, of course, condition artistic production of this kind. Vassallo remarks that, at the moment, he is attempting to develop a fully-equipped lithographic studio; for “original graphics” work, a specialised studio with specialised machinery is necessary. In Malta, there is no real lithographic tradition which could have left such objects on the market. Once Vassallo locates the tools required abroad, he is faced with the challenge of transporting these. A press, for instance, could easily weigh half a tonne. It is paradoxical, therefore, that while the idea behind printing is to be able to copy content for easy dissemination across geography, the actual printing technology limits one to a very specific spot. Lithography also places temporal constraints on the artist, as it forces one to work slowly and over a long period of time. There is a step-by-step procedure which must be followed religiously. It all starts, he explains, with a copper plate which gets polished and coated in varnish. Once this is prepared, he draws on its surface with a fine point and sinks it in an acidic solution, which enters into the grooves of the drawing. The laborious task of setting up the template and preparing it with different colour registrations must also be undertaken. When it is ready, the template is heated on a hot plate and covered in ink. Simultaneously, cotton paper must be put to soak in water. The paper is then removed from the water, placed on the plate and covered with a blanket. Finally, it is manually passed through the press—and it is only here that the artist can see whether all this has been successfully executed. Vassallo exploits these limitations to his benefit. The long duration of the process is an invitation to be more sensitive and to work with more tranquillity. The fixed location of the studio becomes an occasion to invite other artists over, a chance to talk techniques. These are fruitful interactions, as the print exhibitions that resulted from them testify: *PrintCycle i* (2014), *Printcycle ii* (2015), and *iMprint* (2016). It is also a constant reminder of the fundamental importance of design, as one can formulate a designed idea in any location. Getting this design to the studio in order to develop it more slowly, however, can transform the original design substantially. He enthusiastically adds that his own studio is set to welcome a new lithographic press towards the start of 2018.

Although lithography enables one to produce copies better described as *editions containing a number of exemplars*, Vassallo emphasises that his prints are “original graphics”. As opposed to what happens in photography, here, the hand is *not* ‘freed [...] of the most important artistic functions’; the ‘process of pictorial reproduction [is not] accelerated so enormously that it could keep pace with speech’.¹² There is, in lithography, such a thing as “the original”. Authenticity, in this sense, remains important. It is the search for authenticity, in fact, which motivates Vassallo to resurrect old techniques by returning to tradition; an authenticity which he finds disturbingly absent in contemporary culture. As Benjamin writes, ‘the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition’; there is, therefore,

¹¹ See Alois Senefeder, *A Complete Course of Lithography*, trans. by A.S. (London: Ackermann, 1819), and William Blake, *Songs of Innocence, and of Experience*, ed. by Andrew Lincoln (New Jersey, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

¹² Benjamin, p. 219.

'a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind'.¹³

"Which tradition, though?", I ask Vassallo. I wonder if it pertains to the Maltese landscapes which surround his studio. He is quick to answer, however, that he was speaking in general terms. The tradition he is interested in is border-free. Although there are certainly Maltese artists that influence him—Pawl Carbonaro being, perhaps, foremost on the list—he believes that all artists would do well to look at their artistic development in this way. It is a less constricting mind-set which liberates one to create art that truly fulfils its purpose.

By now, the ink has finished separating and a substantial amount of liquid is visible in the container beneath the funnel. Vassallo tests it on some parchment with a brush. The sleekness and blackness of the ink surprise his audience, as *oohs* and *aahs* gently fill the studio. Clearly, this ink-making mission has been accomplished. But what is the mission of art he refers to? What purpose must the artist try to fulfil? Art must comfort the disturbed, he says. Art must be present where it is most needed: in the spiritual war-zones, wherever the soul is under siege. Its authenticity must suggest strength in the face of danger and disease. In a way, the artist—like the detective—has a mystery to solve: the inscrutable enigma of human existence.

It is time to leave the studio, thinking of detectives; a task better carried out, however, through an observation credited to Raymond Chandler, master of the hard-boiled genre: 'Without magic, there is no art. Without art, there is no idealism. Without idealism, there is no integrity. Without integrity, there is nothing but production'.¹⁴

¹³ Benjamin., p. 221.

¹⁴ Raymond Chandler, quoted in *The Writer's Life: Intimate Thoughts on Work, Love, Inspiration, and Fame from the Diaries of the World's Greatest Writers*, ed. by Carol Edgarian and Tom Jenks (San Francisco, CA: Narrative Publishing, 1997), p.32.

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