

Art that oscillates between the poetic and the political

Trevor Borg is one of four local artists whose work is being exhibited in the national pavilion forming part of the Malta Biennale. Here he sits with Daniel Xerri to discuss the political dimension of his work and how it engages with such issues as the loss of cultural heritage.

The theme of the inaugural edition of the Malta Biennale is 'white sea olive groves'. How does your video and audio installation Olea respond to this theme?

By creating a story about the mythical figure of Olea, I sought to bring together the overarching theme of the biennale and the national pavilion's curatorial theme, which is about real and imagined narratives. Olea, which means olive, transcends different eras and inhabits both the past and the present. She moves in between different histories.

Through this installation, Olea tries to trace the footsteps of her ancestors while gradually moving into the present. However, we can still see her glimpsing the past through the present. Instead of a linear narrative, there are several nonlinear narratives that the audience is free to choose from.

People can start viewing the video at any point in time, using the visual, sound and olfactory elements that comprise this installation to make their own narratives. It's an invitation to the audience to extend my own narrative.

What is the connection between Olea and Malta?

The Romans' impact on Malta was also present in the establishment of a thriving olive industry. There are examples of this both in the south of the country and up in the north. Despite not being obvious, in the installation there are hints that Olea is connecting with her Roman ancestors.

Most of the sites that feature in the installation are related to the Roman period in Malta. Many people will probably manage to identify certain things that help to reveal these locations.

There is also a very important artefact shown in the installation.

It's an amphora, which among other things was used to store oil. That is another anchor that links this story with the Roman period. However, this installation could be about any other period, including the present.

One way of interpreting Olea is through the idea that Malta has a complicated relationship with its cultural heritage. Is this something that weighed on your mind when you were working on the project?

Yes, definitely. We all know that Malta is like an open museum. There are ruins and remains everywhere; wherever you dig and search, you're going to find something. This is a blessing but also problematic. Given the size of the island, space is very limited and so a lot of tension is created when it comes to new development.

We are doing an excellent job in protecting the artefacts and cultural elements that we have inside our museums. We're constantly investing in new museums and new technologies to make collections more accessible to the public. However, there are many open sites that are facing different threats and we are at imminent risk of losing them once and for all.

Once that happens, there's no turning back. Once you destroy or scar the land, all that forms part of it will disappear forever. Some of these sites might not even be familiar to the public. My preoccupation is that we're mostly focusing on what is already safe while neglecting some very important heritage sites without realising that in a few years' time most of them could be gone.

Is Olea your way as an artist of commenting on this issue?

This is an issue that we need to

Inset: Trevor Borg (Photo by Therese Debono)



tackle as soon as possible because as we speak the face of Malta is being altered. This has several implications, but it mostly impinges on these sites. The way the installation is designed is meant to instil a sense of urgency.

Olea's story is our story. She is in a similar place to us because she's frenetically trying to recover remnants of her ancestors and relocate them to a safer place. While this place does not necessarily have to be a museum, she is trying to safeguard what is left of her past and of her ancestors.

Only by conserving the past, can we ensure a future for upcoming generations. Heritage is literally what we've inherited; if we don't take care of it and if we're not responsible for the things that we've inherited, that inheritance will obviously cease to exist.

Are you afraid that if you were to be explicitly political, there is the risk of your work being cancelled?

That could happen; it's a possibility. But that doesn't worry me so much because when I had to be more politically in your face, I resorted to that approach. It mostly depends on the time and the specific context.

For example, when I created Crossfire, a sculpture that was exhibited two weeks before the hunting referendum of 2015, I felt I had to be more explicit, even though the work itself was still open ended.

While the work did not take sides, those who were against hunting read it in a particular way and those in favour chose to read it in other ways. If you were to leave politics aside, you could

see the sculpture as something that resonates with our culture.

Wouldn't that be a superficial reading of a sculpture consisting of 9,000 shotgun cartridges forming the Maltese Cross?

Yes, but I don't think that all audiences are interested in delving deeper into a work of art. Many people are not interested in art at all. Some others like to fleetingly visit a museum or gallery, and that's fine.

Whether people want to be selective in their reading of an artwork or to be more exhaustive, they should feel free to do so.

Art historian Vid Simoniti argues that art is indispensable to political discourse and can leave the audience with beliefs that are more receptive to how the world is. What are your thoughts on this?

I think all art is in a way political. Even art that claims to be apolitical is making a statement. It's like being a non-voter; you're voting with your feet. However, you can never make the public read or engage with an artwork in the way you want to. Every audience member has their own baggage, interests and sets of beliefs. Once you display your work, the public can engage with it in a million different ways. So, you cannot really force the public to think in a particular way.

In my work I start from that assumption. I opt for a more playful poetic approach so that I can maybe reach more people, both the ones who are not interested in reading too much in an artwork and those who would like to dig a little bit deeper. Those who dig deeper will find a lot of food for thought.

It's literally a matter of how much you push the political up-front. The political is there, but you have to look for it. It's not in your face. In most of my work, the political is not at centre stage.

At times it seems that the artworks we hear most about are the ones that are highly controversial because they either elicit condemnation or generate divisive debate on mainstream and social media. Is this something you consciously avoid doing in your work?

No, not really. I think anything could be controversial; you can never fully say whether a piece is going to be controversial or not. There are many pieces that do not appear controversial in themselves but have created a controversy.

There are various things at play; besides the nature of the work one has to consider the timing and the context among other factors.

As you've indicated, you're also an academic working with young people who are at the start of their artistic career. How can the challenges emerging artists face in the local art scene be overcome?

There are quite a few challenges and these affect all local artists. Malta is a small country and we have limited spaces where to exhibit our art, especially certain kinds of art. The size of the local audience is also what it is.

However, nowadays the world is our oyster. Due to the internet, social media and travel, the country's small size shouldn't hinder or stifle artistic progress. You can always start with small modest projects, and then move in different directions and take your work to other countries and continents.

Really and truly, there are many opportunities out there. The world has become smaller and it's relatively easy to export your work and exhibit it elsewhere. You can even do this without having to go to that place. I've shown my work in different countries without sometimes needing to visit them.