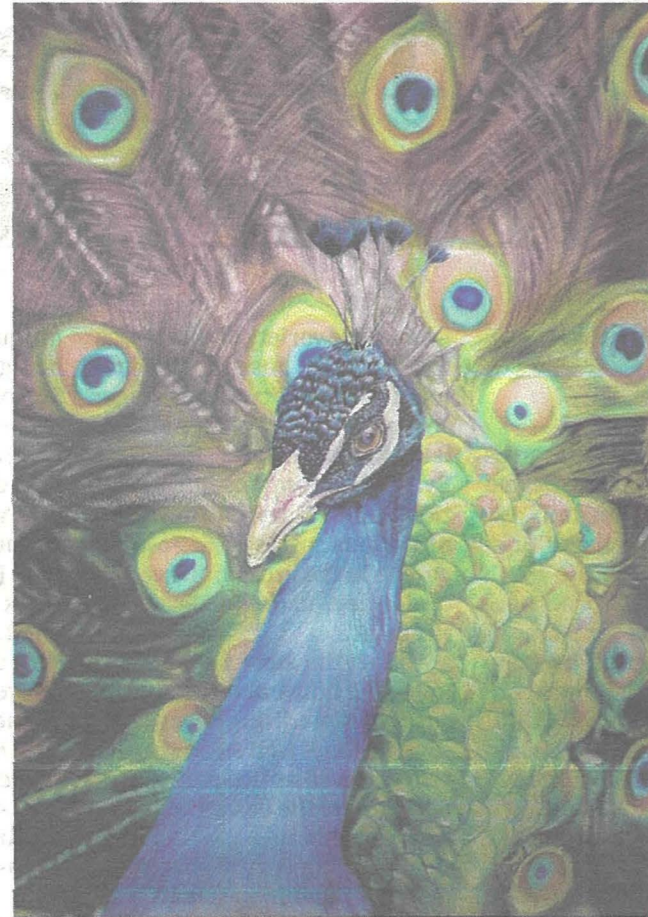




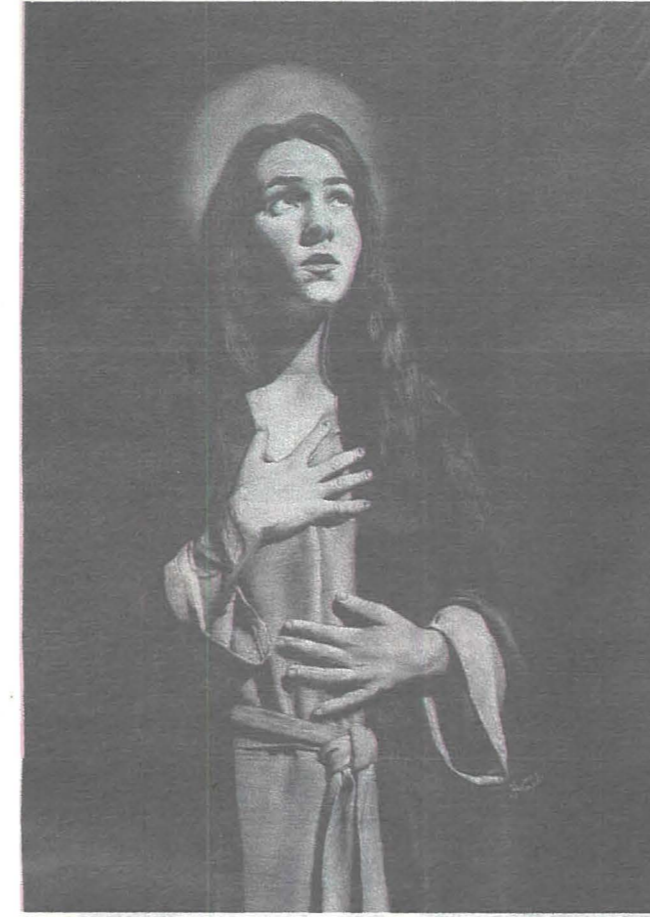
Anġlu (Bernini) bil-Libsa u d-Dadi, Mark Muscat



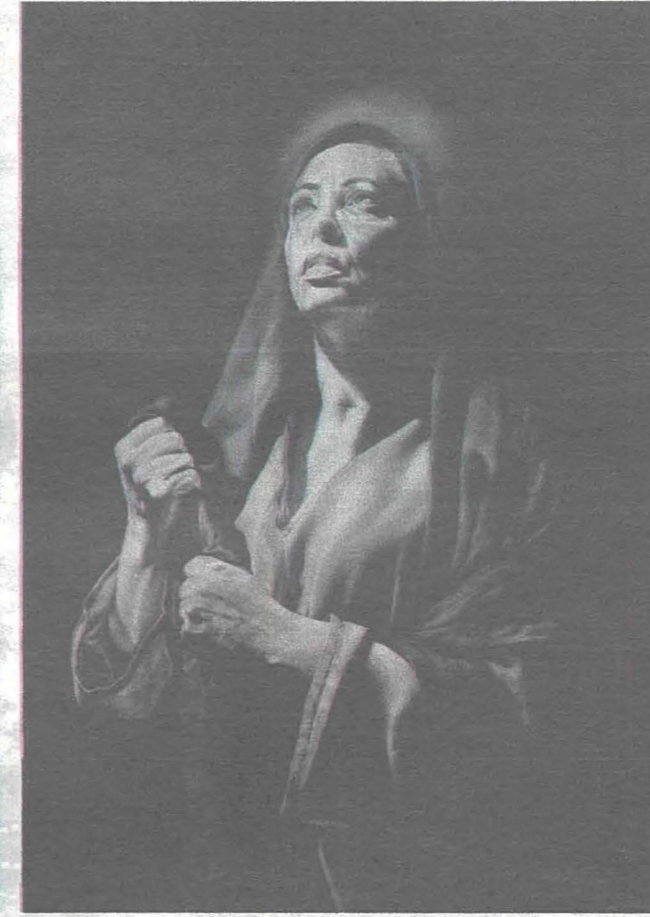
Pavo Cristatus, Francesca Attard



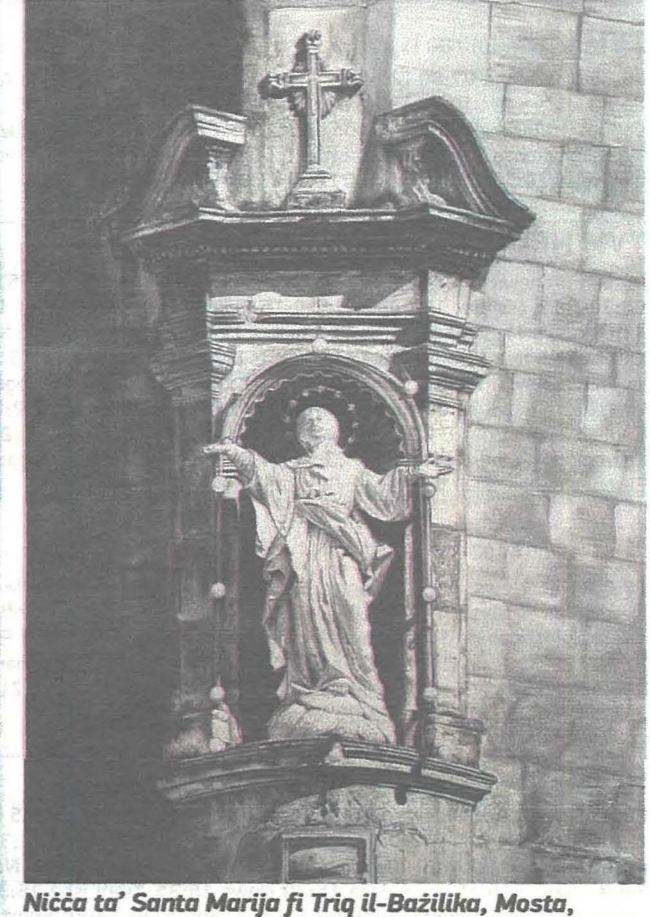
Il-Kampnar tal-Bażilika Kolleġġjata Sant' Elena, Mark Muscat



Ikun Minni Skond Kelmtek, Francesca Attard



Kienet Hemm Wiegfa Fdejn is-Salib, Francesca Attard



Niċċa ta' Santa Marija fi Triq il-Bażilika, Mosta, Francesca Attard

Realism flowing through the veins of two Maltese artists

JOSEPH AGIUS

A year has passed since the first joint exhibition by Francesca Attard and Mark Muscat, titled *The Way to Realism* in which they successfully explored the genre of hyperrealism.

In their current exhibition *Through the Veins of the Artists*, they pursue similar themes as their previous exhibition. Muscat's photorealistic observation and artistic rendering of architecture and statuary is complemented by Attard's deeply sensitive interpretations of religious imagery. However, Attard's capabilities are not limited only to this genre.

The chosen title is indicative of a flow, the veins being an integral part of the circulatory system. These vessels, with the just one exception of the pulmonary vein, carry deoxygenated blood towards the heart so it can be pumped forward to the lungs and can be oxygenated once again and redistributed by the arteries to the rest of the body.

This analogy can be carried forward to the way the two artists relate to stimuli; a photorealist 'heart' beats within their chests, delivering the 'blood' that oxygenates their creative processes.

MARK MUSCAT, ARCHITECTURE AND STATUARY

In contrast with last year's exhibition, Muscat has introduced a full chromatic palette in his rendition of Giuseppe Cali's

Epiphany lunette in the Mosta basilica. He includes the architecture that houses this work of one of the giants of Maltese art; Muscat thus establishes his artwork as an original piece on its own ground and not a masterful copy of the Cali.

He gives architectural context to a well-known painting, one of the series of eight that narrate salient episodes in the life of Jesus Christ, as foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament.

"The chosen title is indicative of a flow, the veins being an integral part of the circulatory system"

In his other work in this exhibition, Muscat reverts to his traditional choice of two palettes, one in which shades of grey predominate and the other which lights up in golden ochre. The Mdina skyline, with the dominating 16th-century cathedral, glows against a pitch-black night sky and foreground.

The artist segments the composition into three parts, the hyperrealism dreamily suspending the architecture, imbuing it with an otherworldly and magnificent radiance. This might as well be one of novelist Italo Calvino's so-called *Invisible Cities* as Mdina, entrenched so thoroughly in its eventful and golden history, can still release new narratives and itineraries to the dreamer lurking in most of us.

Last year, Muscat had initiated a series of paintings thematically linked to the 10 angels on Ponte Sant'Angelo, the bridge leading to Castel Sant'Angelo and to the Vatican City. He has completed and is exhibiting five of them, represented in shades of grey.

The chiaroscuro adds more drama as the sculptural elements of each angel's robe, locks of hair and individual feathers on the wings stand out in high relief. The black background seems to project each angel forward and the incident stark light, as if coming from a sun that defies a heavily overcast sky, aids in adding volume to each of these heavenly creatures.

A recurrent theme in Muscat's oeuvre is his depictions of belfries of various Maltese churches. They are studies of incredible detail as the artist zooms in to explore the elements and idiosyncrasies of the architecture that one might easily miss through a ground-level perspective.

Through these paintings, we partake in the brooding and heavy silence of the stationary bells. Muscat captures a mood of intense solitude. This 'vein' runs through the work in this series, expressed either monochromatically or through his ochre signature way.

FRANCESCA ATTARD, RELIGIOUS IMAGERY AND BEYOND

Attard's very young age belies a remarkable sensitivity in the portrayal of human emotion. In the last exhibition, she portrayed Mother Teresa and Padre

Pio (as well as herself via a self-portrait) in an exceptional psychological study that celebrated these personages' humbleness. This she did through their facial expressions, reaching deep into the soul of the subject and bringing forth their life story and what they stood for.

In this exhibition, Attard has researched religious iconography and reinterpreted it, endowing it with a serene beauty of a more human and temporal dimension. It is only the ephemeral haloes that elevate them to sainthood; these might as well be representations of normal everyday human beings expressing vulnerability and pain, appealing heavenward for delivery from their lot. The artist manages to evoke a sense of spirituality by endowing normal human beings with otherworldly attributes.

We have grown up with santi – representations of saints and biblical episodes – through our Roman Catholic upbringing. Sometimes, these devotional artefacts had representations of masterpieces of sacred art together with a prayer, aimed at reviving or reasserting our religious beliefs. In other cases, kitschy and stereotypical imagery and a prayer proclaimed the power of the saint or deity.

Attard's perspective to religious imagery delves into the intensely normal and human. Sainthood isn't limited solely to ascetics and to those persons who lived a life devoted to and got martyred for delivering God's message.

The woman next door who has been abandoned to live an undignified life,

Maltese artists

the young girl bullied and suffering in silence, the old man ill and forgotten are also saints of fortitude and courage, carrying the burden of their cross without so much as complaining.

In the same vein as her colleague and similarly adopting a monochromatic palette, Attard delves also into the beauty of Maltese vernacular architecture and brings out the intricacies of detail in our country's architectural fabric.

This exhibition also demonstrates another side of the young artist's dexterity via the full chromatic representations of animals. This thematic and chromatic dichotomy is interesting, maybe suggesting that nature abounds with creatures of such grand beauty that transcend the monochromatic 'blandness'

of the human condition and its undertakings.

French poet and thinker Jean Cocteau claimed that "true realism consists in revealing the surprising things which habit keeps covered and prevents us from seeing". Through *The Veins of the Artists* finds two artists reaffirming themselves as foremost protagonists in our country's artistic realism. As Cocteau stated, they are inviting us to engage more profoundly with the world around us, one which we so often disregard.

Through *The Veins of the Artists*, hosted by *Casino Notabile*, Saqqajja Hill, Rabat, is on until December 31. Log on to the event's Facebook page for opening hours. COVID-19 restrictions apply.



Il-Belt is-Siekta, Mark Muscat