



Art *from*
DEATH

Untitled 2009

Author: **Ahmed Taha**

Local artist and University of Malta alumni, **John Paul Azzopardi**, uses some unique materials to create his works of art. Using rabbit and chicken bones, he has managed to create complex artworks. But why this particular medium? And what's the underlying message? **Ahmed Taha** gets in touch to find out more.

Wandering the British Museum's massive halls, each room lined with magical artifacts in glass boxes creating an otherworldly scene, a younger John Paul Azzopardi did not know that this moment would unconsciously attract him to the arts.

Born in East London, England, Azzopardi started his professional life as an electrical engineer but never felt connected to it. 'I spent four years studying, and I was just depressed all the time. And I was pretty crap at it as well,' he says. 'I did manage to find work in London, but I was never really in my element and ended up having a breakdown.'

After moving back to Malta at the age of 25, Azzopardi left London with so many questions. 'I always had these existential questions about life. What is the meaning of life? Who am I? All these are important questions in a very basic sense,' he says. These questions led him to enroll as a B.A. (Hons) Philosophy student at the University of Malta, graduating in 2008.

FROM AN ALUMNI TO AN ARTIST

Azzopardi joined the University of Malta to study philosophy and anthropology, but he soon shifted his focus towards philosophy. 'Philosophy in general helps you in any kind of subject as it makes you think. It's a vast subject, and any topic can be looked at through a philosophical lens,' he continues. 'In the arts, it gives you a kind of grounding. Every time I create something, I look at what philosophers wrote about these things.'

University life helped Azzopardi become an artist. 'It was a life-changing experience because it gave a little rigor to my thinking. It also gave me a lot of discipline, because there's always a lot of reading and assignments to do. It's like a form of exercise; you're always building up this brain power,' he says. 'All this discipline at the university has helped me not only in my artistic output but also in films. In the film industry, it's all about deadlines. And before that, I never really saw myself as disciplined. University changed that.'

CREATING ARTS

One of the most exciting things about Azzopardi's art is the materials he uses. Using organic materials such as bones to create a violin or a moth takes months. The process results in mesmerising works that instantly capture the imagination. Azzopardi walks us through the steps of creating his art.

'First of all, I'm always looking for forms in nature which are attractive. I believe that beauty lures a person to look at it. Whether it's a human being, an animal, a landscape, or the sea. There's something about it, that beauty really draws you toward it. Sometimes if it's intensely beautiful, it almost doesn't even allow you to reflect on what you're seeing. You just become trapped at that very moment, and you lose yourself in it. I'm always seeking out objects that have that kind of quality,' Azzopardi continues.

'I'm interested in objects that have almost certain exaggerated qualities to them. Take the Maltese fertility goddess. She has large bosoms and hips. She's exaggerated; ▶



Study of a late 19th century French harpo-lyre



Study; Detail from D. Mylius Opus Medico-Chymicum



Untitled No.3 (Shadow Time/ Studies in Esoteric Calibration)



The silence around death is also an appreciation of life

we get excited because we're seeing larger proportions. In the same way, when you think of a mosque and you see all these details of pattern, that's also a form of exaggeration. I like those two qualities: beauty and exaggeration. They go hand in hand with the kinds of objects that I'm creating.'

Taking a closer look at his bone violin, the intricate mesh of bones gives the artwork an eerie and fragile beauty. 'The violin was one of the earliest figures I created. An actual violin has a beautiful outline in and of itself. It's the outline that draws your eye, just like when you see, for example, a beautiful person, and you see how they look. But then you want to go into the center of it; you want to better understand the person. With the bone violin, I want the viewer to understand that it is silent,' Azzopardi explains. In fact, the lack of strings is testament to this.

THE BARE BONES

Bones aren't the most conventional medium when it comes to fine art and sculpture. For Azzopardi though, the use of rabbit and chicken bones is central to the aptly named Bone collection. The exhibition features a late 19th century French harpo-lyre, a death's-head hawkmoth, a vampire bat, and a violin – all made exclusively of bones. 'I use bones as a metaphor for your ego-death, meaning a space within you that

is not judgemental or critical. So although bone is the presence of an actual death, in the artwork, it serves as a form of death, a letting go of one's critical thinking.'

'The silence around death is also an appreciation of life. When you see something and you allow yourself and your desires to wash away, you feel more alive. We're always running after things, but when you allow your desire to dissolve, you feel more alive and happy because you don't feel that you need to run after anything,' Azzopardi explains.

Azzopardi has participated in many exhibitions with his work. His first solo show, called *Ħlejriet*, took place in Malta in 2006. In 2010, he participated in the exhibition *New Generation* at the Malta Contemporary Arts in Valletta. Then in 2011, Heritage Malta hosted *Curved Silence* at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta, showing his violin masterpiece. In 2017, he exhibited at The Venice Biennial in the Maltese Pavilion.

As he remembers that moment at the British Museum wandering and watching the beautiful art all around him, Azzopardi says that true inspiration can be found in the darkest of times. 'I try to make my inner life meaningful, because I find life really difficult and depressing. And that is my source for inspiration: how to fight depression through art and through creation.' 