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Lino Borg, Joseph P. Cassar (2012) *Aldo Micallef-Grimaud (1925-2010)*, Malta: Glorian Micallef Grimaud, ISBN 97899957-0296-0, 72 pages.

This finely crafted and colour-plated publication serves as the catalogue for the current exhibition at the Presidential Palace, San Anton, showcasing the work of a prolific Maltese artist who passed away two years ago at the age of eighty-five. Aldo Micallef Grimaud established himself, throughout an eventful seventy year artistic period, as a portrait painter and a painter of still lifes, landscapes in oils and watercolours, and religious subjects.

Hailing from an artistic family, Aldo Micallef Grimaud was also a tenor like his brother Aurelio. Other members of his family, notably his surviving wife Mariucca, whom he met at the Government School of Art, and daughters (Nadine and Glorian), are themselves artists. They too stamped their mark on the local artistic scene, particularly in the area of floral art. I had the pleasure of familiarising myself with Aldo's oeuvre through my frequent visits to his house in the '70s when I befriended his son Mario, then quite a promising musician and ceramist.

The collection on display at the Presidential Palace at San Anton is rather large and I can attest to the fact that it is by no means all embracing given some of the large canvases which I recall seeing at his house, not to mention works in people's homes (in Malta and abroad), especially portraits, and of course the church vaults or lunettes. We obtain a glimpse of the preparatory work for these paintings in churches in a few sketches on display at the exhibition.

Aldo Micallef Grimaud was very much what we would call a traditional artist. He was a protégé of Edward Caruana Dingli and this sums him up. The influence of the Caruana Dinglis, Robert and notably Edward, the latter arguably the most influential mentor, in Maltese art, in the first half of the previous century, is there for all to see at the exhibition. Aldo displays all the rigour with which Caruana Dingli's best students at the Government School of Art were equipped. Some of the sketches date to his early days as a student and we come across some very stylised postures in works executed with an eye for detail and in a manner that demonstrates the acquisition of superb technique. For technique was an obsession in the kind of art promoted by Caruana Dingli, something he instilled in a number of his students. As the authors note in this volume, it also served as what he considered to be their ideal preparation to proceed with their studies at the Accademia delle Belle Arti in Rome or elsewhere, an opportunity which Aldo Micallef Grimaud was denied owing to some bureaucratic hitches (the application for a scholarship in London was not sent by the authorities on time, despite his ranking as a 'top notch' student at the then School of Art, p. 7).

This book has the merit of providing insight into the nature of artistic education in Malta at the time. The details through which this account is provided, not only in the brief captions to a selection of paintings on display but also in the lengthy biographical account, renders it a boon for anyone studying the history of Maltese 20th century art. Some of Caruana Dingli's students managed to break away from the formulaic stranglehold which their mentor must have had on them. Aldo Micallef Grimaud, however, demonstrates, through most of the works on display, that he stuck to the principles provided by his mentor. Of course, the techniques employed were varied, as

evinced by the different works on view. His works range from oil paintings to watercolours to sketches carried out in pencil. Some works display the knife edge technique, others involve light palette or thick brushstrokes. Some portraits are very traditional and detailed. Others stand out for their sketchy freedom. This renders Micallef Grimaud quite eclectic.

Other influences, apart from that of Caruana Dingli in both his portraiture and *vedute* representations of aspects of Maltese life, are noticeable, not least that of the Church's *premier peintre* of the late '50s and early sixties, Envin Cremona (see for instance the authoritative but loving image of Christ, with some echoes, according to the authors, of Cremona and Anton Inglott, p. 34). Watercolours providing imaginative and exoticised depictions of the 'Orient,' in the manner discussed by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, are also evident. We see this in representations of Egypt on page 16. These were carried out in 1942, that is five years before the artist actually went to Egypt to follow a course at Heliopolis' British run Education Vocation Centre, where he spent six months attending a life-class course, enjoying facilities which were not available in Malta. I therefore assume that the representations are figments of the artist's own imagination, perhaps influenced in no small measure by similar 'exotic' depictions provided by Maltese (Preziosi) and high profile foreign (Delacroix) artists. This is the 'Orient' as we are led to imagine it to be, fed by western constructions.

The landscapes, mainly in watercolours, some said to have been carried out while the artist took his family out on a picnic, vary in quality. There is an obvious fascination on the artist's part with the shimmering restless surfaces provided by the chromatic contrasts that enhance the movement of the meandering pathways and rubble walls. The 'time stood still' cliché seems appropriate here. We come across the old eighteenth century *vedutista* convention of prominently setting a decaying building or arch against the background of the Maltese countryside, the way earlier artists, especially visiting French artists, used remnants of Greco-Roman antiquity in their Italian country scenes. The stillness of the countryside and solidity of the farmhouses are offset by the movement provided, in a specific section of the painting, by the odd swaying branches (or leaves or

prickly pear cactus) bunched together in certain paintings and at times serving as a *repoussoir*, demarcating foreground and background.

The sentiment is nostalgic and the mood throughout these and other paintings, notably scenes from Maltese everyday life, including the orderly San Girgor procession at Zejtun with the dominating red and white colours of the priests' vestments, is quietistic (we get none of the social and political upheavals of the period here). The depictions of country women tending their sheep are very much in the Caruana Dingli tradition of romanticising these people, shedding little light on their social plight in bygone days, a point raised by Evarist Bartolo in an introduction to a particular edition of Gwann Mamo's novel, *Ulied in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerika*.

We notice a greater freedom in Micallef Grimaud's later works, notably work of the '90s. The watercolour and ink minimalist sketch 'Going home,' characterised by dashing strokes, is executed with a freedom not witnessed in earlier works. The same can be said of his 1995 oil painting, 'Arbre Enchanté' in which the tree metamorphoses into a female figure at one with nature. This work stands out for its impressive sense of movement, capturing the idea of being rooted in rather than apart from nature, though the human figure still takes centre stage.

What emerges from the exhibition and the paintings illustrated in the splendid accompanying volume, for which Borg and Cassar, as well as the artist's daughter Glorian and nephew André, deserve much credit, is an appreciation of the artist's superb array of technical skills and his powerful design, the kind of areas in which, I suspect, one or two contemporary artists, hiding behind the veneer of abstract or conceptual art, might be found wanting. The book and exhibition are admirable for their comprehensiveness, even though I felt that the exhibition itself should have been more selective. Who is to say that the artist being honoured would have wanted all works gathered from his studio and elsewhere to be exhibited?

The issue of portraiture, the area in which he excelled, raises the question of whether Malta should have its own 'national popular' portrait gallery. I threw in the word 'popular' to distinguish such a gallery from the rather staid and elitist galleries of this kind we find in other countries, galleries which highlight the lives of artistes, politicians and the ruling social class in general but which give scant importance to people from other walks of life. The rather inclusive portrait-photos that once welcomed visitors to Valletta on entry can well find their place together with other representations, including traditional ones as displayed at the Micallef Grimaud exhibition and other more popular ones included in such volumes as Raphael Vella's *Cross-currents* (e.g. Gozo Cowboy), giving importance to issues of social class, 'race'/ethnicity, gender, religious identity and other forms of social difference. I wonder whether the building which currently houses Malta's premier art collection, the Museum of Fine Arts in South Street, Valletta, soon to be replaced by the Auberge d'Italie in Merchants Street, can serve as the venue for such an inclusive collection rather than house a ministry.

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