

Religious and political 'absolutism'

Louis Laganà reports on Reading Cabinets, an exhibition of contemporary art by Raphael Vella



Raphael Vella, who is a well-known contemporary artist in Malta, creates works that range from altered books to drawings, sculptures and multi-media installations. He alters books into paper pulp or reconstructs the material into other forms, which he terms as "biblioclasm". We know that today artists also find a way how to deal with personal issues and social inquiries of contemporary life by altering books. In his latest works, Dr Vella excavates the transgressions of society reflecting mostly on the religious and political scenario of contemporary life.

In recent years Dr Vella had the opportunity to work on a number of interesting projects related to textuality, politics and religious faith. He explored concepts of truth and "believes that books are vehicles of an authoritarian version of truth". In his work Dr Vella also addresses themes related to religious indoctrination and violence referring mostly to fundamentalism in Catholicism and Islam. He is, in fact, currently holding an exhibition of drawings entitled Reading Cabinets at St James Cavalier, in Valletta. Some of the works in this exhibition formed part of a successful art show held earlier last year at Modern Art Oxford in the UK. For this occasion he also published a hardbound full-colour book which includes an essay by Allia Ali, who curated his exhibition in the UK, an interview with Dr Vella by Susan Johanknecht, a printmaker and a lecturer at the University of Arts London, and a long philosophical analysis of his works by Prof. Kenneth Wain. In the last section of the book, Dr Vella produced a "visual essay" composed of drawings, sculptures, photographs, books, paper, marginalia and other objects. The book was sponsored and published by Allied Publications Limited. It is perhaps one of the best books dealing with contemporary social issues in art which has been published so far in Malta.

Reading Cabinets is presented with a variety of drawings mostly dealing with the exploration of the links between religion, fundamentalism and terrorism. Dr Vella

produced three cabinets painted in cardinal red, and a number of drawings placed inside the drawers encourage the viewers to open them and discover what the drawings are all about, as if one is leafing a book trying to discover what is inside. The way the cabinets and the drawings are exhibited also suggest a kind of "concealness" and the viewers find themselves entering into a different world. Many of the drawings are done in a very meticulous way, in graphite, pencil and dry pigment, exposing the paradoxical aspects of religion and terrorism.

In most works, Dr Vella symbolically uses the "book" as a metaphor for ideologies (which could be religious or political) that explain a kind of aura for the "truth". It is, in a way, how today large masses of people in the world are indoctrinated by political ideologies and how they become "sacred" for many. The artist also uses objects in his drawings to remind us of terrorism and its effect. For example, in some drawings he uses images of weapons like machineguns or bombs.

These images are not simply a means to send a message to the viewers about the brutality of terrorism but also about the effects of how brainwashing people, especially in politics, may lead to terrorism. Prof. Wain pointed out in his essay, that Dr Vella's work does not only "explore" issues of religion, fundamentalism and terrorism but they also "make a dramatic statement about these phenomena in our times".

In this exhibition, Dr Vella included one of his "book" sculptures. It is the largest sculpture ever exhibited at St James Cavalier. This large construction about four metres high, is called A Horse for Airing the Gods. It is made of timber and steel and is found at the main entrance hall under one of the arches. It was originally exhibited in 2004 at the Den Haag Sculptuur, a large-scale outdoor exhibition held each year in The Hague, Holland.

The inspiration behind this work was the political episode when discussions about the EU constitution were held in Brussels and God's name was not going to be included in the EU constitution. This work also refers to "the erasure of the name and the co-existence of many definitions of the divine". Dr Vella created a number of larger-than-life steel books hanging at different levels and each book has a laser-cut title referring to the name of God in different European languages. He questions strongly how contemporary life addresses the concept of "God" and "the truth". I think that a work of this calibre should be placed to be viewed permanently in a public library or at any other institution.

Surely, Dr Vella will continue to offer us a fascinating insight into the creative process; the valuable dialogue between the artist and the audience, through other themes which will address conflicting systems of social value, religion and political belief.

Times of Malta:

<http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20080329/arts-entertainment/religious-and-political-absolutism.202017>