

## The Metamorphing Life

In the fifth article in the series of artists and their work Louis Laganà profiles the work of Caesar Attard who creates intense ‘spiritual’ imagery yet complex to understand

As we know many Maltese figurative artists not only express realistic images portraying what one sees, but most try to stylize and simplify their figures using colour and form to bring out the emotional effect and sometimes use distortions to create and emphasize a particular situation or concept. Caesar Attard is one of those artists who explore profoundly ways and means how to express the essence of the human form and experience. In Mr Attard’s work the spiritual element is part of the artist’s reflective qualities. Although unique in style, his drawings and paintings attract, deceive, resemble, imitate, animate and leave the viewers perplexed to grasp their meaning.

Caesar Attard has been a well-known artist in the local art scene for many years. He started his art studies at the Government School of Art in 1959 under the prominent sculptor Vincent Apap and later in 1966 under Esprit Barthet another important figure in the Maltese art scene of the time. After his studies at the Teacher’s Training College in 1973 he was appointed teacher of Art with the Education Department. In 1995 he joined the Junior College, University of Malta to continue his art teaching career. During his early years in his art practice, Mr Attard was an active member of the Art Groups: Spectrum’67, Vision’74, and Atelier’56. During this period the artist started to establish a

name as one of the main avant-garde artists in Malta by participating in group exhibitions.

In the late sixties, Mr Attard started to experiment and explore the relationship between images and their transformation by means of mathematical rules called algorithms. The artist was fascinated by the relationship between the mysterious use of these rules and the observation of the human form, and also between reason and intuition. Looking back at some of these works one may understand quickly the influence early technology of computer graphics had on art. In fact as the artist stated, during this period he was 'struck by the primitive computer graphics even though the personal computer arrived in Malta in the eighties'. At that time the critics interpreted Mr. Attard's work as a sort of "mechanistic" worldview, where the artist's fascination was focused on the interplay and the differences between chaos and order.

Around 1974, an important modern art group called Vision 74 was formed in Malta and Caesar Attard was one of its leading members. At that time his closest friend was the famous veteran artist Josef Kalleya. Kalleya was a friend of the 'spirit' and he had with him many discussions about art, society and religion. Other mutual friends like Joe Mallia and Tony Sciberras formed an integral part of the art group. With them he discussed various issues but his meetings with Kalleya were more 'deeply philosophical and sometimes confessional'. In 1975 Mr Attard had a joint exhibition with Josef Kalleya at the Malta Professional Bodies Centre, in Paceville. Professor Peter Serracino Inglott compared these artists as a 'meeting of the East (Kalleya) and the West (Attard)'. Caesar

Attard commented about this assertion: “This is understandable because Mr Kalleya’s work certainly revealed his wisdom in his understanding of the relation between faith and personal experience – which, I believe, is the essence of his works. My work perhaps revealed a young curious and experimenting person deeply concerned by the deeper issues defining individuality.”

Caesar Attard’s first exhibition was held in 1980 at the Museum of Fine Arts where he showed a set of drawings in which the ‘observed is provocatively confronted by the imagined’. Although the works were small, many of them not bigger than a postcard, they had a powerful effect on a few people. One must also mention that Mr Attard also exhibited in other foreign countries. In fact, in 1986 he had another art show at the Maltese Embassy in Moscow. Since 1987, when the exhibition called ‘Fear and risk’ was held at ‘Gallerija Isititut’, at the Catholic Institute in Floriana, the artist started to create a visual language which was not easy to apprehend. It was a challenging type of art, sometimes obsessive and compulsive, which might appear irritating at first and that no one knows what to make of it. The artist explains: “My work developed from an intense look into hidden areas of the mind to a deep involvement in intimate mostly family dramas. Viewers were drawn into the unrelenting darkness as if in a whirlpool. In reaction to these engaging but unrelenting works I went back to my more ironic self and began to tease the viewer or participant into a relationship with the work in which he or she feels destabilized and even helpless.”

In 1992 the artist exhibited a series of drawings and etchings at the New Gallery, Auberge de Provence in Valletta. The title of the exhibition was 'Life and Passion'. This series of drawings was started early in 1985 with one of the first Gospel drawings entitled 'The Agony'. Later the artist produced more interesting work based on events from the Scripture, ranging from the Annunciation to the Baptism, Death and Deposition of Christ up to the empty tomb. In these drawings the artist created not just the imagery of the actual episodes as narrated in the Holy Scripture but also framed them in a contemporary social context. I note that some of these drawings and etchings are reminiscent of the sketches of the caricatures or cartoons by German American expressionist painter and illustrator, George Grosz. Mr Attard managed to create a similar kind of agitation and turmoil in his works which reflects his disillusion with contemporary life. An interesting piece in this series is 'The Feeding of the Crowd', where one could notice light emanating from the centre of the gathering and exaggerated distortions of the facial characteristics of the people to typify social class.

A significant body of Mr Attard's work was produced for two other art shows, one held in 1994, entitled 'Paintings and Drawings held at the New Gallery, Auberge de Prvence, in Valletta and another in the year 2000, 'Graphicon', a series of paintings, photographs and computer artwork in 'Art in Malta' held at the St. James Cavallier, Centre for the Creative Arts, in Valletta.

Perhaps Caesar Attard's name will remain known for his 'shrouded figures'. These works remind me of Henry Moores's shelter drawings. Like Moore's figures they are 'in deep

sleep or trance' or may also express 'death' as we find in Egyptian mummies or medieval tomb sculptures. Although Mr Attard had a different approach and meaning in his shrouded figures spirituality is still an important notion in these works. There is a mystery behind the artist's shrouded figures. The figures hidden beneath the drapery are without any identity. We do not know whether they are men or women. Although there is an aspect of individuality and anonymity they seem to suggest a 'collective psychological death'. It is an expression of the artist's turmoil inherent in contemporary society. I argue that the artist taps into the cultural psyche to explore the new forms of consciousness which are reflected in today's world. I also see in the shrouded figures a kind of conceptual similarity to the drawings of Swiss Jew artist, Rosemarie Koczÿ, a Nazi concentration camp survivor, who witnessed the Holocaust in 1942-1945. Koczÿ enshrouded her anonymous figures to 'give them dignity' and a respectful burial. Although in both cases the theme of death runs through these works, the shrouded figures eloquently convey a sense of protection and symbolically they are also a manifestation of change and transformation.

During the last ten years, we have seen marked changes in Mr Attard's work. Gradually the artist moved from the representational to a more abstract and mysterious imagery. 'Life and death' seems to be a recurring theme in his recent work. This is seen in his distorted figures, the dissolution of clarity and distinction into deformation and distortion. At times the figures become abstract with little emphasis on form but important stress is put on line. These works are reflected in his latest exhibition held in May 2007 at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta, where he showed a series of drawings and

paintings. The exhibition had no title but the artist used as a sign an arrow in inverted commas. Perhaps the meaning of the arrow is to show the viewers the direction he was taking in his recent style or is simply used as a metaphor for the continuation of his artistic journey. I believe that in this last series Mr Attard's work is an enquiry about man's existential quest to find the 'self'. Like Barnett Newman art his work is 'religious'. It is permeated with a deep spiritual sense of life and the uniqueness of man.

His work called 'Eikon', which we also find as the title for the image database for biblical studies, already gives us a hint of what the subject is about. This work was executed in the year 2000, and here we discover how Mr Attard synthesized with a few lines the figure of the crucified Christ. The deformed figure is placed in the centre, emerging from a composition of rectangular jagged lines showing only parts of the arms and legs. Christ's head covered with thorns is illustrated more like the head of weird animal rather than that of a human being. This work expresses the extreme anguish of agony.

When viewers look closely at Caesar Attard's works, they can also see the influence of prehistory on some of his works like 'Natural Orientations', 'Supine Animal', and 'Fat Beast'. As art critic, Joseph Paul Cassar points out in his introduction for the exhibition brochure: "There is also somewhere underneath a connection with prehistory. This is evident in the scribble-like images particularly those depicting beasts forms, which display an amazing richness of imagination." The primitivistic stance of Caesar Attard is

to incorporate primitive forms which are considered as 'sophisticated artifices' stripped away from the complexities of nature.

This year, Caesar Attard has been invited by the Bank of Valletta to hold a retrospective exhibition next November at the Gallery of the BOV Centre in Santa Venera. In this important and prestigious art show the artist will be showing a selection of work dating from the early seventies to recent years. It will be interesting to see how Mr. Attard's work evolved during the last few years and also try to get a glimpse of how the artist developed his work from a representational style to a much freer abstract idiom. His reflections about the realistic world changed to an immaterial sensitive reality of life. Mr. Attard's recent works are the result of the images which emanate from his unconscious: reflections of the disconcerting chaos of life, frightening and baffling imagery from his interior world. It is a life-long project of self-configuration and enhancement through the creative experience.

Times of Malta:

file:///C:/Users/Mr.Lagana/Documents/publications/weekender%20reviews/Caesar%20Attard.htm