

Art

A different kind of landscape

Charlene Vella reviews Tonio Mallia's exhibition, *Earth*.

The world incorporates a system that millions of humans and creatures depend on, from minerals to water, land and such.

As its inhabitants, humans are responsible for some of its changes and its safeguarding. A love for nature and all things natural is imbued in many artists, especially those who take their main inspiration from it as a main source.

And artists can be extremely sensitive to issues involving the way man imposes his presence on it. Some artists then choose to capture the beauty, incessantly going after an often idealised result, the prettiness of which may result in greater economic revenue from sales. But others go after its raw allure.

Tonio Mallia is known as a landscapist, the subject he chose to return to in an intimate, ongoing solo exhibition in Gozo.

Two years ago, Mallia distanced himself from landscapes and instead exhibited a series of paintings related to war. In this exhibition he has returned to landscapes even more strongly with the use of the dry brush technique being mixed in with washes being his main mode of expression.

“A very animated series that shows a raw natural beauty”

There is a great balance between drawn elements and the very painterly and there is a personal artistic development that is clearly visible even to the untrained eye.

Mallia is becoming a more individual artist in style and technique. This is also a result of Mallia applying archival inks that have been recently introduced on the market, which he found to blend well with Indian ink.

These works, which have been produced in the past couple of years, are, therefore, a result of a great understanding of his chosen medium. This allows him to reach greater expression with bolder texture as he has come to admire in the work of two of his greatest influences: the American artist William Thon (1906-2000) and the British John Blockley (b. 1931).



Golgotha

The exhibition is truly a tribute to both these artists whose work Mallia equally admires. Mallia's paintings are versatile in technique and were also executed with watercolour, gouache, acrylic and metallic paints.

The subjects of the 11 works on display are local rock formations. They are captured at their wildest and most natural, often showing the effects of time and weathering, and also the imposition of man-made structures.

The dark palette that this demure painter has chosen to portray these scenes with evokes a sombre mood in which there is a liberal use of black.

This, together with his great power of the brush and mastering of technique provides a very animated series of works that show a raw natural beauty and far from your typical seascape.

The palette is also likely the result of these paintings having

been produced in the studio rather than *en plein air*, allowing for the technique to be better explored.

Nonetheless, one can rest assured that the scenes are true to life, for Mallia is an avid hiker venturing across the rugged coast and rough terrains. They cannot be more different to the scenes of the island bathed in light we often see in posters and pictures.

A striking work, *Golgotha*, is a landscape in which several crucifixes appear from rocky promontories. It is clearly not a topographical landscape, but a painting that reflects Mallia's apprehension towards hunters in the countryside. And this was painted over a year before the spring hunting referendum.

These environmental sensitivities make Mallia a genuine painter of our island that forms a small part of our planet, but for which this exhibition has been eloquently called *Earth*.



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