

## The Fascination of Beauty and Nature

*The sense of beauty is the harmony between our nature and our experience. When our senses and imagination find what they crave when the world so shapes itself or so moulds the mind that the correspondence between them is perfect, then perception is pleasure, and existence needs no apology (George Santayana, 1896, 269).*

The experience of beauty in a work of art occurs spontaneously, with no effort. It is the artist who seeks this experience to bring about through his or her creative efforts and presents us with 'beauty'. The artist works to perfect the forms of expression in the artwork to evoke an aesthetic experience such as beauty. This is exactly what Audrey Mercieca conveys to us in this collection of paintings she is presenting today.

Mercieca is known primarily as a landscape painter, but there is more in her oeuvre. As this personal art exhibition reveals, Mercieca is an excellent and outstanding portrait and figurative painter, and her recent works are precise and detailed beyond photographic naturalism. As we are seeing in this collection of works, the artist's versatile approach to painting is to employ different styles while she experiments on a variety of subjects.

### Landscape Paintings

*We see what we want to see, and what we want to see is determined, not by the inevitable laws of optics, or even by instinct for survival, but by the desire to discover or construct a credible world. What we see must be made real. Art in that way becomes the construction of reality (Herbert Read, 1959, 12).*

Local artists have always felt that deep connections with the surrounding sea, natural settings like terraced fields, dry and sparse vegetation, rubble walls, rocks, and the built environment are left in the genre of landscape painting. In her paintings, Audrey Mercieca evokes the notion of beauty and paints public places by exploring the natural, built and social landscape of Malta and Gozo. Featuring a varied selection of landscapes, her paintings maintain an amused attachment to her personal myths and Maltese identity. Through these landscape paintings, the artist explores the relationship between humans and the



Audrey painting en plein-air, photograph by Lorella Castillo.

environment. She is one of the few leading artists who particularly paint en plein-air in the countryside and seaside areas where she lives in Gozo and other locations around Malta. The artist finds that painting in the 'alla prima' method, that is, creating a painting in one layer of paint and one sitting, gives her that deliberate, spontaneous approach. Painting outside also helps her to understand better the quality of the changing light and atmosphere. In this exhibition, the artist is presenting a series of oil and watercolour paintings of scenes we are familiar with and others which are unknown to the public.

Mercieca discovers most of these local views while rambling on the outskirts of our villages and towns. It is a great challenge for her to paint in different weather conditions where one must face bright sunny, hot days, and even windy and rainy circumstances. Regardless of the weather, the artist successfully expresses the atmosphere of the place with a wide range of colours, depending on the inspiration of the moment.

Mercieca's style in landscape painting varies from impressionism, her favourite, to 'romantic expressionism', which is influenced by her emotions, moods, or atmosphere and so determines the result of the painting. In her vast repertoire of landscape paintings, we find studies of trees, shrubs, soil, rocks, narrow roads, traditional Maltese buildings, alleys, chapels, churches and all that make a unique local scene which is rarely found in other



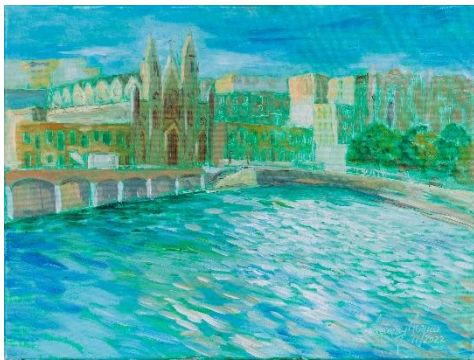
*Il-Bosk.*

foreign scenery. The famous British author and art historian Simon Schama, in his exceptional book *Landscape and Memory*, suggests that 'Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock. But it also should be



*May Afternoon at il-Bosk.*

acknowledged that once a certain idea of landscape, a myth, a vision, establishes itself in an actual place, it has a peculiar way of muddling categories, of making metaphors more real than referents; of becoming, in fact, part of the scenery' (1995, 61). In some of her exquisite studies of typical Maltese and Gozitan landscapes, Mercieca projects a distinctive vision of scenes which are an important part of our heritage and culture. A close look at these studies like *il-Bosk* and *May Afternoon at il-Bosk* and other similar paintings in this exhibition recognizes and confirms that the artist has an acute sense of analysing scrupulously the scene in front of her. In these paintings, the artist captured on her canvases the intense light and sharp shadows, which characterise the contemporary existence of such places. Works like *San Dimitri, and Gozo*, also articulate a more refined and detailed subject of the landscape which is sensitively handled by the artist.



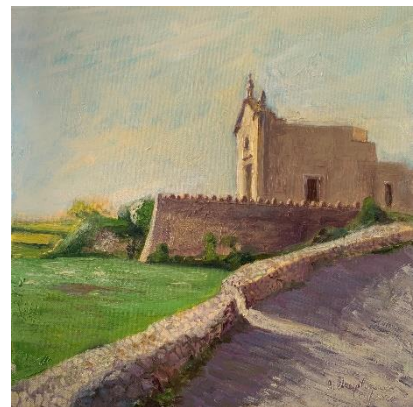
*Balluta Bay.*

The artist also explored places where the sea forms an integral part of the local

environment. For example, in her recent work of *Balluta Bay*, painted at dusk, Mercieca emphasized more on the movement of the sea and the sky. Yet,

the topographical details of the church, adjacent buildings, and arches next to the sea are detectable. The effects of a fleeting visual impression of the scene fascinate her with the display of greenish-blue monochromatic colours of the sky and the sea, which create a striking and magical mood.

In contrast to her impressionist paintings, Mercieca successfully delved into a more simplified form of the landscape. In *Comino in Red and Green*, the artist illustrated this popular view in an abstract configuration. Although the artist used arbitrary colours, however a hint of the place is still recognisable. The artist created these pictorial planes that drew their sustenance



*San Dimitri.*



*Comino in Red and Green.*

entirely from colour. Colour, light and space achieve the same aesthetic pleasure, which is also found in her other landscape paintings, whether in watercolour, oils, or acrylics. This work was executed early in 2022, and it is one of her best works in this collection.

Mercieca enjoys the beauty of colour, of form and gesture and gradually she is moving towards abstraction which is an aesthetics of intimism.

### **Figurative and Portrait Painting**

In this personal art exhibition, it is evident that Audrey Mercieca is showing another facet of her painting style and creativity. Different from her landscape painting, the artist created a body of work related to classical portraiture and figurative painting. Creating a portrait takes



*Portrait in profile.*

time, patience, and accurate work and requires several sittings by the model. The academic process is usually done by working in layers and allowing the oil paint to dry for each given layer unless the artist is working with acrylics. We all know that portrait painting is the highest form of academic art and the most difficult discipline to master. Mercieca accomplished this while studying at the Florence academy in Italy. In her portraits and figurative works, the artist shows her academic

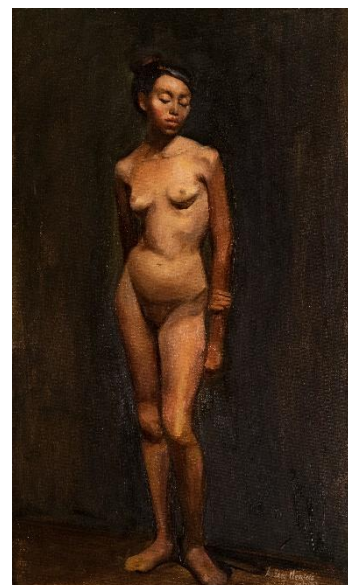
achievements in mastering the complexity of the human anatomy and portrayals of people's faces. Stylistically, these paintings remind us of the celebrated American painters like John Singer Sargent,

Thomas Eakins, Edward Hopper, and others who worked on the classical style of the period. One can admire Mercieca's remarkable talent to capture the sitter's soul and personality.

She uses in an evocative manner the chiaroscuro technique and employs subtle colours, delicate skin tones, values form, and light effects are usually done with the same colour

palette. The background of these portraits and figures is typically set in a dark-coloured ambience. Strong light often falls from a single point, so the sitter emerges from the dark

background to evoke a dramatic effect.



*Standing nude figure.*

For many years, Audrey Mercieca worked on several life drawings and paintings. She frequently attends painting sessions with the live model and employs various techniques depending on the medium she uses. In this exhibition, we are seeing the results of the various poses and skills the artist achieved, especially in her spontaneous watercolour studies.

### **Other Paintings**

*Art exists only to communicate a spiritual message* (Alphonse Mucha 1860-1939)

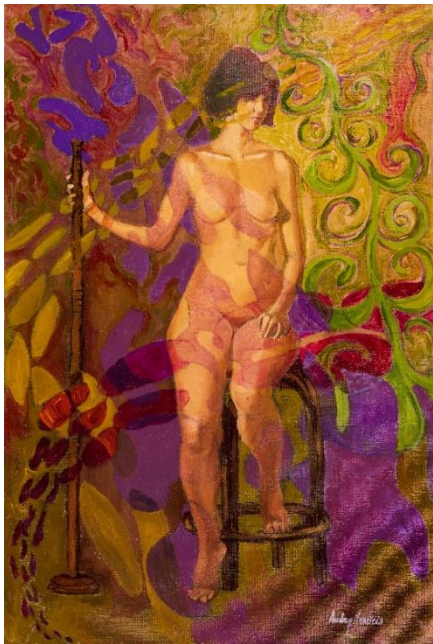


*Self-portrait with floral motifs*

I must mention that Audrey Mercieca is a remarkable artist who also experiments with her creative powers and imagination to produce other genres of painting. Although these works are inspired directly by the model, landscape or subject, the final pieces are highly decorative, and the results are the imagery of graphic intensity, instinctual colour contours and extravagant and sensuous designs.

Overall, this style of art is characterized by its emphasis on aesthetics and visual impact, however, at times there is a specific message or meaning. It is often associated with a sense of pleasure and sensory stimulation and may be used to create a mood of joy or euphoria in the viewer. One must also mention that her self-portrait with floral motifs has a specific meaning which relates to an exploration into the 'self'.

The artist developed this personal style and adapted floral motifs which resemble the 'Belle



*Seated nude on a stool.*

Époques or the Art Nouveau period. She is inspired by the paintings of the great artists of this period like Alphonse Mucha, Aubrey Beardsley, and Gustav Klimt. We know that Mercieca's aesthetic love is derived from what surrounds her and so these works include natural elements, curves, asymmetrical forms, and intense or sublimation colours. One of her best examples is a seated female nude on a stool, seen from a frontal view and superimposed with decorative tendrils, flower motifs and super fine vegetation. The body of the female nude is expressed with a finesse of line, which creates an element of sophistication. The chiaroscuro effect could

be seen in all the canvas, and thus produces an appearance of the mythological essence of the feminine. The female figure holding boldly to a stick turns into a heroic and archetypal female who symbolically signifies women today: sensuality, independence, wisdom, and leadership.



*Poppies.*

As a subject, 'flowers' are also part of Mercieca's oeuvre. Apart from her amazing self-portrait, seen in her profile and highly decorated with flower ornamentation, the artist also created many other canvases related to 'flowers'. In her

large paintings, like *Poppies*, the artist blends the iconographic details of the poppy with the colour pink and green patchwork of flowers, which undoubtedly symbolise femininity and a desire for peace and tranquillity. To us, these flowers mostly symbolize remembrance, but for the artist, poppies have a



*Audrey working on a feast banner (bandalora).*

different connotation. The poppy flower has a long history which dates to ancient times. The poppy was once meant as a symbol of sleep and peace, because of its narcotic properties. In Greek mythology, the poppy was associated with Demeter, the goddess of harvest and fertility and in Roman mythology, the poppy was a symbol of Mars, the god of war. In contemporary times, this popular flower is also associated with spirituality, love, and creativity, thus as a reminder that the artist can create something beautiful.



*Audrey working on the final piece in the sculpture course which won first place at the School of Art*

Besides painting at her studio or en plein air, Mercieca also creates *Bandalori* (banners) for the village feasts in Gozo, and religious decorations like the Paschal candle and other important church occasions. The artist also excelled in sculpture, while attending modelling in clay classes at the Malta School of Art, under the tutorship of the late sculptor, Joseph Chetcuti. These lessons helped her to gain traditional and contemporary sculptural skills, especially in depicting the human anatomy. She was placed first in the sculpture course.

During the years, Mercieca also had the opportunity to work from the life model and continued to acquire more skills in sculpture, especially when depicting the full-size figure.



*Work produced from the life model.*

Furthermore, Audrey also attended courses in sculpture at the academy in Florence where she was taught sculpting techniques like carving, modelling, casting, and assembling materials. The artist had the opportunity to learn more about human anatomy and proportions and how to accurately depict different body parts. She was given the opportunity to express herself artistically through her work and create her own unique pieces.



*Audrey working on a piece of sculpture at the Academy in Florence*

In this personal art exhibition, Audrey Mercieca is taking us through a creative and visual journey by opening the frontiers of the visible beauty of the world and interpreting it in her paintings. The famous poet, playwright, and writer Oscar Wilde once stated that 'the true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible' (2015, 31). The artist, enchanted by nature, explores the sublime and mysterious images of life to share with us the wonderful experience and the powerful language of art.

Photos by Anthony Grech

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