

Q Interview / Exhibition / Malta
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MALTA

GABRIEL ZAMMIT

An alchemy of disruption

Outsider Art in the White Cube



West African Bocio Fetish Doll (c. 1850-1920) wood, cloth, shells, dried grasses, thread and metal fishhooks

Photos by Lisa Attard

The label of outsider artist has come to function as something of an umbrella term for individuals producing work outside the culturally established centres of psychological or social normality. Outsider art is characterised by an almost total stylistic freedom and a unique use of materials with a disregard for ‘correct’ form and a lack of concern for art-historical context. “These [types of] artists,” artist and art historian Jean Debuffet writes in 1988, “derive everything – subjects, choice of materials, means of transposition, rhythms, styles of writing, etc. – from their own depths, and not from the conventions of classical or fashionable art.”

GROUNDWATERS outsider perspectives and visions of elsewhere, an exhibition being held at Valletta Contemporary Gallery, grew out of a fascination with art as a radically free sphere of expression and brings together work and objects made by a group of individuals in the same spirit of exploring independence from compromised culture as had by Debuffet. The exhibition, however, develops a widened definition of outsider art that is oriented towards aesthetic practice as transformative ritual, thus also drawing into the circle of investigation religious art, ritual art and art therapy practices. Objects such as West African Bocio fetish dolls, ex-voto offerings and the alchemical philosopher’s stone

have been introduced into the space to provide a touchstone narrative of transformation around which the artworks gather, each adding or taking according to its specific valence. *GROUNDWATERS* is an attempt to thread these strands into a coherent story which weaves into the past and dips into the world of alchemy, ritual and subterranean desire, looking for visions of else-

where and alternative narratives which lie outside what is recognised, fashionable and canonised in order to build a deeper understanding of who we are, and who we could become.

Aesthetically the work overlaps with various other categories such as naïve art or folk art etc. and the amalgam of what is being called ‘outsider’ art is a

site of conflict and *GROUNDWATERS* reflects this conflict. The exhibition’s final argument is that this kind of art and meaning-making bypasses the circuits of conventional creativity and plunges straight into the groundwaters of our collective subconscious, and is therefore telling of its hidden structures.



Adrian Camilleri, *Self-Pleasure - Manifested Flesh* (2016) acrylic and watercolour on paper

GABRIEL ZAMMIT is a curator with a background in philosophy and art theory. His curatorial practice is driven by a curiosity in art as an alternative method of meaning-making which is free from the limits of conventional ways of looking at the world. He derives most of his inspiration from literature, particularly mythology and poetry, and uses conceptually driven projects to explore the limits of the human condition.



Emma Attard, *Black Horse Stallion* (2022) ink, coloured pen and crayon on paper



Anonymous, *verso of Untitled* (undated) biro on found paper

The exhibition is the first in Malta to explore outsider perspectives. The white cube is the temple to what art has become in the 21st century, it is a monument to capital, consumption, hierarchy and ultimately unfreedom. In my view, it is time for different voices to take over the gallery and museum spaces, especially here in Malta, and to empower outsider perspectives to take over a white cube space is to challenge the culturally sanctioned mechanism of bestowing the right to create truth, and therefore to question the validity of established ways of thinking about creativity, and by proxy ourselves.

In curatorial terms this challenge is facilitated by several physical changes to the space - differently coloured walls, a

room flooded with water (groundwater itself seeping upwards out of the stone) a sound design component built from field recordings constructed out of the mundane everyday hum within which we live our lives, changes to lighting etc. - in order to make the white cube bend and flex so as to make room for different ways of constructing truth.

GROUNDWATERS takes its title from Charles Russell's 2011 publication of the same name and seeks to extend Russell's research into new contexts. "We sense that we are encountering individuals who may be very much like us but who also seem to exist in another dimension of our world," writes Russell, "suggesting degrees of intensity or estrangement that may be at once fascinating, desirable and frightening ... the mystery of otherness and its closeness can loom forth even more strongly in the encounter with the work of outsider artists, whose inner journeys pull us deep into themselves and into ourselves." *GROUNDWATERS* is ultimately about creating a space for that encounter to happen, but what this might finally reveal is up to the individual who is experiencing the work. ¹

Participating artists - Anonymous, Emma Attard, Adrian Camilleri, William Driscoll, Emma Johnson, Salvina Muscat, Joe Vassallo.

Open from 30 September - 12 November. The project is sponsored by the Arts Council Malta project support scheme.



Joe Vassallo, *Hand 1* (2014) acrylic on plaster cast manufactured by Charles Sammut workshop



William Driscoll, *Untitled* (undated) coloured ink on paper