



Fomm ir-Rih at sunset



Fawwara

Impression: Malta

Charlene Vella

One of Malta's leading full-time artists, Kenneth Zammit Tabona, is presenting his latest 'en plein air' watercolours at B'art Gallery in Amery Street, Sliema. This small but interesting collection includes various landscapes and seascapes of Malta, Gozo and Comino, all of which have been painted within the last six months. Zammit Tabona and his painter friends frequently tour around the Maltese countryside, brush in hand, ready to capture whatever is before them or that which inspires them.

When painting outdoors Zammit Tabona does not confine himself to encapsulate what he sees. By embracing the natural elements around him, he allows his mood and temperament to infiltrate the subject and give it life in his own individual way. This means that the same scene tackled on a different day may turn out to be somewhat different to a previous rendition. As a case in point, exhibited are two views of Argotti Gardens that have been executed a month or so apart, where one transpired into a more sombre image than the other.

This watercolourist is introducing something novel in his work.

More accurately, it can be said that he has recently omitted a significant aspect of his compositions which many have without doubt been associating with his name.

I am here referring to the caricaturesque figures that used to inhabit his lively landscapes and scenes. As he himself explained to me, this was not premeditated. This may be a natural course Zammit Tabona is taking in the development of his artist career. As time passes people inevitably change; this artist is choosing to embrace change and the natural effects this has on his artistic production. These latest pieces still however bare his unmistakable stylistic trademark. So where have all the little people gone? They still dwell in his previous works, and no one is to say that they will not resurface in the future.

His work maintains a freedom in the use of the watercolour technique gained by practice and experience. The result is a portfolio of imagery imbued with qualities that can be described as fun and fresh, just like a sketch is more likely to be. In my view, a sketch (or *bozzetto* in Italian or *esquisse* in French) is often more interesting than a more technically-oriented finished work. This aspect pervades Zammit Tabona's paintings and I find that this quality is rather capti-

ating. This freedom of expressiveness is akin to that found in Impressionist paintings whereby the artist's main endeavour was to capture a moment in time onto a two-dimensional surface in a way that could not be realised by any photographic camera.

Zammit Tabona's fluency in the technique of watercolour painting has allowed him to build a confidence that oozes through his brushes and onto the paper. He knows which paper he's in the mood to deal with (a watercolour paper's weight and place of manufacture has an effect on the final result), what colours his current frame of mind will suit the most, and which skills to exploit. Leaving slight blank, unstained spots in a watercolour painting is rather difficult to achieve, but with Kenneth Zammit Tabona it materialises effortlessly. This results because of his incessant practice and his inexhaustible productivity.

He also likes to occasionally gorge with the lush use of gold, such as in 'Fawwara' and 'Trees at San Anton Gardens', and exploits his expertise by applying diluted colours onto the paper, the result of which is an intangible and weightless very reminiscent of the *sfumato* effect. In some paintings the colours are allowed to bleed so as to create an ethereal space. I find this

approach to be relatively pertinent; if we wanted a direct representation of a landscape we could hang a photograph on our walls and not an artist's impression.

Like the other leading Maltese watercolourist John Martin Borg, Kenneth Zammit Tabona's paintings are still very much influenced by the work of the late Giuseppe Arcidiacono. What is interesting is to concede on how individually they have been, and are still, responding to the same influence. Both artists were on friendly terms with Arcidiacono, a master of the watercolour technique and a leading Maltese landscape artist, who managed to capture images with small amounts of paint and water, very much in an Impressionist manner.

Zammit Tabona is turning out to be one of our most prolific painters, and we eagerly wait to see more of interpretations of the Maltese landscape. What I admire most is his expressiveness and devotion to his art. After having a conversation with him I can easily see that his main philosophy in life and his work is rather simple, and I would say that the phrase 'l'art pour l'art' (French for 'art for art's sake'), is very much fitting in this context.

The exhibition is open until the end of the month.

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Mellieha