**Between the Setting and the Rising Sun**

**History Re-Imagined**

**Nikki Petroni**

*Acts of injustice done*

*Between the setting and the rising sun*

*In history lie like bones, each one.*

*The Ascent of F6*, Act II, Scene V

W.H. Auden & Christopher Isherwood

Among the many sensations invoked by nighttime, the uncertainty of temporarily colourless form, cold and disconcerting, incites the imaginary to merge with reality. In this darkness takes place that which is not permitted by the (moral) light of day; order becomes precarious within the cyclical pattern of quotidian life.

The night is a brief period of unmitigated prospects. It is where the socio-political underbelly resides. Myths are born, realities concealed, and from the darkness emerge possibilities for the visible and the invisible. Norbert Francis Attard’s exhibition *Between the Setting and the Rising Sun* deal with the less agreeable aspects of Maltese and Western society, past and present, shining a glaring light on controversial subjects.

On many levels, Attard’s works attest to the several ways in which images may be used and reused, rediscovered and re-presented. Such practices are commonplace in contemporary art; appropriation and juxtaposition have become standard methods of art production. It is the choice of images that draws one into Attard’s large photographic and digital prints. Choice and juxtaposition project overlapping narratives; historical, cultural, political, and religious that talk about the consequences of political dissidence. Their immediate flatness, chromatic appeal, and familiarity work to incite our memory. A number of critical points and contentious question gradually effuse from the interaction with this series of direct and cleverly manipulated pictures. Literature, local and global politics, pop culture, history, text, motifs, and the media world posit a variety of cross-cultural associations.

The sixteen works are all interconnected by means of subject matter and their non-temporal specificity. Few were conceived concurrently as part of a singular series. Each piece came into being during the past fifteen years wherein Attard’s art began to evince an explicitly political voice. A new image-focused dimension erupted that transformed face-value appearances into blatant visual statements on or against power, a tone marginally projected by his previous work.

Immigration, exile, imprisonment, violence, suffering, sin, eroticism, surveillance, and bodily fragility are prominently exhibited with the representation of objects, people, signs, and symbols that embody the tensions of their interrelating political fields. There is no fixed historical chronology from which the components are borrowed. Each image transcends temporal and sometimes even spatial categorical logic. It is possible to group them under the headings elicited below.

**War/Violence/Eroticism**

Our acclimatisation to realist and hyper-realist portrayals of war and violence has engendered a need for divergent visual responses to widespread global suffering. Attard has opted for playful palimpsests of contradictory signs; simplified designs of war instruments and the delicate quality of lace, the Maltese *bizzilla*. Marilyn Monroe’s ubiquitous portrait is overlaid with diminutive stamps of a military aircraft, corresponding to the lace-clad fighter jet in WARANDPEACE. The notorious sex symbol reappears in EROTICISM-VIOLENCE which spells out the link between the two with the use of patterned motifs. Valletta’s cityscape as a site of violence alludes to the female lower-body and the experience of domination. The cabaret performer in RDS -220 grinningly asserts her subordination of the Tsar Bomba, the most potent nuclear weapon to have ever been used. Her demeanour mixed with pink and black lace serve to ridicule the act of war.

Caravaggio’s life and art are captured in CARAVAGGIO, a segment of an installation created by Attard in 2001. Knives lie resting on seemingly blood-drenched pillows, their gravity superimposed with flirtatious multicoloured lettering spelling out the artist’s name. Caravaggio’s temperament and dramatic intensity changed the course of art history, whilst affecting the collective artistic memory of the Maltese.

**Identity/Surveillance**

Nothing is more topical today than the discussion of citizenship and immigration. Bureaucratic and technological systems are registering all our movements and defining identity according to rigid dehumanising criteria. The familiarity and exoticism of PASSPORT portrays the false simplicity of state identity representation. Individuality reduced to a set of colour-coded documents that when displayed simultaneously posit the aesthetic of modern-day geopolitics. BEING WATCHED reminds us of the non-autonomy of self. Power figures watch us from their ivory towers, recording and manipulating data. The magnitude of contemporary surveillance is akin to that of Jesus Christ, mythical and untouchable.

**Religious appropriation**

To say that religious imagery is unavoidable for Maltese artists is a platitude that has somehow not lost its effectivity. Attard cleverly transforms repeated forms to update their meaning in a relatable manner. Original Sin is spelled out by the apples themselves in SIN, laid on a bed of grass therefore already picked off of the tree. CCTV embodies the non-human manifestation of Christ, the individual is willingly crucified. A self-portrait of the artist alludes to artistic sacrifice and narcissism. THE ZEALOT depicted as Christ; the smiling martyr who can substitute his own image for that of a ‘higher’ spiritual being. St. Sebastian’s own martyrdom is analogous to the plight of Oscar Wilde and Julian Assange, both imprisoned for their audacity and contempt for the arbiters of truth and love.

**Contemplation: the end and the beginning**

This takes us back to the theme of violence, yet a violence which we are precluded from seeing. PREMEDITATION emulates the moment of contemplation and restraint before the shooting of an arrow is enacted. The image itself is meditative, as is that of St. Sebastian’s state of ecstasy and suffering. POINTBLANK visualises the end result of this first stage, omitting tension to convey an enduring silence before and after physical exertion. Multiple targets and multiple shows are the marks of human imperfection.

**Radical action/Exile**

Dissident subjects and objects are increasingly featured in Attard’s work. Two of the pieces in the exhibition, EXILE and THE ROAD NOT TAKEN, are visual constellations about radical writers, artists, politicians, media and the condemned products of their labour. Detail and multiple images invite the viewer to spend time reading and observing the selection of pictures that are at first glance seemingly chaotic. The former looks at those persecuted for exercising their intellectual and artistic freedom in spite of everything. The more loaded latter piece talks of choices made and the nature of consequence. EXCOMMUNICATION I enunciates the results of radical action; the blurring of Spinoza and Luther’s portraits, excommunicated for their beliefs and sentenced with moralising decrees.

The culmination of the excommunication/exile theme is manifest in IL-BANDIERA TAL-MALTIN, eponymously titled after the Maltese radical socialist newspaper repeatedly pictured in the left half of the canvas. Manwel Dimech’s political activism resulted in his excommunication from the Roman Catholic church in 1911. He was later exiled in 1915, dying in Alexandria. The work’s chromatic division mimics that of the Maltese national flag. It is truly significant that Attard turned to the representation of Maltese political activists. For practically the entire twentieth-century, artistic reactions to local historical events were absent from the development of modernist art. Art historian Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci has repeatedly analysed this self-abstinence from overt ideological representations and dismissals of hegemonic power. Such a practice has proved to be damaging to the assertion of Malta’s national identity. Attard’s image appears almost 100 years after Dimech’s death, when the dust has settled and been swept away. The choice to return to a happening untouched by art leads us back to its time and reignites memory, yet is filtered by physical and temporal distance.

**A new dimension for Maltese contemporary art: appropriation, and historical choice**

The remixing of cross-cultural and artistic references is idiosyncratic of Maltese modern and contemporary art, albeit performed unconsciously by many. Malta is a peripheral country, but it is simultaneously central to the evolution of the Mediterranean region. It's ‘in transit’ status as a stopover place in the course of journeys, both human and non-human, means that a diversity of visitors have left their mark on the islands’ culture. Historian Carmel Cassar and other scholars have argued against the myth of Malta’s identity as being solely rural and provincial. It is a small place with a large history, and thus a centre for multifarious and disordered artistic production.

Together with the displays of local history and culture, Attard creates a network of global spheres of knowledge. That they transgress spatial and temporal boundaries is the most intriguing aspect of the entire project. Cultural appropriation is evidence of the unbounded sense of liberty in our contemporary times. Attard responsibly borrows without proclaiming ownership.

As Alexander Nagel, Christopher S. Wood, Mieke Bal and several other art historians and theorists have shown, contemporary art has worked and reworked the traditional past, engendering multiple planes of artistic experience. The idea of absolute progress that has guided Western thinking in the modern era is effectively undermined by the knowledge that contemporary art bears strong and indivisible links with recent and past history.

This is explicit in Attard’s present selection of works. History is projected as a playground of images; juxtaposed, superimposed, repeated, both manipulated and untouched. Yet commonality is retained throughout. Attard plays with the surface of history to produce quasi-cartographical mementos of the people who endured imposed or self-inflicted unmitigated torment.

Attard’s hanging images provide an overtly political view which is disquietingly missing in Maltese art. Needless to say, art doesn’t have to have visible signs of political figures and events to make a statement. Throughout art history there were several ingenious artists who turned art creation itself into a defiant praxis. It is refreshing to see a Maltese artist responding to oppressive mechanisms of twenty-first century power structures, namely the subject of surveillance, and also showing us that contemporary society is not as democratic as we revere it to be. This link between injustices unfolding before us as we speak with those from the past make way for human empathy and remembrance.

Images that provoke memory are crucial in times when such is being obliterated. As Schembri Bonaci argues, power negates art that is capable of retaining collective memory alive. Paradoxically, Attard’s pieces are exhibited at the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg, a veritable centre of power. This fact gives greater depth and meaning to the artist’s project.

The question is whether it is sufficient to simply picture the past and the present if we are to empathise with the plight of others. Can an image within an image within an image of Julian Assange’s portrait, one which is heavily reproduced across media channels, help us to understand what it means to be accused of criminal activity when trying to tell the truth? Is a picture of a bomb-covered Valletta adequate for us to remember the harrowing nature of war and the extent of Maltese people's’ misery?

Susan Sontag tackled these questions in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, testing the limitations and the possibilities of war photography in preventing future atrocities. Hindsight demonstrates that recent art has not halted violence in spite of the iconic status of certain

poignant images.

Norbert Francis Attard’s images will not overthrow the institution in which they are exhibited. However, for a brief period of time, they will interfere with its spaces, and hopefully with the knowledge and memory of those who encounter them.