Towards Conceptualism

A retrospective view of Norbert Attard’s art

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The career of Norbert Francis Attard as an artist spans over fifty years, never static or confined to a particular style. His artistic development has been in a continuous state of regeneration, shifting between subject matters: covering social, cultural, and political aspects, at times cast with scientific and religious overlays. This state of flux in Attard’s art is also reflected in the various media he has adopted and made his own. In expressing his inner self, he has cut linoleum, dipped brushes in paint, toiled with an offset printer, edited photos and videos, and sanded wood to smooth finish. His work is perpetually complex and multi-layered, causing disparity in interpretation and meaning, and often creating an unsettling tension. His graphic oeuvre communicates through a broad and varied visual language while, in his latest phase, conceptual installations challenge the ingrained cultural understandings, whilst providing an insight and reinterpreting common ideas and conceptions. he urges the viewers to become active participants, questioning and interpreting the work he presents to find their own meanings.

Attard was born in 1951, in Sliema, the second child in a family of eight siblings, to an enterprising industrialist father and a stay-at-home mother. Before he graduated from the University of Malta as an architect in 1977, he received his education at St Edward’s College in Birgu and St Aloysius College in Birkirkara. He was drawn to art from an early age; it was in 1964, when he was just thirteen, that he was awarded first prize in a Commonwealth countries children’s competition, for what was one of his first abstract paintings. This has left a lasting impact on his disposition towards abstraction. An artistic language he would revisit later in his artistic development.2

His formative years were right amid, what in Malta is considered, a period cultural upheaval and during which the social roles of the artist were changing. The run up to Malta’s independence in the late fifties and early sixties brought about several cultural changes, including a shift in artistic sensibilities which energised the development of modern art in Malta. A number of young and irrepressible artists were embracing novel forms of expression and adopting new media which locally had either been neglected or had not been explored before. Fr Peter Serracino Inglott compared this period to a concept of ‘fertility and sterility’, referring to the creativity of the Maltese artists which was however still constrained by archaic structures exerting cultural domination.[[1]](#endnote-1) A similar argument was reiterated by AC Sewter in the early seventies who spoke of Malta’s ‘cultural isolation’ and “a tendency towards the continuation of existing and established styles which, however, inevitably degenerate and decay with repetition and imitation”. This he attributes to the lack of opportunities for the Maltese at large to receive ‘liberal and contemporary visual education.’ On the other hand, the renowned art critic and historian, hailed the expansion of the local economy which emboldened a number of commercial enterprises to peruse ‘adventurous modernisation’ and the adoption of contemporary architecture which in turn provided the opportunity for innovative art commissions giving impetus to local artistic development.[[2]](#endnote-2) This sociocultural context Attard would later revisit in his Walled Cities series, but in his early years, Attard absorbed the various styles encountered and was under a strong influence of contemporary European artists and art movements and pioneering Maltese artists. However, with the ultimate aim of discovering and developing his personal style he was always careful to distance himself from formal art training that would interfere and exert influence in his personal artistic development.

Early works, executed in the sixties reveal a captivation with the cubist aesthetical compositions, a style which at the time was considered revolutionary in the local art scene. Cubism was introduced in Malta a few years earlier by the artists forming part of the Modern Art Circle, of which Frank Portelli, the artist’s uncle, was one of the founding members.[[3]](#endnote-3) Attard was a regular visitor to Portelli’s studio, and the aesthetic sensibilities of the latter, together with the works of Picasso and Georges Braque, had a strong influence on his artistic output of this period. The compositions of the works Human Rights and Head bring to mind Portelli’s genre of cubism (crystallised cubism) and other works such as the 1973 pen drawing Leisure and Environment he references his uncle’s Contours series. In the mural sized painting, War and Peace, the anguish in Picasso’s Guernica is explored and reinterpreted with a formal organisation dominated by cuneate shapes which are imbued with powerful force and movement. The geometry and multi-faceting adopted in Soulmate and Stairs make reference to Picasso and Braque ouvre. The influence of Harry Alden’s use of asymmetrical shapes of colour and hard-edge technique is also manifested in the works of this period.

Other important influences on the earlier works could be traced to Henry Moore and chromatically to Friedensreich Hundertwasser. In Metamorphosis of the Reclining Figure, Moore’s motif of the reclining figure, inspired by the topography of the landscape, is treated as a still life subject which undergoes sequential metamorphosis and abstraction to become a simple organic form, a single pebble. The radiant colours of Hundertwasser, who similarly to Attard was also an architect, influenced the shift from a generally restricted palette to an explosion of colour adopted in the execution of a series of scenes saturated with lush vegetation and flowers.

The captivation of Picasso’s work was not limited to cubist influences; Some of Attard’s first prints were a series of linoleum prints inspired by the influential Spanish artist’s hundred etchings that make up the Vollard Suite. The subject reflects the emotional and spiritual state of a young artist: discarding the mythological references in the Vollard Suite and elaborating on the theme of love and sex. Eager to experiment with new media and ideas, Attard resorts to whatever material is at hand, even using manuscript paper for his prints. In the quest of his own understanding and interpretation of this series of etchings, he selected a diverse medium, albeit one which Picasso had pioneered. The linear and fine detail of the etchings is replaced by the smooth lines on a contrasting black textured background of linoleum prints. The figures are given additional depth by a thick line, relief-like rendering, similar to the scarifying effect found in traditional African art and also appropriated by Picasso in some of his work. The exquisite fluidity of the lines in this series attest, early on in his carrier, to Attard’s draughtsmanship skills.

In parallel with his artistic output, in his late teens Attard showed an inclination towards architecture which was followed by his pursual of a degree in architecture and civil engineering. For the best part of twenty years, Attard was both a prolific artist and an architect managing his thriving architectural firm. His architectural work consisted mainly of villas and residential buildings and was principally concerned with the function and internal planning of these living spaces. As he himself attests ‘architectural knowledge and experience has permitted me to produce and create in all sorts of environments, using a vast array of simple and complex materials, while retaining great consideration for that existing beyond the materiality of my pieces. The interventions in public spaces, built environments and outdoor territories are testimony to my architectural education.’[[4]](#endnote-4) In 1996, concurrent with his artistic shift towards abstraction and conceptualism, the architectural practice was abandoned to pursue art.

His artistic output demonstrates a reaction and connection to architecture which goes beyond draughtsmanship. His works are executed with an architect’s disciplined eye for detail; and the influence of the architect on the artist is manifested in his preoccupation with proportion, geometry, and modularity, as well as the response to and respect of the physical spaces and volumes. In the technical rendering of the Walled Cities lithograph series, the balance between forms in his abstract paintings and the site-specific installations, Attard keeps returning to the architectural background as a point of reference and departure.

Attard’s undergraduate years at the University of Malta were fertile ground for his artistic development. This was also a period in which his sensitivity to social issues was heightened with the involvement in theatre production through his connections with the experimental theatre group Henri Dogg. Amongst the greatest productions of the latter group there was Charles Camilleri’s major work for organ, Missa Mundi,[[5]](#endnote-5) which, with the involvement of Fr Peter Serracino Inglott, was staged at the Chapel of All Souls in Tarxien. Attard was responsible for the set design and the cover of the programme. Two decades later, also in collaboration with Fr Serracino Inglott, he went on to design the set of the opera Elisabeth: or to be a Mann with the libretto written by the latter and music composed by Charles Camilleri. The unorthodox set consisted of a minimalist stage incorporating an installation consisting of a specially edited video running in the background becoming an integral part of the performance. The stage design, an artistic installation creating a total environment, was completed with salt pan like orthogonal pools of sea water on the ledges of which the singers had to tread perilously creating a constant state of disquietude and thrill throughout the performance.

Through his introduction to Eagle Press by Fr Peter Serracino Inglott, Attard renewed his interest in printing and graphic design and produced numerous poster designs for wide spectrum of cultural events. His innovative and eye-catching poster designs were used to promote works such as theatre productions, particularly works produced by Teatru Henri Dogg and Atturi Theater Group which included plays directed by Joe Friggieri and films presented by the Cine Association at the University of Malta, as well as the poster for Malta's first 8-mm feature film, Frans Sammut’s Il-Gagga. His designs were adopted as book covers as well as presented musical events and art exhibitions.

The influence of theatre in the Attard’s artistic output is reflected in diverse ways, from the titles given to abstract works to the staging of his photographic works however it is his installations that allow for a more intense theatrical effect. A notable example is the tension created between the dramatic and the use of the familiar everyday objects in the Maltese Falcon; consisting of a juxtaposition of a white porcelain bathroom set displayed on a layer of sand, a gilded ‘Maltese’ falcon positioned over the bath and with a background photo of an old man wearing extravagant gold jewellery.

Following a formative period of deep artistic exploration and experimentation, liberating himself to self-expression, Attard pioneered offset lithography in Malta and produced a series of lithographs. Adopting his exquisite and precise draughtsmanship skills and sense of perspective he presented a series of mindscapes which can be considered to form the first truly original phase of his artistic career, the Walled Cities series. These imaginary landscapes, although not exclusively, reference Maltese maritime and terrestrial landscapes.

The landscape of the Grand Harbour and fishing villages, which have been endlessly reproduced through history, and still a very popular subjects, are re-imagined and re-interpreted to present a social commentary in an architectural phantasmagoria. Attard’s Walled Cities series transcend pictorial interpretations and, as aptly described by Dominic Cutajar in his commentary on t the artist’s offset lithogrpahs, truly capture the existentialist experience of living in Malta.[[6]](#endnote-6) The socio-economic and political situation of the islands is encapsulated in the surreal architectural scenarios featuring depictions of an ingenuous human life. One can find a reflection of the local turbulent political landscape of the mid-seventies and eighties and the then prevailing anxieties of the impending total nuclear annihilation. In the blank ‘meaningless’ sky of these lithographs, Serracino Inglott perceived the despair of a catastrophic end to the cold war; however, it is in post-doom earthly settings, total devoid of, or with sparse human life and activity, that this pessimistic perspective is reinforced. Similarly, the acidic chromatic effects of the lithographs such as in the Silent City and Saltpans (with the effective integration of photography) infer an obliteration of the natural cycle of life: the day after.

The various representations of bastions and high enclosing walls symbolise Malta’s physical, social, and political insularity, perhaps a reaction to centuries of foreign occupation. Maltese Islands, showing the archipelago enclosed by high masonry perimeter walls around its coastline, was completed in 1978/79; when the withdrawal of the British navy from Malta and risk of isolation was a much-debated subject. The walls also present a sense of claustrophobia which is intensified by the use of maze-like structures. In God I, the maze formed by high walls (and at the same time uncannily forming a question mark) is used as a religious symbol signifying the way to salvation as adopted on the floor of Chartres Cathedral.

The socio-cultural influence of the Catholic religion on Maltese society is another central theme which is explored by the series. The lithograph After Mass integrates various elements and uncertainties of the laypersons’ religious experience at the time: after attending to their weekly obligation, imposed by a mix of traditional beliefs and peer pressure, the congregation of mortals exits unprepared for the harsh and forbidding outside world. The Church as an institution and the Catholic beliefs are represented by a daedalean structure with an inherent hierarchy, where the towers of salvation are at the far end out of human reach. Another print, Church Walls, alludes to the Church’s reaction to increased secularisation and its predicament of being caught between tradition on one side (embedded in solid rock) and the urge to open up to the contemporary world (dismantling of walls).

This series is primarily influenced by the graphical art of the Belgian artist Jean-Michel Folon, who similar to Attard was also a self-taught artist and had a background in architecture. Taking an anthropological approach, rooted deep in the local context, Folon’s metaphorical style[[7]](#endnote-7) is adapted and reinterpreted to achieve a unique local relevance. The brick walls and cubic structures become bastions, and Folon’s idiosyncratic bird-men are re-invented as symbolic creatures of the Maltese conscience. There are also reflections of the impossible world of MC Escher and the surreality and the quotidianity of Rene Magritte. The fascination with the Cittadella in Gozo and the islet of Filfla could be referenced to Richard England’s mystical reverence for both ‘islands’.

In the simplified and surrealistic landscapes there is an evident reference to the effects of urban sprawl which by the eighties had already unbalanced the relationship between the rural and the urbanised areas, threatening the loss of individuality of neighbouring towns and villages. Such a statement is nowhere made clearer than in A Times a Changing, however it is more subtly found in other lithographs by the depiction of sprawling conurbations and the alienation of the city from nature. Urbanisation is linked to a sense of claustrophobia caused by living in a small and isolated island and to Attard’s own state of mind at the time. The feeling of despair is intensified in the lithographs where nature hits back and reclaims land lost to development, as vegetation advances it engulfs the territory and the confinement of walls is replaced by the entanglement of organic growth. With the fervour of an algal bloom reacting to an anthropomorphic provocation, nature prevails and reclaims and when it does it chokes everything in its path, leaving behind a dead zone: a sense of neurosis and disorientation of the mind. The political and the environmental becomes the personal.

Serracino Inglott notes that these works allude to the objective tension between positively orientated change (evolution) and the tendency towards uniformity and associated chaos and disintegration of human affairs (entropy).[[8]](#endnote-8) At times within the same lithograph the mood oscillates between the two opposing poles. At a cursory glance, the general impression is forbidding and inclined towards a path to oblivion, however after a deeper look the series transcends the obvious bleakness and presents a statement of human resilience in the face of adversity. The dull grey sea in the Power of One is juxtaposed against the positive affirmation of one single person floating alone, thus reflecting the creativeness of humankind and the efficacy of one person to influence change. A more subtle reference is the collective joy of the children (Civitas Invictas, Bastion Walls, and Only One Man), in an otherwise forlorn landscape with an abundance of man-made walled cities and stone structures, is an attestation to the permanence of human life.

With reference to Walled Cities series, Dominic Cutajar notes that Escher’s influence on Attard is of a lesser consequence,[[9]](#endnote-9) on which qualification Serracino Inglott expresses surprise and advances several arguments which establish firmer connections between the two artists.[[10]](#endnote-10) Among these cited there are the recurring central themes of the works and the common reference to the bastions and even the sharing of the name Tower of Babel, between a 1928 woodcut by the Dutch artist and a lithograph by Attard. Escher described one of the staircases in his work as “a rather sad, pessimistic subject”,[[11]](#endnote-11) encouraging an ascent leading to nowhere. Attard transposes this theme in various lithographs, however whereas Escher uses bold mathematical projections and impossible constructions, his approach is a flowing one, adopting the local and familiar by borrowing from the Maltese landscape. Taking the aforementioned lithograph Tower of Babel as an example, the same grammar used in Escher’s impossible paintings is adopted by Attard, however the strict lines of the Romanesque and Renaissance assemblage elected by Escher’s industrious builders are replaced by the organic forms of the local vernacular architecture. The restrained and forbidding landscape is transformed into a more contemplative organic setting.

After the Walled City offset lithographs and etchings, Attard shifted his focus from the socio-political awareness to a meditative mood. Of relevance is Attard’s concurrent involvement in the Practical Philosophy Group.[[12]](#endnote-12) Kenneth Wain describes the subsequent works in the Mihrab, Kimono and Mandala Series as an inward voyage of the artist.[[13]](#endnote-13) In the Mihrab series, the choice of subject is not incidental or aesthetic but is a deliberate mental representation. The Mihrab is the central element in a mosque, the niche that indicates the direction of Mecca, functioning as the focal point in prayer ritual. However, in these lithographs the subject is not devotional but directional, acting as a spiritual compass for a journey of self-discovery. The Mihrab is treated as a sculptural element fusing the arabesque and art deco styles – the religious and the secular.

In Japanese culture the kimono is a major focus of artistic expression. Meaning 'the thing worn', Kimono are simple, straight-seamed garments, where it is the pattern that is significant. In the simplified compositions and essentially flat images Attard appropriates the palette and distils the characteristics of traditional Japanese woodblocks. In some of these representations the focus on the Kimono transcends the aesthetic into a contemplative representation of quasi-architectural studies of sacred spaces in dramatic colours.

The last series in this contemplative period of transition between phases is the Mandala Series. With the use of simplified geometric constructions and suffused colours these esoteric symbols are imbued with intense contemplative feelings and mysticism. The compositions in these three series sustain a simplification of form and composition leading the artist on a path to abstraction. The end of this journey of discovery is very well instilled in the very meaning of a Mandala, a representation of self-healing, transformation, and spiritual illumination.[[14]](#endnote-14)

At the end of the eighties Attard progressed into abstraction, shifting the emphasis from a visual reference of the subject matter to the portrayal of emotions. Though there is a continuum from the previous representational works to these abstract paintings, the latter are considered to be the second phase in the artist’s career. The geometric shapes in previous works, particularly the Mandala series, continued in their mutation into absorbing compositions which still evoked deep mysticism. There are chromatic references to Hundertwasser, adopted in earlier naturalistic scenes, whilst the geometric shapes and free-form lines are reminiscent of Wassily Kandinsky. Coincidentally these works, in terms of their composition and spatial arrangements continue to aver the role architecture played in defining Attard’s artistic development. Transcending past influences the artistic development progressed into what Victor Pasmore pronounced as a unique and individual expression of completely abstract and independent paintings.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The abstract works are a reflection of the universe of being, presenting a flow of events and emotions within space and time. Serracino Inglott, in his reflections on the works of this period, identifies a focus on the holistic image of existence and subjective and objective experiences.[[16]](#endnote-16) The balanced compositions of geometric and free-form shapes are emotion-charged, evoking contemplation and inducing contrasting reactions whilst the juxtaposition and repetition of shapes and their arrangements suggest a vibrant sense of movement. The splattered paint dominating the visual field provokes a feeling of travelling in outer space with stars passing before the viewer’s eyes. The idiosyncratic and hypnotic constructions are not intended solely for the aesthetic pleasure; the exertion of gravitational forces between the elements in space and chromatic effects create a moving experience.

Kenneth Wain notes three main stages of development in the abstract period which extended up to the late nineties.[[17]](#endnote-17) In the watercolours of the initial stage, Attard resorts to a pictorial language that is loosely related to the outside world by appropriating an established language of esoteric and yet familiar symbols. Three elliptical crests framed within a sea of blue form the main composition of the Graces of Gozo. The work Eternity is dominated by a rectangle from the strict confines of which is unravelling a triangle with an eye at its centre, which is not just the symbol of freemasonry, but also of God’s divine eternal providence. Emmanuel Fiorentino aptly refers to the acrylic paintings of the subsequent phase as evoking a dance of sparkling and yet controlled choreography.[[18]](#endnote-18) The geometrical and open forms become more pronounced; however, the use of colours becomes increasingly expressive in tone with the conceptual subject matter. In the compositions of the third stage representational forms are superimposed and partially absorbed into a synesthetic field of chromatic effects; reflecting a more coordinated approach in which expressionist elements are interconnected with the conscious.

Representational forms and the inclusion of cut-out like shapes in the later abstract compositions exhibit a renewed interest in the object and serve as a precursor to the next major phase in Attard’s artistic development around the 1995: the transformation of the flat plane of the canvas into three-dimensional assemblage. Through the inclusion of objet trouvé on the painted surface the media of painting and sculpture are brought together within a single art object, reminiscent of Robert Rauschenberg’s combines. In assemblages like Geometry in Nature and Earthworks the emphasis is put on the objects adopted and arranged within a specifically designed context (frame), which is itself an intrinsic part of the artwork.

Attard also started incorporating scripted words in his abstract paintings which are hybrids of visual imagery and language. The painting and the added text content resonate and fuse into one composition and the arrangement of the painted form and found objects conflate with the added phrases to convey a contemplative finished work. Using the feeling evoked by the painting and the directness of the phrases the artist endeavours to create a discourse with the viewer, provoke introspection and draw out emotion. Returning to the subject of entropy, as identified by Serracino Inglott in the artist’s early works, order, disorder and chaos, are recurring themes in these works, some of which also which incorporate found materials such as dried grass and heavy impasto on an acrylic painted surface.

In his last painting, the assemblage Transition, Attard symbolically latches in a permanent and visible manner his paintbrushes within the composition as a statement of changed underlined by the title of the work. The three-dimensional collages expose a yearning for the object and the aim for an encapsulation of total experience within the composition. The framing and wall mounting of these works retained a general connecting element with the previous paintings until the late nineties transformation into embracing ephemeral installations.

Since 1998 Attard has dedicated all his energies to installation art which he has presented locally and in various other countries around the world. The shift to the three-dimensionality of installations was a natural one for Attard, who describes himself as being more a sculptor than a painter. Years later he declared that in time he had come to realise that he should have taken up installation art earlier in his artistic career, possibly directly after the lithographic prints phase and avoiding the abstract phase.[[19]](#endnote-19) By comparison to abstract paintings, installations allow greater flexibility in conveying concepts and ideas whilst at the same time providing for the holistic engagement of the viewer. The philosophy and approach of the works of Joseph Beuys, to which he was extensively exposed by Richard Demarco during his visits to Edinburgh, are a primary source of inspiration and energy. Such influence does not stop at direct references to the celebrated conceptual artist in various installations but is reflected in the expanded conception of art as a social sculpture[[20]](#endnote-20) with potential to transform society socially and environmentally. The inception of Attard’s interest in political art can be traced to Beuys philosophy and controversial teachings.

Various installations make reference to socio-political issues particularly immigration and injustice and explore various aspects of religiosity. The dissatisfaction with social inequity is the catalyst of various installations which simultaneously expose the social reality and stimulate discussion on the subject in its many forms. Injustice, particularly that related to immigration is a central preoccupation of the artist. This is presumably intensified by the popular Maltese antagonism of irregular immigrants and the associated superiority complex with regard to African and Middle Eastern migrants. In the work Where are you from? Attard challenges the traditional and popular assumptions about the Maltese physical appearance and racial uniqueness. The preconceived distinct physiognomic appearance, different from those of other ethnic origins, is shattered by an installation of fifty large scale portrait photographs, as a sample of the Maltese population, which betray the multi-ethnicity of the nation. Issues pertaining to multicultural awareness and particularly immigration are explored in other works such as Pass+port and Pleasure Trip.

However the social consciousness expressed in the installations expand to wider perspectives: the revulsion of mass violence coagulated in the visceral presentation of a heap of shoes in Ora Pro Nobis, the plight of social Darwinisim as allegorically represented by the exhausted archery target in Bull’s Eye?!, the repressiveness of censorship and conversely the political power of print in the two versions of Exile, and the detached glamorous visualisations of the horrors of war in the Intelligence series. These works expose the sufferings of society and function as a conduit for the voices of the underinvested and marginalized whilst aiming at creating avenues for a wider dialogue.

As in previous printed and painted works, Attard’s elaborate articulated structures and preoccupation with the relationships between form and volume of his installations expose his technical engineering background as well as his instinctive planning of architectural space. The geometrical forms of the wooden constructions in A Bit of Boat and Twelve Dialogues manifest design and structural sensibilities pertaining to his previous profession. The latter is also evident in the use of space and spatial arrangements in I See Red Everywhere and in other works where he intervened within an existing architectural setting such as Interlaced I and II and Intervention I. Links to architecture are also evident in the concrete structures of his two public installations based on the Fibonacci spiral, one in Japan and the other in Belgium, in which the arte povera works of Mario Merz are reinterpreted into elegant minimalist interventions. These two works have harmonious composition which echoes the surrounding landscape, and the Fibonacci spiral is adopted to celebrate creation and to create a link to the natural world. In a similar indoor interpretation, the Fibonacci spiral is given a cubic form to reflect the indoor space, and the link to nature is maintained by using 12,000 sudachi (Japanese lime) to represent the infinity of the numerical sequence and corresponding to proliferation in nature.

In various forms, staircases are transformed from the practical and functional to the evocative and metaphorical, and from a structural connection between physical spaces to a link of the conscious with the preconscious. This subject matter is a recurring preoccupation of the artist throughout his oeuvre. This motif has constantly materialised in various forms, being a central feature in many works in the Walled Cities series of the lithographs and etchings, as well as later installations such as the Tree Descending a Staircase and Wittgenstein Ladder. At times acknowledging the influence of Escher’s ‘impossible’ works, staircases offer an allegory of a spiritual connection between states of being. Staircases are adopted as symbols of hierarchy, ambition, and transformation, or conversely, of confusion and sorrow and the obscure. If one considers Freud’s link of stairs with the sexual act,[[21]](#endnote-21) therein lies a subliminal sexual connotations more evident in other of his works of this period such as Bomba! and V (discussed in further detail below).

From the bleak meanderings of the earlier graphic work the motif of staircases evolved to more indulgent reflections of existence, and in the case of You are the Staircase, into a public monument to life and living. Linking the helix of the DNA with the helical movement of a spiral staircase, this work reflects the ardour and dynamism of life: the panoramic view of the bustling street in the city from the top of the steps presents the viewer the opportunity to view the mundane from a new perspective and interconnect with humanity. A similar sense of awareness is promulgated in the Spirit of the Wolf at Verdala Palace Sculpture Garden, with its lure for discovery and sense of connection with the past history of the site.

Frequently Attard’s installations are informed by the site context resulting in a dialectical and dynamic relationship between the two. The sculpture Wonderful Man presents the form of a fighter jet rendered from shattered tempered glass. The impressive arrangement of glinting glass fragments is a visual treatise on man’s rapid advancement in technology which, not being matched by a corresponding level of maturity and discretion in harnessing it, is repeatedly adapted to inflict misery and self-destruction. Installed in Dresden, there is the inescapable allusion to the World War II carpet bombing of the city, however inherent in the sculpture created of broken glass there is the reflection of the resulting aftereffects of regeneration and peace: buildings rebuilt after the destruction are now the venue for the Dresden Music Festival bringing together musicians from around the world. In this phenomenological installation the location and subject are intrinsically linked, and the former is acting as a generator for the meaning of the work; the locality acting as mould for the installation. Similarly, structure and shape are provided by the historic surroundings of the two installations V and Intervention, set up in Strait Street Valletta and Lister’s Mill Bradford respectively, which works in turn had a visual and symbolic transformative force on the site. Serracino Inglott refers to V as ‘the transformation of a place initially identified as a receptacle of filth and waste into a brilliant and beautiful work of art [which] can be seen to have patently a social value and significance, but also latently a sacred if not quite sacramental meaning’.[[22]](#endnote-22)

He also refers to the links of the installation with Thomas Pynchon’s 1963 novel ‘V.’ in which the search for the various incarnations of V, is partly set in Malta and Strait Street, as the red-light district and centre of entertainment in Valletta at the time. The site specificity of Attard’s installation is reaffirmed both by the multiple words starting with the letter V referencing the many disguises of V. in the novel and the fact that the first entertainment establishment mentioned by Pynchon in this street is the Four Aces pub, which was later renamed Ye-Old-Vic[[23]](#endnote-23) and which was situated right next to this same public convenience.[[24]](#endnote-24)

The materials used for the ephemeral installations produced in the past twenty-five years vary from natural elements and everyday found objects to specifically designed structures. In these installations, reflection, both as a practice and as material choice, emerges as an often-adopted method of engaging with the viewer. The reflective materials are used in an effective manner to manipulate the viewing experience and heighten the visual perception. Such reflections increase the awareness on the gallery space or the external setting and challenges the role of the viewer in that space. In the installation Balance, the reflective surfaces of the boat, floating on the Noosa River, transform it as an integral part of the landscape and simultaneously making it the focus of the viewer. By resorting to a concertina of mirrors, in Clone, the viewer is provoked to engage the ethics of cloning, identity and genetic identification. By virtue of reflectivity, similar to Lacan’s theory[[25]](#endnote-25) on perceptions of self-hood, the artist presents images with which the viewer is encouraged to identify and relate to.

Making use of religious imagery, titles, and associations, and reinterpreting them through art, Attard links the act of living to the afterlife, rephrasing the perception of the relationship between the two states. In Palestrina and Hell, installed at Johanniterkirche in Austria, the altar and pulpit are set afloat on a reflective layer of water which is separating the world of the living from that of the dead, represented by a crypt filled with open graves. The viewer is allowed a unique dual view of the cycle of life with the water acting not just as a separator but as a symbol of purification and deliverance. Religious iconography is not used in a controversial or scandalous manner but as an aid to contemplative spirituality. Engaging religion, the work is at the same time detached and renounces the connection to relate to the most basic insecurities and fears of human existence, themes he was already exploring in his lithographs some twenty years earlier. The hallmark of Christian religion, the crucifixion, is adopted in various installations and is used to symbolise the firm connections of religion to the very essence of human existence. The contently smiling middle-aged turbaned man with a portly figure (a portrait of the artist himself), in the work Zealot, contrasts sharply with the suffering of the iconography of the crucified Christ. This image, similar to the other Attard’s works, has many layers of interpretation including the abuse and commodification of religion by fanatics, but it also offers a social commentary. In consonance with Andres Serrano’s notorious depiction of Christ, it can be interpreted as an allusion to commercialisation of Christian icons in contemporary culture. It also reconciles the irreconcilable: the uncontrollable quest for self-inflicted pain and violence of an ever more prosperous and increasingly alienated society.

The adoption of concepts of duality and the exploration of the coexistence of polarities are often used as an analytical method of the subject matter both in a visual and philosophical manner. Raphael Vella notes that the opposites in Attard rarely clash with each other in a dissonance of forms and colour; rather they mingle with each other, each opposing force complementing the other’s forms and ideas to form a new whole.[[26]](#endnote-26) However this sense of complementation vanishes the moment the viewer is drawn into the subject. In the Swing installations the viewer is confronted with a child’s swing, an association with freedom and merriment, but on approaching closer the viewer is faced by the uncomfortable realisation that the seat is made of two guns immediately bringing an association with violence and war. In A Place Called Paradise Attard creates tension that encourages the viewer to develop a double consciousness. An aura of pleasure and relaxation is constructed within the squalor of a slum interior. The setting within an old building infused in memories and radiating the warmth from the previous occupation and further idealised by a recreated beach environment in one of the rooms, is unsettled by an opulent golden tap from which a red liquid, redolent of blood, pours into a white basin emphasising on the rot and decay.

For Attard the need for regeneration is a personal characteristic inducing a complete loss of self-consciousness and leading to a flow state. With his pioneering experimentation with offset lithography and his installations, investigating the notions of scale, volume, and materiality, he has contributed to shaping the development of contemporary art in Malta. By his own admission Attard hates repetition and it is through the continuous questioning of the state of being and the resolve towards unceasing metamorphosis that his work is in a constant state of transition. His artistic development has progressed from the initial socio-political commentary to an introspective quality. Later in his carrier his focus shifted back to a philosophical awareness of the social and political landscape as a transformative platform for positive social change. This is not intended at engaging in participatory politics but at creating a transcendent link with the substance of the matter and exposing and encouraging a public discourse on society’s afflictions. Such preoccupations belie a natural dichotomy for an artist who considers art as a creative refuge which sustains his freedom independent of social obligations and regards the solitude of the studio as a luminous conduit to the truth.

1. Joseph Paul Cassar, *Pioneers of Modern Art in Malta – Volume 1* (Malta: PIN, 2010), 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. A.C. Sewter, Sculpture: Gabriel Caruanain *Contemporary Art in Malta,* ed. Richard England*,* (Malta: Malta Arts Festival, 1974), 31-46. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Joseph Paul Cassar, 124. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Teodor Reljic, *From abstract dreams to solid structures - Norbert Attard,* Maltatoday, April 29, 2014, accessed April 8, 2016, http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/arts/art/38497/from\_abstract\_dreams\_to\_solid\_structures\_\_norbert\_attard#.VxOzElKKDmI [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Joe Friggieri, *Theatre in Malta*, Journal of the Faculty of Arts 6, No 4. (The University of Malta, 1977): 276 -282 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Nikki Petroni, *The enduring pursuit of being*, The Sunday Times of Malta, May 11, 2014, accessed April 30, 2016, http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20140511/arts-entertainment/The-enduring-pursuit-of-being.518733 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ray Bradbury in the book *Folon’s Folon* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990) compares Jean Michel Folon’s work to haiku metaphors, allowing a fresh insight into that which stood unseen because of its size of familiarity. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Dominic Cutajar, *Norbert Attard Offset Lithographs* (Firenze: Editori Galleria De Amicis, 1983), 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Steven Poole, *The Impossible World of MC Escher*, The Guardian, June 20, 2015, accessed April 24, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jun/20/the-impossible-world-of-mc-escher> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The School of Practical Philosophy in Malta, as it is now known, is a non-profit organisation that conducts philosophy courses with a non-academic approach.­ [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Kenneth Wain, *An invitation to Norbert Attard*, (Valletta: Foundation for International Studies, 1996), 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Carl Jung in The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious (1959), notes that the severe pattern imposed by a circular image of a Mandala compensates the disorder of the psychic state– namely through the construction of a central point to which everything is related, or by a concentric arrangement of the disordered multiplicity and of contradictory and irreconcilable elements; adding that this is an evident attempt at self-healing which does not spring from conscious reflection but from an instinctive impulse. The Mandala is presented as the psychological expression of the totality of the self. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Victor Pasmore, *An invitation to Norbert Attard*, (Valletta: Foundation for International Studies, 1996), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Kenneth Wain, *Crosscurrents- Critical Essays on Art and Culture in Malta*, ed. Raphael Vella (Malta: Allied Publishers, 2008), 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Emmanuel Fiorentino, *Norbert Attard, Prints and Painting: 1977 – 1996*, ed. Dennis Vella (Germany: Roemer-und Pelizaeus Museum, 1996), 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Jacques Lacan resolved that infants pass through a stage in which an external image, reflected in a mirror, produces a mental representation of the self with which he identifies, and which serves as the basis of the emerging perceptions of selfhood. This image is established as an ideal towards which the subject will perpetually strive throughout his life. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Teodor Reljic*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Sigmund Freud in his book *Dream Psychology - Psychoanalysis for Beginners* (New York: The James A McCann Company, 1920) indicates that staircases, ladders, and flights of stairs, or climbing on these, either upwards or downwards, are symbolic representations of the sexual act. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Peter Seracino Inglott, *On “V”,* 2010 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. The sign of Ye-Old-Vic painted on the corner between Strait Street and Old Theatre Street is still extant. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Arnold Cassola, Pynchon, V., and the Malta Connection in *Pynchon Malta and Wittgenstein*. Petra Bianchi et. (Malta: Malta University Publishers, 1995), p.25. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Social sculpture is a theory developed by Beuys, spurred by his idealistic ideas of a utopian society. This theory advocated that everyone has the ability to influence and re-organise society to be more humane and ecologically sustainable. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Raphael Vella, *A place called paradise I & II*, accessed May 20, 2016, http://www.norbertattard.com [↑](#endnote-ref-26)