

Fig. 1
Joseph Calleja, *Ripped Form* (front view), bronze, wooden base, 36 x 41 x 16cm (incl. base), 1980. (Donated to Heritage Malta following the BOV Retrospective Exhibition in 2018)

Sculpting with Light Joseph Calleja (1924–2018)

This is the first of a series of articles which explores the life, thought, and creations of selected twentieth-century Maltese sculptors. In this article, Theresa Vella overviews some of the sculptural works of a Maltese-Canadian artist

The sculptures and paintings of Joseph Calleja can be found in major art collections in Ontario and Quebec, as well as in Valletta. Yet, until 1996, Calleja the artist was relatively unknown to his Maltese compatriots, other than to his old friends of the Modern Art Group with whom he kept in close contact. As a Maltese-Canadian visual artist, he is one of the few Maltese artists who achieved an international reputation in the pre-digital age. From Melchiorre Cafà to Antonio Sciortino to Joseph Calleja, these sculptors thrived well within the artistic movements of which they formed part while living overseas; yet, at the same time, they sustained their personal roots and connections embedded within the art scene in Malta.

An exhibition of Joseph Calleja's work which was held at the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, in 1996, gave a new impetus to his artistic presence in Malta and Gozo. In 2018, his stature as a Maltese national artist was confirmed by the holding of a retrospective exhibition organised by the Bank of Valletta, which displayed the range of Calleja's artistic output.¹

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opposite: Fig. 2
Opening of the Modern Art Group exhibition of 1953.
From left: Samuel Bugeja, John Fenech, Ugo Carbonaro, Oliver Agius, Giorgio Preca, Frank Portelli, Joseph Calleja, Joe Caruana, Joe Borg Xuereb, and Antoine Camilleri.

below: Fig. 3-4
Joseph Calleja working on the back of *Luminaria*;
Joseph Calleja demonstrating one of his 1968 kinetic sculptures.

(Courtesy of the artist's family)

Some notes about his life

Joseph Calleja was born in Xewkija, Gozo, in 1924, to a family of stonemasons. Helping in his father's workshop, Calleja understood the medium of stone at first hand, honing his own skills and craftsmanship. After buying his tools as a boy, he produced his first autograph work—a relief portrait of a young girl. Soon after, at fifteen years of age, he was asked to carve one of the arches of the old parish church of Xewkija. Early pieces from his youth, still in the artist's collection, show that Calleja had already taught himself to study a subject from life. A pivotal point in Calleja's trajectory occurred during the art classes which he attended at the Gozo Lyceum. Under the guidance of Guido Cali, he discovered a talent for drawing in ink as capably as he could carve in stone. Graduating with honours, Calleja could have chosen any career path. He chose to pursue a life in art.

Soon after, Calleja moved from Gozo to Malta where he earned his living as a teacher. In 1945, he began a two-year evening course at the School of Art, studying under Edward Caruana Dingli with whom he established a friendly, respectful relationship; one which Calleja maintained when he moved to the United Kingdom by ongoing correspondence with his former teacher. Giorgio Preca was another teacher with whom Calleja maintained a friendship, even after Preca moved to Rome. Among other students attending the School of Art at the time were Antoine Camilleri and Frank Portelli, both of who were to remain Calleja's life-long friends.

Soon after graduating from the Malta School of Art in 1947, Calleja won a British Council scholarship and between 1948 and 1949, he attended the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in Oxford. On completing the course, Calleja returned to Malta via 'the long route',

travelling south, with his old friend, the poet Marcel Mizzi, via Holland, France, and Spain. Visiting museums in the principal cities provided several revelatory moments for Calleja, seeing at first hand those masterpieces which he had only previously known from prints.

Equally exciting was his exposure to the pioneers of modern and contemporary art. In Holland, a chance encounter with the founders of the CoBrA art movement left a powerful impression on the young Calleja who felt a strong affinity with the boldness of the paintings of Karel Appel, whose studio he visited. Several years later, in 2007, works by both artists were to be acquired for the collection of the Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ontario, and exhibited together in a collective exhibition titled *Carnival: Works from the AGH Collection*.

Returning to Malta, Calleja worked as an art teacher between 1950 and 1955. In 1952, he held his first solo exhibition at the Malta Society of Arts, Palazzo de la Salle, Valletta. During these years, in a pioneering spirit, he started to define his own artistic identity. Together with his former School of Art colleagues, in 1953, Calleja was a founding member of the Modern Art Group (Fig. 2). He was an active member, arduously and eloquently promoting modern art, and participating in the Group's collective exhibitions. Throughout this period, Calleja worked mainly on paintings, executing landscapes and portraits in a bold, modernist style.

Calleja left Malta once more, in 1955, after taking three years of unpaid leave to enrol in the National Diploma Course in Design at the Regent Street Polytechnic School of Fine Art, where he also attended classes at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London. At this time, Calleja met Jean (Gina) Gadsby, a graduate of the Slade School of Art, later a writer and illustrator of children's books. In 1958, they were married in London.

The young couple grew aware of the social problems they would face, whether they settled in Malta or the UK, and, learning of the possibilities of teaching art in Canada, opted to start their life together in a new country. Calleja faced down the obligation to work for a stipulated number of years in Malta, preferring to pay the penalty of refunding



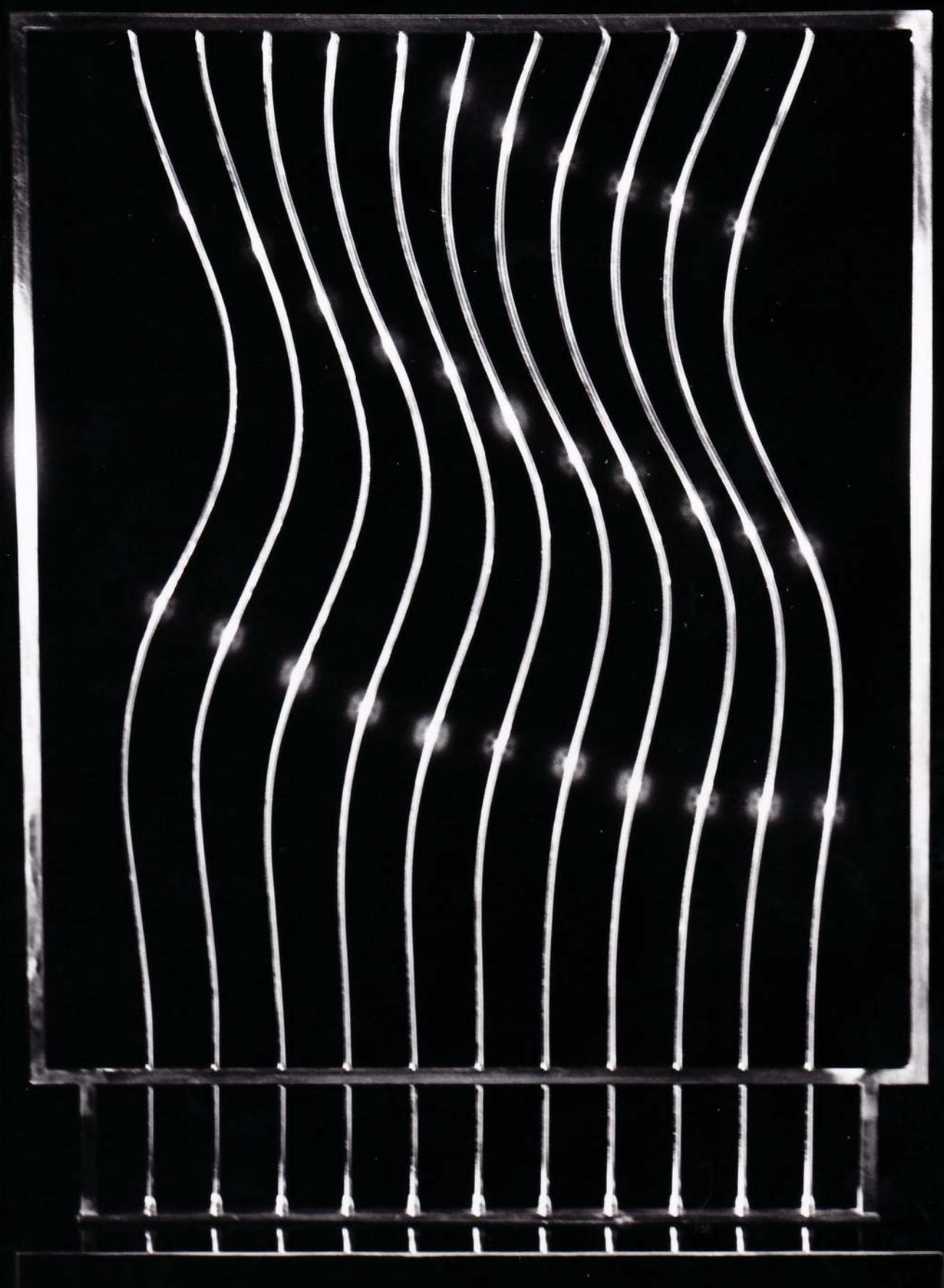
the scholarship money rather than survive in Malta by compromising on his modernist ethos.

Calleja's years of teaching in Winnipeg led the artist to explore the cubist idiom. He also turned his attention to printmaking, producing lithographs, etchings and engravings. By 1960, Calleja and his young family moved east to Ontario, where he taught for many years. His art classes left a profound impression on his students, several of whom went on to lead successful careers in art. Teaching also gave Calleja the freedom to experiment in art, becoming increasingly incorporeal, to the point of pure abstraction with experimental research in light and prisms.

The city of Hamilton, Ontario, provided a stimulating art scene, leading Calleja to experiment in an entirely new medium, that of moving light. He researched the properties of prisms attached to belts and motors, moving in cyclic patterns and, in the artist's words, 'picturing in light'.² The artist's proximity to New York was also fortuitous as, by then, the city had become the world centre of contemporary art, giving Calleja the opportunity to tap into new artistic developments as soon as they first surfaced on show to the public.

Calleja's contribution to modern sculpture

In October 1968, a solo exhibition was held at the Pollock Gallery in Toronto. Showing his works in chronological order, Calleja displayed a series which ranged from a sculpture with moving parts to an installation with a number of lightboxes with prisms and reflections, and sculptures with convex lenses and mirrors (Fig. 3-4). The highlight of the show, *Luminaria* (Fig. 3), was a perpetually mutating composition in light and projection, which drew critical attention for its conceptual



opposite: Fig. 5
Kinetic sculpture, 1972, Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa.

Fig. 6
Joseph Calleja beside his mural installation at the Windsor
Public Library, Canada, 1973.

(Courtesy of the artist's family)

innovation. Calleja was invited to exhibit the innovative piece at the 1970 Summer Festival held at Memorial University, Newfoundland. Attempts to acquire the 'large luminal screen' were made by the organisers, leading to a commission for Calleja to build another version of *Luminaria*. The installation of the 2.7 x 2.1 metre light mural was completed in July that same year.³ Viewing the piece, one is mesmerised by its beauty and intrigued by the reductive elegance of its concept. The ephemeral installation defies photography or film, as the light permutations are unrepeatable, though Calleja had commissioned a videographer to record part of its display.

Calleja's landmark exhibition was effectively his first participation in the Kinetic Art movement, which he had encountered in 1965, at the exhibition *The Responsive Eye*, at MOMA. The movement of the chromatic permutations of *Luminaria* was the result of Calleja's five-year long research and aesthetic exploration, using experimental models in wood coupled with his skills in mechanics and industrial art. In Calleja's dexterity and drive towards innovation, one can trace a link between

his early experience in stonemasonry, via the three-dimensionality of *Luminaria*, to the next phase of Calleja's art: kinetic sculpture.

With his own original kinetic art forms, Calleja was well-prepared to join the North American avant-garde movement of the 1970s. In 1972, he returned to the Pollock Gallery with an exhibition of kinetic sculptures in polished chrome steel, moving in undulating waves while reflecting bursts of light (Fig. 5). The art critic Wayne Edmonstone wrote that 'Calleja's creations occupy the Pollock Gallery like a race of electronic house plants ... some reflect the fluidity of water, others curl and curlicue like rings of smoke from endless cigarettes, while yet others cuddle and embrace. The show is like a 21st-century scientist's dream: clean, cool and sensual.'⁴ Another prominent critic, Kay Kritzweiser, stated that '...Calleja pushes the spiral into many forms: the movement of skaters, the flicker of musical notes, a spider's web endlessly reflecting.'⁵

The exhibition was successful, with all seventeen pieces going into public and private art collections. There followed a series of invitations to participate in collective exhibitions as well as in a series of solo exhibitions focussing on individual Canadian artists. Other commissions also came in, with a major kinetic mural sculpture measuring around 6.6 x 3.3m to be installed in the Windsor Public Library, and moving, in Kritzweiser's words: '...in dancing sensuous rhythm against a black wall [with its] rods behaving like arm movements from a Swan Lake corps de ballet, each rod in its stationary box ... controlled by its own gear and making four revolutions a minute' (Fig. 6).⁶

In 1975, Calleja's work in teaching art was given recognition with a new post at the Fine Arts Department of the University of Toronto, which he held for two years. There, Calleja taught the teachers of art and promoted an open approach which encouraged innovation and



Fig. 7-9
 Joan Miró (1893–1983), *Carnaval d'Arlequin (Carnival of Harlequin)*, 1924–1925, oil on canvas, support: 66 x 93cm.
 (Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, Room of Contemporary Art Fund, 1940; RCA 1940:8 / © Successió Miró S.L., Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, ADAGP, Paris);

Joseph Calleja standing beside his *Spring Revelry* in 1982.
 (Hamilton Art Gallery, Ontario, Canada / Courtesy of the artist's family);

Joseph Calleja, from the series of *The Sacrifice of the Lambs* (No.4), oil on paper on masonite, 81 x 57cm, 1985–2000.
 (Archbishop's Curia, Floriana / Courtesy of the Archdiocese of Malta / Photo: Ian Noel Pace)

discovery. He also contributed to the formulation of a new art curriculum for schools. Calleja would have also shared his ideas on the teaching of art with his friends in Malta, such as Antoine Camilleri, for whom teaching was also an integral part of their lives as artists.

Calleja's teaching post also ushered in another period of reflection and research, which brought forth an unexpected and irreverent series of kinetic sculptures inspired by Joan Miró's surrealist paintings (Fig. 8). In 1977, he held an exhibition titled *Homage to Miró*, where the main exhibit was Calleja's three-dimensional kinetic rendering of Miró's *Carnaval d'Arlequin* (1924–1925) (Fig. 7). Smaller pieces were also direct references to *d'Arlequin*, with flat creatures given movement by hidden motors, gesturing in whimsical and humorous ways which fascinated the crowds that attended the show.

On retiring from teaching in 1984, Calleja turned once more to 'his first love', stone carving. Picking up his chisel and hammer again, the elemental forms which Calleja created were often inspired by the prehistoric sculptures he recalled as his Gozitan legacy. He also returned to painting, though he had never completely abandoned the medium. Drawing on both the luminous winter landscape of Canada as well as on his memories of the Mediterranean landscape, his geometric yet nuanced paintings reflected a relatively calm moment before he embarked on a monumental series of works, which took fifteen years to complete.

Between 1985 and 2000, Calleja created a series of paintings about the loss of human life in war and massacres, titled *The Sacrifice of the Lambs* (Fig. 9). The powerful paintings are full of sacrificial imagery and moral intensity; they bear witness to the artist's cultural roots and sensitivity in portraying the suffering of men and women.⁷ Calleja saw in the motif of the lamb a timeless symbol of innocence,



Fig. 10
 Joseph Calleja, *Riven Stone*, Ontario limestone, 42 x 41cm, 1983.
 (MUZA, Inv.No.: 14531-2; Courtesy of MUZA, the National Community Art Museum – Heritage Malta)

and, by extension, the symbol of salvation through Christ as the Lamb of God.

At the same time, the 1990s were a decade of retrospective exhibitions for Calleja, establishing him as one of the key figures in the Kinetic Art movement of North America. Acquisitions of his works by major collections 'further acknowledged Calleja's importance as a senior Canadian artist as well as his versatility, and recognized his place in the history of national and international art movements', as stated by Tobi Bruce, Senior Curator of Canadian Historical Art at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ontario.⁸



More recently, in 2016, the recognition of Calleja's contribution to modern art came with the inclusion of his art in the major exhibition *OP! Le Vertige Optique: L'Art Optique, Ici et Ailleurs, 1960–1975*, held at the Maison des Arts de Laval, Quebec, in 2016.

Calleja's ties with Malta

This phase also saw Calleja resuming his part in the history of modern art in Malta, with his first retrospective exhibition at the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, held in 1996, and later in Victoria, Gozo, in January 1997. This exhibition saw the start of an ongoing friendship with the Museum's curatorial staff and was reviewed extensively by Maltese art critics.⁹

While Calleja was well known to his Maltese artist friends, until then his works were only found in private collections in Malta and Gozo. His exhibition at the National Museum was, therefore, a revelation to younger Maltese collectors of modern art. It also instigated a reunion of the old members of the Modern Art Group, bringing Samuel Bugeja, Antoine Camilleri, Joe Caruana, and Frank Portelli, together with their old friend. In 2012, Calleja's life-long friendships with fellow artists from the School of Art and the Modern Art Group also occasioned an invitation by this journal, inviting the artist to pen a biographical article on Antoine Camilleri.¹⁰

The 1996 exhibition was also the occasion of the first of many generous donations which Calleja made to the national art collection, when he presented two works of art from key moments in his artistic life, the painting *Harbour Scene* (1966), and *Riven Stone* (1983) (Fig. 10).

A second donation followed in 2014, with four more works added to the national collection which included two

Fig. 11-12
Joseph Calleja, a work from the series *A Play on Nature*,
2013–2014;

Joseph Calleja's last sculpture, 2018.



kinetic sculptures from his 1974 series and another from his 1977 *Homage to Miró* series. During one of his regular visits to Gozo, Calleja was invited to give a public talk at the Art School of Gozo; this was the occasion for another donation, this time of two drawings, portraits of two students, which he had executed in 1947 when he worked as an art teacher in Ghajnsielem.

In 2018, the Bank of Valletta retrospective also provided the premier showing of Calleja's *Sacrifice of the Lambs* series. The thematic content of the series led Calleja to donate the series to the Archdiocese of Malta. They are now displayed inside the Archbishop's Curia in Floriana, and embody the first permanent display in Malta of Joseph Calleja's art.

Calleja continued to research and experiment in art, creating original pieces until his last days. Calleja died in Toronto a few months after his last exhibition in Malta, on December 21, 2018, the day of his birth, passing away just a day after he finished his latest creation (Fig. 12). In his most recent series of sculptures, he created 'trees' and 'plants' recalling the Gozitan landscape with buttons, stones and plaster, but reducing the forms of the natural elements to stylised and brightly coloured works (Fig. 11). The apparent simplicity of the elemental forms disguised the challenges which the artist was facing due to the reduced strength that came with age, though his dexterity is still evident. To the end, he continued to work on a sculpture which recalls the curves and turns of his kinetic pieces as well as the bold design of his paintings and prints.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Anna Killin, daughter of Joseph and Gina Calleja, for her kind support in the preparation of this article.

Notes

- 1 Theresa Vella, *Joseph Calleja: A Bank of Valletta Exhibition, 1 June – 15 July 2018* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2018).
- 2 Verbal communication by the artist, September 2017 quoted in Vella (2018), 15.
- 3 I was shown the original ensemble functioning at the artist's studio during a visit to Toronto in 2017 in preparation of the above-mentioned BOV exhibition.
- 4 The quotation by Wayne Edmonstone was published in the *Toronto Star*. The reference is known via the article by Manuel Gauci, a former Editor at the *Sunday Times of Malta*: Manuel Gauci, 'Maltese-Canadian Artist-Prophet of New Art Evolution', *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 1972.
- 5 Kay Kritzwiser, 'Calleja and Soto: controlled illusion', in *The Globe and Mail*, 6 May 1972, 30.
- 6 Kay Kritzwiser, 'At the Galleries: Kinetic Ballet', in *The Globe and Mail*, 21 July 1973.
- 7 In his youth, Calleja experienced the horrors of the Second World War, especially having witnessed the body of a German pilot whose plane crashed in Nadur, leaving impressions that were to surface in his painting series, *The Sacrifice of the Lambs*.
- 8 Tobi Bruce, 'Works by Joseph Calleja enter Canadian Art Gallery', 16 August 2010; Joseph Calleja Archive, Toronto.
- 9 Reviews by E.V. Borg, Prof. J. Aquilina, Raphael Vella, Emanuel Fiorentino, and George Glanville were published in *In-Nazzjon*, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, *The Malta Independent*, and *L-Orizzont*, respectively, between November 1996 and January 1997. Glanville continued to follow Calleja's work in Toronto, publishing a review in *Il-Hadd* on October 20, 2000. Joseph Paul Cassar also discussed Calleja's role in the Modern Art Group in his publication *Pioneers of Maltese Art*, Vol. 1 (Malta: PIN, 2010).
- 10 Joseph Calleja, 'Antoine Camilleri: An artist who defied convention', *Treasures of Malta*, Vol. 18 No. 3 (Summer 2012), 60-67.