



Fig. 1
Lovers in the Bull (detail), 1984,
oil and mixed media on canvas,
168 x 247cm.
(Private Collection / Photo
courtesy of Graham Cooper)

Remembering Isabelle Borg (1959–2010)

Abigail Pace discusses highlights from the oeuvre of this pioneering female artist

Isabelle Borg (Fig. 2) was born in London on the 7th September 1959, and as a child travelled frequently to Italy, the birthplace of her mother Renata. In 1973, at the age of fourteen, she moved to Malta and was educated at St Joseph's Convent, Blata l-Bajda and Sliema, returning to London shortly after, in May 1979.¹ That same year she began working with KPHS Advertising,² swiftly moving on to Decca Record Company in London, where she worked as a graphic designer and typographer until February 1980; this is where she began a friendly relationship with her lifelong partner, Graham Cooper.³ During her stay in London she, in her own words, 'did the kind of jobs that people did to survive',⁴ and described her experience there in the 1980s as:

Emphasis was on independence and doing your own thing, but a lot of the time one was broke... that was stressful. To be an artist, to produce, you need stability, yet there's a lot to be said for living in the city... you learn to stand up for yourself.⁵

This was certainly an aspect Borg was known for, especially standing up for herself and women's rights.

Abigail Pace is a third-year student reading for a BA Honours degree in History of Art at the University of Malta. Her undergraduate dissertation, under the supervision of Dr Charlene Vella, focuses on Isabelle Borg as an artist, giving particular attention to the feminist element in her artistic oeuvre.



left: Fig. 2
Isabelle Borg in front of two of the portraits she painted, featuring Caesar Attard (on the left) and Dennis Vella (on the right).
(Courtesy of Graham Cooper)

below: Fig. 3
A study by Isabelle Borg of *The Battle of San Romano* by Paolo Uccello.



In 1982 Isabelle entered the London Camberwell School of Art, from where she graduated with a BA (Hons) in Fine Art Painting four years later. In 1988, after her stint in London, Borg settled in Malta for good when her father Aldo found her a home in Floriana, which she transformed into her home and studio. Upon settling in Malta she read for an MA in History of Art at the University of Malta, completing her thesis in 1994.⁶ Her connection with the University did not end there; in 1994 she was appointed Director of Painting and Drawing Landscape in Malta (until 1996) at the University's summer school at the Foundation for International Studies in Valletta.⁷

During this time, she was also employed by the University of Malta as a full-time Assistant Lecturer in Fine Art and History of Art. Borg also taught at Junior College, where she worked alongside fellow artist Caesar Attard. She was one of the first lecturers in the History of Art classes introduced at the University by Prof. Mario Buhagiar. She gave classes in modern and contemporary art, and in vernacular art, specializing in the ex-voto tabella, which was a subject in which she had a specialized interest. Together with Fr Gino Gauci, she was one of Prof. Buhagiar's very first assistants.⁸

Her earliest participation in an exhibition was in the 1982 collective 'Women Artists of Malta' held at the Gallerija Fenici, Valletta. This exhibition included the participation of artists whom Borg built a strong bond with, among them Josette Caruana (b.1959), Anna Grima (b.1958) and Madeleine Gera (b.1960). Throughout her lifetime Isabelle Borg also exhibited in Paris, the Netherlands, Germany and elsewhere, with her final exhibition 'Strange Cargo', having taken place in 2008. 'Strange Cargo' was inspired by her luggage portrait series and was held at the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta.

Between 1996 and 2008 Borg published and collaborated with several academics including Raphael Vella, Dennis Vella, and Paul Clough in a total of seven publications. Her own personal 2004 publication – *The Maritime Ex-voto: A Culture of Thanksgiving in Malta* – was based on her MA thesis on the ex-voto tabella. Borg had a close relationship with Prof. Joe Friggieri, and they both felt that their art and poetry respectively, greatly complimented each other. The two first collaborated when Borg created the set design for *Assemblywomen by Aristophanes* in 1995, which was directed by Prof. Friggieri himself and held at the University of Malta's Open-Air Theatre. Two years later she designed the book and artistic images for his publication *Mitt Hajku*. The talented artist also designed a set of four postage stamps in 1998 that were



right: Fig. 4
Journey to the South (Self-portrait), 1986, oil on canvas in suitcase.
(National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta – MUŻA / Courtesy of Heritage Malta / Photo courtesy of Graham Cooper)

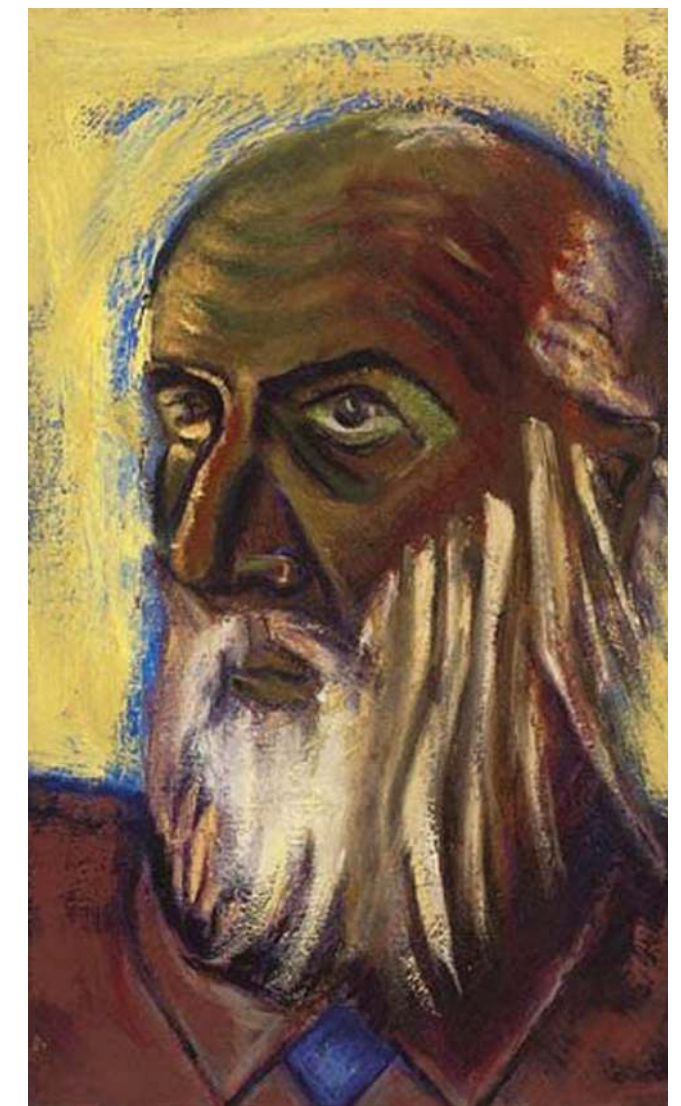
below: Fig. 5
Antoine Camilleri, 1988, oil on canvas, 50 x 30cm.
(Private Collection / Photo courtesy of Graham Cooper)

commissioned for UNESCO's Year of the Ocean by Posta (now MaltaPost).⁹

Travel, culture, and Maltese history were certainly major influences on Isabelle Borg. As a child she travelled to Florence, where she stayed with her cousin Silvia Benini, who was six years Borg's junior. The city of art left a great impact on Borg and she began to take a profound interest in the works of the masters, among them Giotto and Uccello (Fig. 3), and notably, Michelangelo. Her father Aldo gave particular importance to his only child's education, among which museum outings were a priority. As a result Borg developed a fascination with Maltese prehistoric art, a recurrent theme in her oeuvre, and which crystallized in the quintessential *Lovers in the Bull* (1984, Fig. 1,10). This is a work that the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts (MCCA) aptly described as 'a milestone in Maltese twentieth century art... asserting itself as one of the foremost works by a Maltese artist inspired by the imagery of Malta's prehistoric past'.¹⁰

The bull is a symbol of power and sexual energy and has been depicted in art from the caves of Lascaux to Picasso.¹¹ For Isabelle Borg, the theme of the bull was inspired from Malta's prehistoric temple culture as a 'time-old symbol of virility'.¹² Tarxien temples have their own unique bull relief carvings. Borg placed male and female forms inside the bull, in which the woman shows signs of fertility, reflecting the conflict between the two components without altering the bull's independence of form.¹³

The artist stated that it was partially concerned with the 'metaphors for desire and conflict between man and woman'.¹⁴ According to Dominic Cutajar, it was produced in a 'ritualistic' process and through this work Borg 'achieves a personal idiom and successfully applies her reductionist attitude'. Art critic Emmanuel Fiorentino described it as the 'role of acting out these nagging preoccupations springing from the subconscious but which are the axis around which most of the human drama unfolds'.¹⁵ The bull and the sea are themes pertinent to Maltese culture and they have a 'special



kind of function in her [Borg's] work because that is the place with which she is more identified, her spiritual home'.¹⁶

The 1986 self-portrait titled *Journey to the South* (Fig. 4) was executed in London after Borg's stay in West Berlin, a trip that prompted the luggage-portrait series.¹⁷ This was



Fig. 6
Mount Gabriel West, 2002, oil on canvas, 84 x 96cm.
(Artist's Collection / Photo courtesy of Graham Cooper)

a period she described as the 'time I painted myself in a suitcase, because I was confused'.¹⁸ She also portrayed close friends in similar suitcases.

Borg had a strong academic intellect; her training harked back to classical works and icons, resulting in the frontally

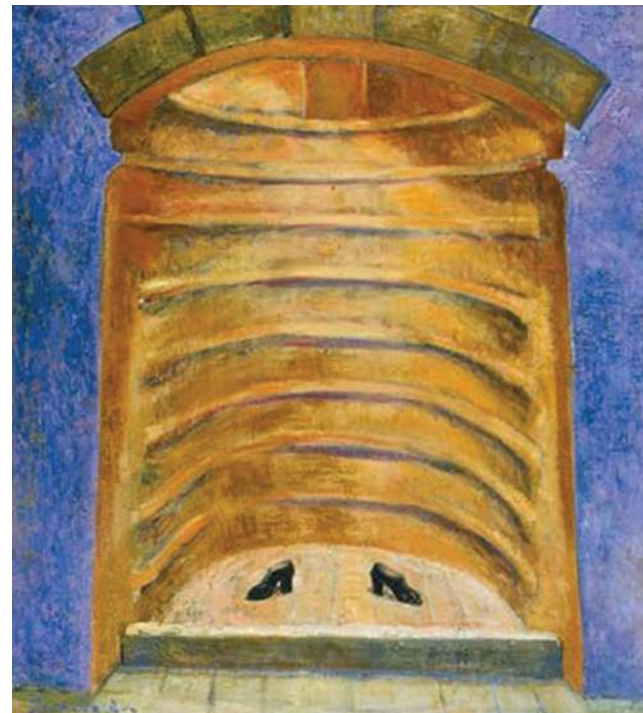
Fig. 7
Dead Boats, 1993, oil on canvas, 167 x 247cm.
(Courtesy of the Malta International Airport / Photo courtesy of Graham Cooper)

posed and elongated portraits, all of which as a result link to the Fayum portraits (Fig. 5).¹⁹ Isabelle Borg's sitter is left bare, stripped from any personal and emotional qualities, bereft of any decorative elements in the background, and set against a multi-layered wax and pigment wall that in turn recalls the plaster of Roman frescos.²⁰ The skin tones applied, according to Dennis Vella, recall the Near East, archaic and Byzantine elements which are the foundation of Borg's portrait series.²¹ Cutajar likened her portraits to Chaim Soutine's (1893–1943) who focused on shape and colour over representation, as they reject all form of idealization.²² Isabelle Borg was not after flattering herself or any of her sitters.



Ireland was a place that Borg frequently visited, especially West Cork, where the vast landscapes intrigued the artist. This was also the case for the Maltese land and seascape. Borg's interest in the Maltese landscape focused on the bastions and the human impact on the environment; on the other hand, she found the natural scenery of Ireland and its 'constant movement of the skies and sea overwhelming the slow-moving geology of the land' (Fig. 6) as a fascinating contrast.²³ The strong link with the urban 'paysage' links Borg's work with that of Carmenu Mangion.²⁴ She was also drawn towards the 'grimy structures' of the shipyards seen in *Dead Boats* (Fig. 7), for to her a

Fig. 8
Standing Nude, 1995, oil on canvas, 135 x 121cm.
 (Artist's Collection / Photo courtesy of Graham Cooper)



'boat is a metaphor for the journey of the spirit'.²⁵ Borg's fresh, bold and vigorous brushstrokes made whatever she portrayed extremely vivid, not in a realist kind of way, but more in an expressionist manner.

Borg exposed herself to the Neo-Expressionist movement which was very prominent in Germany and Italy in particular,²⁶ and her work also bordered onto the Fauvist.²⁷ She adopted a strong use of colour 'to evoke an atmosphere of space and sensation – an exploration towards a more personal language'.²⁸ Borg presented two sides in her landscapes, which Cutajar describes as the 'duel between mind and heart'.²⁹ In her own search for personal language, the simplification of forms gives way to bursts of colour. These two elements can be seen in the work of Nicolas de Stael (1914–1955).³⁰

Links can also be made with the early work of Rothko and Pollock.³¹ Her use of line and form in landscapes' compositions betray the influence of the human form and are carefully structured but contrasted to the way Cezanne broke down the original form in, for example, Montagne Sainte-Victoire, as is pointed out by Dr Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci.³²

One other important element that should be remembered is that Isabelle Borg was an avid feminist who strove to overcome gender boundaries that are evident in our society. She was 'a strong believer in the right of women artists to strip themselves free of patriarchal layers', and when she was not painting she was 'plotting for women's rights'.³³ This highlights the impact she left on the feminist movement in Malta that was set up to defend and empower women who found themselves in abusive relationships. In fact, she was the founder of Moviment Mara Maltija and in November 2002 she was elected its President. In 1993, the thirty-four-year-old Borg revealed that it helped her 'find that courage which every artist is needing to push the boat out to sea'.³⁴

At the turn of the twentieth century, Walter Shaw Sparrow stated that: 'No male artist however gifted he may be, will ever be able to experience all the emotional

life to which women are subject',³⁵ and Borg also empowered women through her art. Apart from the theme of prehistoric Malta, Isabelle Borg recorded the harsh representation of sex workers in the region of Albert Town (Fig. 9) in Malta, a theme she explored on two occasions, in which her intention was not to charge the composition with erotic content. Rather, she exposed the reality of those women trapped in the cycle of sex-work, uncovering the single aspect of a layered, complex identity. The representation of sex workers has for centuries been glorified, from Manet to Ingres with their depictions of young, white, 'beautiful' women in luxurious settings, and the way in which prostitutes are presented in the works of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's *Rue des Moulins*, and in the Maltese context, Valletta's Strada Stretta.

She also questioned the naked and the nude in art, especially with regard to the female form. In 1995 Borg produced the *Standing Nude* (Fig. 8), which was exhibited at the landmark 'The Nude in Maltese Art' exhibition. This painting, in itself holding great feminist values, was especially significant for the context it was created for and exhibited in. It was eloquently described by the late art historian, curator and friend of the artist, Dennis Vella, as 'one of the wittiest and most pertinent' exhibits,³⁶ which in fact it was. The exhibition was dominated by male participation and her work stood independently.

The artist went against the common idea of the nude (which is more often than not female), choosing to depict a pair of shoes within the empty alcove of her studio, as a harsh commentary on the way the female has for centuries been portrayed in art. Before this iconic painting, one is

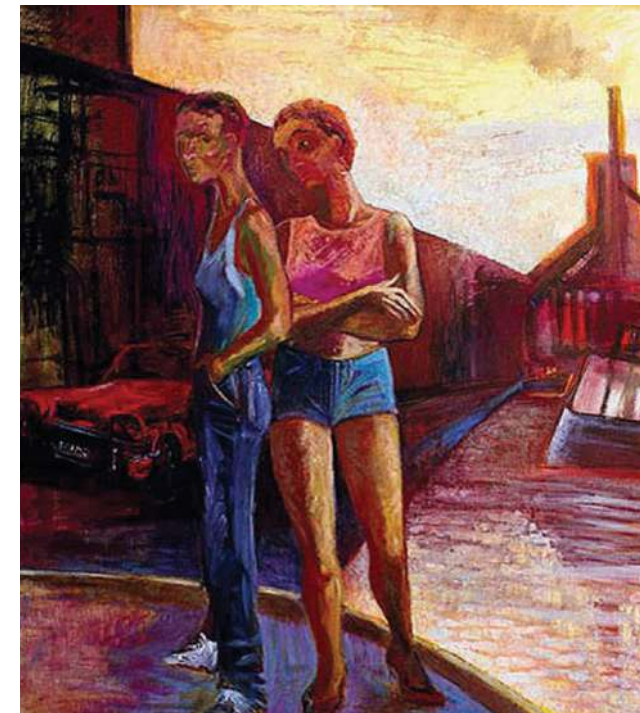


Fig. 9
Albert Town, post-1996 version, oil on canvas, 145 x 140cm.
 (Artist's Collection / Photo courtesy of Graham Cooper)

overleaf: Fig. 10
Lovers in the Bull, 1984, oil and mixed media on canvas,
 168 x 247cm.
 (Private Collection / Photo courtesy of Graham Cooper)

left to imagine whose nude female body could be presented there, enhancing the 'peep-show' effect present in western painting.³⁷ With a hint of humour and a good dose of irony, Isabelle Borg was silently criticizing the other paintings in the same exhibition, and the portrayal of the female nude in western art. Her decision to do this reflected her choice to not objectify the female nude for anybody's pleasure.

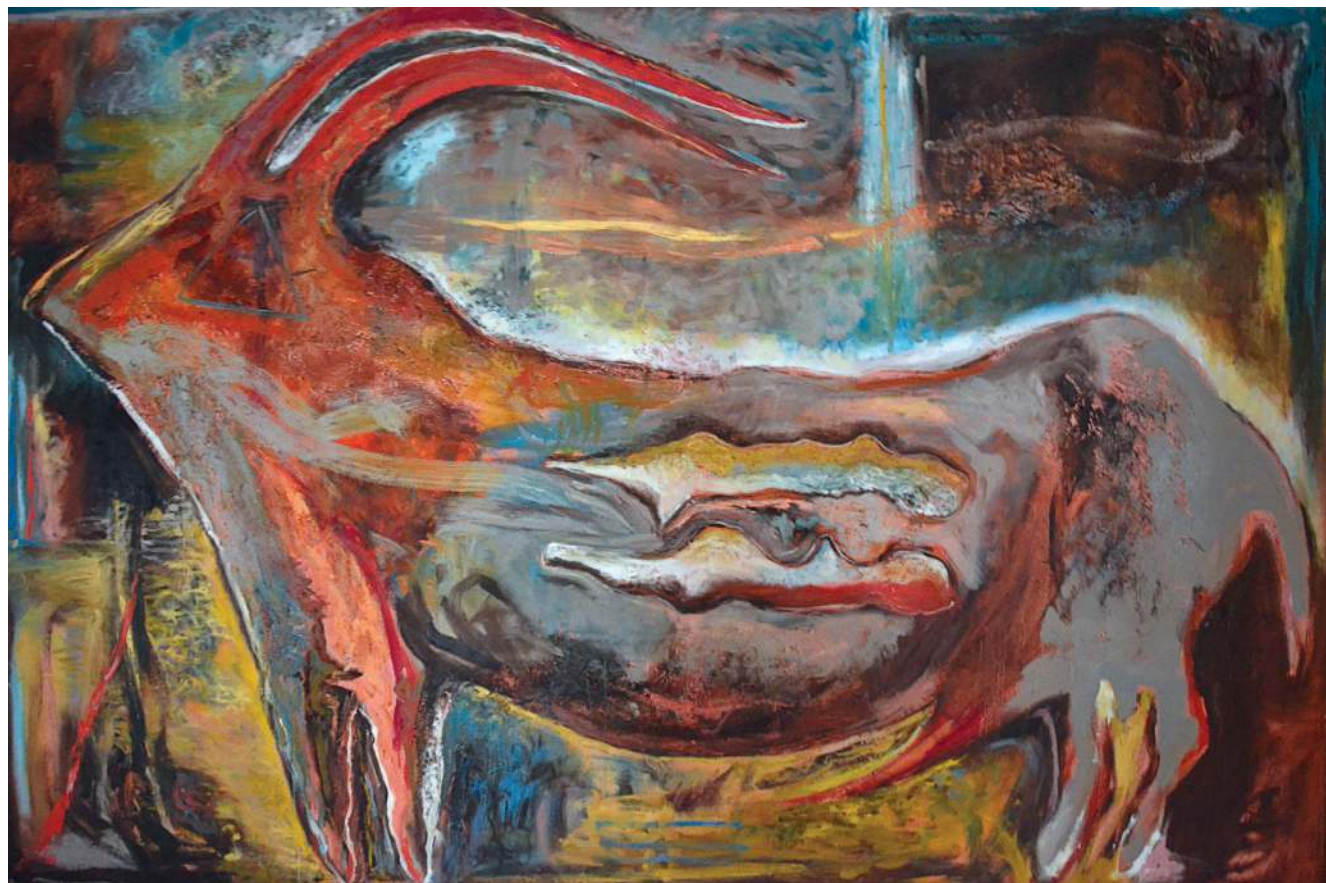
Isabelle Borg was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis in 2007, a degenerative disease that left her with a great shortness of breath and confined to her Floriana home. In 2010 she succumbed to the disease at the age of fifty-one. This left Malta to mourn the loss of 'one of the first truly important female contemporary artists'³⁸ and whom the MCCA described as an artist who has 'over the past three decades left an incredible mark on the history of Maltese art as well as its teaching'.³⁹ As she herself stated, painting, which she practised incessantly every day, was 'an activity I need to get involved in, that has a total effect – not just a conceptual but an overall physical experience'.⁴⁰ Malta is fortunate to have had Isabelle Borg to contribute to and alter its modern art-historical landscape.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 Adrian Stivala, *Contemporary Maltese Artist* (Valletta: North Star Publications, 1985), 30.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Information from a personal communication with Graham Cooper on 25 August 2015.
- 4 Daphne Caruana Galizia, interview with Isabelle Borg, *Times of Malta – Weekender*, 25 June 1994, 2.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 This and the following information was generously made available to me by Prof. Mario Buhagiar on 3 February 2016.
- 7 The start of the summer school was mentioned in Daphne Caruana Galizia's interview with Isabelle Borg, *Times of Malta – Weekender*, 25 June 1994, 2.
- 8 This information was generously made available to me by Prof. Mario Buhagiar on 3 February 2016.
- 9 This information was generously made available to me by Graham Cooper.
- 10 'Prominent local painter Isabelle Borg dies', in *Malta Today*, 26 September 2010, 25.
- 11 Dennis Vella, *Woman in Maltese Art c.1600–1995* (Malta: Gutenberg Press Ltd, 1995), 60.
- 12 Emmanuel Fiorentino, 'Virility from the subconscious', in *Sunday Times of Malta*, 15 September 1985, 28.
- 13 Vella, op. cit. (1995), 60; Emmanuel Fiorentino, 'Virility from the subconscious', *Sunday Times of Malta*, 15 September 1985, 28.
- 14 Dominic Cutajar, 'The dual temptations of a young artist', *Times of Malta*, 11 September 1985, 7.
- 15 Fiorentino, op. cit. (1985), 28.
- 16 Letter about Isabelle Borg from Noel Forster, the Principal Lecturer in Painting at the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts, 4 December 1986.
- 17 Dennis Vella, 'The Portraits of Isabelle Borg', *The Circle* (Autumn 1989), 41.
- 18 Daphne Caruana Galizia, interview with Isabelle Borg, *Times of Malta – Weekender*, 25 June 1994, 2.
- 19 Dominic Cutajar, 'Modern Kind of Spirituality', *Times of Malta*, 15 November 1989, 13.
- 20 Vella, op. cit. (1989), 42.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Cutajar, op. cit. (1989), 13.
- 23 http://www.isabelleborg.com/0000_ArtBioStatementPages/0000ArtStatement01.html; accessed on 3 November 2015.
- 24 Personal communication with Dr Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci on 11 February 2016.
- 25 Emmanuel Fiorentino, 'Variant views on landscape', *Sunday Times of Malta*, 8 August 1993, 21.
- 26 Dennis Vella, *twenty-five years 25 artists* (Floriana: Middlesea House, 2006), 13.
- 27 Personal communication with Dr Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci on 11 February 2016.
- 28 Cutajar, op. cit. (1985), 7.
- 29 Ibid.



- 30 Personal communication with Dr Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci on 11 February 2016.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Mario Azzopardi, 'Portrait of the artist as a woman', in *Malta Independent – Gallarija Supplement*, 20 June 1993, G5.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., G4.

- 36 Dennis Vella and Patrick Fenech, *Women Artists in Malta Today* (Valletta: National Council of Women, 1994), 6.
37 Ibid.
38 Personal communication with Prof. Mario Buhagiar on 9 October 2015.
39 'Prominent local painter Isabelle Borg dies', *Malta Today*, 26 September 2010, 25.
40 http://www.isabelleborg.com/0000_ArtBioStatementPages/0000ArtStatement01.html; accessed on 24 October 2015.