

HIS LIGHT MATERIALS

OPENNESS AND CLOSURE, LIGHT AND DARK, LIFE AND DEATH – ALL ARE THEMES THAT RUN THROUGH THE LATEST EXHIBITION OF **ABSTRACTS BY CHRISTOPHER SALIBA.** DAVID CLANCY DROPS BY AT THE GOZITAN ARTIST'S STUDIO IN SAN BLAS

Photography by Andrew Gauci Attard

As I write this I'm swaying side to side on the crossing back from Christopher Saliba's home in Gozo. It may not be the best environment in which to write but I want to get everything down while the imagery is still resonating in my mind – the colours, the contrasts and the feelings they evoke. Just what inspires an artist to create the abstract paintings that Christopher conjures from the blank canvas?

Earlier, as I entered Christopher's home, I had been immediately struck by one of his paintings, a semi-abstract portrait of a religious figure, hanging in the hallway. Other paintings, vibrant, colourful, were propped up on easels and hanging from the walls all around me, creating energy throughout the rooms.

It might seem, to the unlearned eye, as though abstract art is done in bursts of energy, going from blank canvas to brightly coloured imagery in a surge of inspiration all in one sitting. But this is rarely the case. Christopher tells me that every piece starts in his mind and is given structure through sketches. The structure is crucial to the process since it gives him "the confidence to move forward with the piece".

With personal exhibitions at St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, the National Museum of Fine Arts and the Auberge de Castille, Chris' name has become an established one with art-lovers. Recently he has also been invited to participate in a collective international exhibition at the Louvre Museum in Paris. And this month will also see him exhibit in a new form in a collection he has entitled *Introspections*. This is his

tenth exhibition to date but only his second in the abstract form, and will showcase 40 different artworks which he describes as much more free in comparison to his earlier work.

"Previously, I used geometric shapes in my abstract paintings but have now moved to creating vortexes of light within my work to contrast the areas of darkness, since I found that the formed shapes were becoming limiting." This light and dark contrast is often apparent with Christopher's theme of opposites. Openness and closure, light and dark, life and death – all are engrained in the common theme of confinement that influences the artist. "It's important to me that I can look at my work as a whole and see the different stages of development. Although diversity is key to maintaining inspiration, continuity is essential in order to grow as an artist."

Standing in the artist's studio and looking around at the many paintings, I can see that confinement and the idea of opposites are dominating themes throughout his work, an idea he attributes to his life on the island of Gozo, with its feeling of seclusion. "I absolutely love Gozo, it's a beautiful island," says Chris, "but sometimes it can create an almost claustrophobic feeling in me, and I draw on this frustration for my art." However, he doesn't aspire to represent the outside world in any way, and instead aims to show his feelings at the time of creation, leaving onlookers free to interpret the imagery as they choose. This is essentially why none of his work is titled. "If the same feeling I had when creating it is



stirred in just one person, then I know I have reached my objective."

The studio itself, with plenty of daylight streaming in and paint supplies scattered around, seems to indicate that bursts of inspiration can often cause mayhem in the room. "It is important to me to visit my studio at least once a day in order to keep in tune with my work, even if I'm just preparing a canvas to start painting."

Christopher's work isn't limited to the world of painting, and leads him into different forms of creative expression, covering photography, video and even animation. "I tend to work in cycles when I feel inspired to challenge myself – stagnation is crippling for the creative process."

One of the thrills as an abstract artist, he tells me, is not knowing exactly how a piece is going to progress no matter how planned it may be. However, one of the hardest parts is also knowing exactly when a piece is complete and when to step away.

"I sometimes leave a work alone for a while until I can see it in another light," explains Christopher. "It gives the work time to mature in my memory and enables me to revisit it with an open mind."

Does he fear that one day he will run out of ideas? "Not at all. I know that as long as I remain actively involved and immersed in my work, then life will always provide me with the inspiration I need." **C**

Introspections will run between 6-30 April at the Auberge d'Italie, Merchants Street, Valletta. The exhibition will open daily from 9am to 5pm. In conjunction with the exhibition, Chris has produced a 30-page full-colour catalogue with images of the exhibits. The catalogue also includes critical essays by Professor Joe Friggieri, head of the department of Philosophy at the University of Malta and by Dr Louis Lagana, art historian and lecturer at the Junior College and University of Malta. The exhibition is supported by APS Bank, Middlesea Valletta Life and Marsovin. A part of the proceeds will go in aid of Inspire – the Eden and Razzett Foundation. More information on www.gozo-art.com