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Art



Freshness pervades *The Russian*, where the hair is merely hinted at by a few strokes of paint, with attention being focussed on the figure's face.

Different shades of...

Charlene Vella

Do you ever wake up feeling in a particular way, and associate it with a colour? Well, if you have the opportunity to be the subject of one of Debbie Caruana Dingli's portraits, you may very well be changing different shades of a very many different colours.

Caruana Dingli's current exhibition of portraits in the newly inaugurated Lily Agius Gallery in Sliema is made up of a series of paintings produced in weekly three-hour sessions. Francesca Balzan, who partakes in these sessions, stresses this point in the exhibition brochure.

The result has a freshness that, coupled with a perceptive grasp of the sitter's personality, translates portrait painting into a visual experience in which it is colour that sets the mood and the aesthetic experience.

There is nothing new in this. It has been tried before, but Caruana Dingli's technical dexterity and response to the medium, makes it all the same an exciting and rewarding experience. It is in many ways a painterly *bravura*.

The main focus is the head, where flesh tones and a large range of colours are happily wedded. Colour is nonetheless often the major protagonist, and you repeatedly have an aurora borealis of colours. It is sometimes not what you would normally expect. But then again, if everything were true to life, that is, likeness and colour, then what would the artist have left to experiment with?

Although this is not always the case, it occurs often, and is

particularly evident in *Chev dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*. In other works, the colour spectrum is more subdued, and the colours selected are more 'real' to flesh tones.

It is colour that makes the sitters come alive: the lively colours. Equally important is Caruana Dingli's brushwork. This is what I enjoyed most. It is as lively as the chosen palette.

Broad, bold and thick, the brushwork lends to the paintings a sense of *joie de vivre* and bring forth a confident Caruana Dingli - a watercolourist who is proving she can be equally dexterous in oils.

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And, as a caricaturist who can just as well pin down a 'true to life' likeness. Her caricaturist traits, in fact, make their presence felt in *The Estate Agent*.

The Eater is one of the most charming of the lot, and fun. The serious sitter glancing downwards must have been reading. But then, a juicy burger sits precariously on his head.

Also fun are the titles of all the portraits, which never reveal the sitter's name, but a trait associated with them, such as *The Inkviet Kbir*, or perhaps their profession, such as *The Lawyer*.

Portraiture is an intriguing subject, and the difficulties are manifold. Among these, one must not only capture a likeness, but also the spirit of the sitter, and in Caruana Dingli's case, this is done in a matter of a couple of hours.

Her characters often evade the viewer's glance, and look elsewhere, often pensively. But as in *The Thinker*, a gleeful sitter's beaming smile is accompanied by a twinkle in his eye that is as real as it gets. This is the result of a fresh approach applied to the execution of the portrait.

And freshness pervades most of these portraits. Particular is *The Russian*, where the hair is merely hinted at by a few strokes of paint, with attention being focussed on the figure's face.

The Lily Agius Gallery is a new exhibition space has been assiduously prepared to house paintings as well as sculpture.

With more galleries opening, we have more exhibitions to visit, and more places that were conceived as exhibition spaces from their inception. With such galleries, one expects the quality of artwork exhibited to be of a high standard if the owner/manager must maintain the gallery's reputation.

If one knows the local art scene, he would know that gallery owners must be picky, very picky, when choosing who exhibits in their space, and it will therefore be no easy task.

Caruana Dingli's exhibition was complemented by the chosen space and her portraits proved to be a consistent body of work, bold and beautiful.

'Portraits' closes today (open from 10 to 2 p.m.) at Lily Agius Gallery, Cathedral Street, Sliema.

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