**The Exiles Series: the road not taken**

Norbert Francis Attard’s **The Exiles Series: the road not taken** is part of the artist’s ongoing political work, and especially of large corpus of work that falls under the generic name **Exiles. The Exiles Series** started in 2013 with the exhibition ‘**Hermetik**’ curated by Michael Bock at Fort Tigne, Sliema. **The Exiles Series** includes sculptures (**Pressure Books**), installations (**De-Fence**), other images (**Exile I, No Trespassing, Being Watched**)**,** as well as the **Bomba, Intelligence** and **Targets** series.

**The Exiles Series: the road not taken** (2016) is a development of the work **Exile I** (2013). Inspired by the fact that Malta is marking the 50th Anniversary of Malta's signing of the Council of Europe's CONVENTION FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS, the artist treats various issues related to human rights: from gender issues, racism, freedom of speech and expression to the death penalty, women’s rights, refugees, and animal rights.

Attard has regularly treated political themes in his art, and he becomes particularly embattled by the issue of injustice. The title is taken from from Robert Frost's familiar poem ‘The Road Not Taken’:

 *‘Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—*

*I took the one less travelled by,*

*And that has made all the difference.’*

**The Exiles Series: the road not taken** is about both ideas and emotions. The eight panels are made up of images researched and mainly lifted from the internet, portraying a wide variety of subjects, occasional text and Facebook-like memes with an underlying thread reflected in the title.

Titles of artworks can be funny things. Some are not very helpful – Klein’s *Blue*, or Rothko’s *Abstract No 10*. Some are so effective that they change the way we look at an artwork – Serrano’s *Piss Christ*.

Attard intends the *exiles* in his crafted title to refer to the personages who have placed themselves outside of the mainstream – a political gesture. Attard considers the exile an aesthete; a self-exile whose physical estrangement is a political gesture, as painful as Petr Pavlensky nailing his scrotum to ground in Moscow’s Red Square, though not necessarily as dramatic.

Attard’s understanding of the concept includes persecution, torture, and death - an exile from the conventional understanding of societal norms. Attard questions how far we have progressed in issues such as freedom of speech, and from a point of departure of generic human rights, the images progress into an expose’ of society’s ills. This montage thus becomes a sort of visual history of the persecuted. It is a history that affords little comfort, as the visuals attest to the persistence of persecution of all kinds that still exist in the contemporary world.

The series of eight panels works on several levels. On the narrative level, Attard uses a very wide range of images to play with a content that at first glance may seem a literal rendering of the commissioned theme. But Attard rises above this mundane rendering, and elicits meaning not just from the individual images – each a strong and informed choice on the recurrent theme of persecution – but also in their juxtapositional relationships. A Banksy graffiti, showing a Mona Lisa armed with rocket launcher, is placed next to Martin Luther King’s mug shots. The two images are separated by the front cover of Umair Muhammad’s text ‘Confronting Injustice’ a treatise on social activism in the age of individualism. Next to this series is a digital meme proclaiming ‘terrorism’. The author clearly wants to provoke his audience, inviting participation through both reflection and argument.

The series also works in a very different way – as a montage of images, Exiles takes on the aesthetic qualities of film.

*“For me, cinema is essentially emotion. It is pieces of film joined together that create an idea, which in turn creates an emotion in the mind of the audience. Not through spoken words, but through the visuals. It's a visual medium. And montage is the main thing. All moviemaking is pure montage."* [Alfred Hitchcock interviewed by Arthur Knight, 1973]

In a sense this piece works like a video installation. Just like Viola’s meditative videos demand patience from viewers, Attard’s complex and busy piece needs to be savoured slowly, meticulously.

In the classical montage theory posited by Eisenstein, the way each image is placed in relation to other images, creates impacts beyond the individual images. Not only can a third image comes into its own from the amalgam of two counterposed images, but the technique allows the *auteur* to stretch time, manipulating the audience’s perception, slowing it or speeding it up according to the aesthetic and iconological requirements of the piece. Attard does something similar by juxtaposing hundreds of images in a carefully structured matrix. However the chosen medium is not linear, as in film or video, but allows the viewers eyes (and attention) to wander.

But titles can be funny things. Calling this a series suggests that there will inevitably be more exiles.

**Michael Fenech** Curator