

Art

Painting the town red?

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A naked, slender, headless female body captures my attention. The photograph I am looking at however comprises several topless torsos in a variety of positions. Most are obviously mannequins, yet subtle nuances denoting the warmth of human skin coupled with a certain unmistakable grace which permanently rigid and static objects could never hope to possess, gives the "body" in question away.

So much can be said about a photograph and the person behind the lens who has captured that moment... the selective, framed version of reality which forces those looking upon it to restrict their vision and focus their attention within four corners. This is what the photographs of Alexandra Pace ask of their viewers.

In her four collection exhibition, titled *Redprints*, Ms Pace goes beyond the realms of a mere photography show. With a sound background in commercial and fashion photography, in which she has an established reputation, the exhibits become a detail amid a thorough developmental project which evolved over months and have resulted in the rehabilitation of a vacant four-storey townhouse-cum-gallery in Valletta.

The space is practically empty and void save for a few sporadic items – a free-standing safe, a "vintage" fridge, an antique TV set and a polychromised statue of an open-armed risen Christ. These random items, together with the typical coloured tiles, and the aptly garish period bathrooms dating back to the 1970s, are the only "remains" of the house. Otherwise, the "new" space has been gutted to assume as much of a white cube "feel" as possible.

The exhibition space which has been restricted to two floors is divided into four separately titled sections: *Santa Marija*, *Boutique*, *Soldier Boy* and *Maggie's Kitchen*. The collections have been purposely devised for the spaces in question and have also been displayed chronologically, according to execution and production. All the photographs have the same dimensions, format and frame, and each one is equidistant from the other. Consistency, coherence and line are the prevalent characteristics of each of the display rooms.

The first collection to "greet" the visitor is the *Santa Marija* series – as the name denotes, all the photographs were shot on August 15, when the island is witness to an exodus of people flocking abroad, to Gozo or to the beach. Ms Pace chose the latter, where, clad with the fisheye lens already utilised for her lomographic shots in London, she takes on the role of a submersed submariner and the spectator becomes an underwater creature slaloming between the alien pairs of legs and feet.

As the visitor ventures upstairs, a change of tone and mood is felt as the subject, and its handling,



shifts to the portrayal of nudes. The *Boutique* series is almost a peep-show – a juxtaposition of interacting mannequins with a lonesome female form whose head has been purposely truncated therefore rendering the figure anonymous, together with most of the mannequins whose "identity" is irrelevant. Ms Pace seems to be making a statement in this series which she then reiterates in *Soldier Boy* – having worked as a fashion photographer for many years, she has a strong sense of the ideal... of what sells. The generally flawed human body, however, is here represented as a pristine and unblemished statue, an epitome of classicism. It is ironically the mannequin, to assume the role of the defective, blemished or imperfect prototype.

This series is reminiscent of Robert Mapplethorpe who often depicted nudes with truncated or defaced heads which were covered or concealed. His nudes however emanated a particular strength, which sometimes verged on the aggressive or the pornographic, whereas Ms Pace's nudes are graceful in their femininity, and there are no erotic undertones to the poses and positions.

The same cannot be said for the *Soldier Boy* series, where the Adonis-like male model is given an identity and thus appeals to our senses. Some of the poses are quite commercial and one almost expects them to be accompanied by a cosmetic product. However, recently Anderson and Low presented a series of black and white photographs depicting some of world's top athletes *au naturel* and these do bear semblance to Ms Pace's *Soldier Boy* nudes, whose forms are streamlined, taut and almost sculptural against the stark black ground the depth of which remains fiercely impenetrable.

The last collection is perhaps the



most unexpected of the four series. After the abundance of virile nudes in the previous quarter, the still life food photographs of *Maggie's Kitchen* come alive in front of our eyes, and from a distance look like limbs and other unnamable body parts. Whether they are taken as whole items or captured in detail, here the focus is given to texture and to strong contrasts of light and shade. The proportions and the ratios of the

individual fruits and vegetables are unrelated to one another, in fact a mushroom looks like an immense cactus flower and an onion looks like a pumpkin. However, this series makes it painfully obvious that the spectators' notions of their recognised reality can be altered by a simple change of proportions and the elimination of colour, background and context. The house hosting these

collections, is a gem of a place within Valletta, pleasantly haunted by its history. Ms Pace has breathed new life into this building... a life which might be extended indefinitely should it turn into a gallery for temporary exhibitions and shows.

■ *Redprints* is showing at no. 68, St Lucy Street in Valletta until Tuesday. It is open between 10 a.m. and midday and 2 and 8 p.m. www.redprints.com