

Teodor Reljic. “World-renowned artist dedicates sculpture to the children of Malta,” *Malta Today*, October 12, 2018.

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Ugo Rondinone’s ‘The Radiant’ at Sa Maison: Rooted, eternal, accessible

As construction on the Malta Contemporary International Art Space (MICAS) gets underway at the Ospizio in Floriana, Swiss-born, New York-based artist Ugo Rondinone talks about The Radiant – a stone structure serving as a hopeful totem to the ambitions of this new venue



Ugo Rondinone stands next to The Radiant

Popular wisdom would have it that most contemporary art is simply pretentious twaddle, but the output of acclaimed Swiss-born, New York-

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based artist Ugo Rondinone can certainly be counted among the work of those who value emotion and engagement over scholastic obscurity.

Active in New York since the mid-nineties – a milieu now bittersweet to him, given the city’s recent drive towards aggressive gentrification – Rondinone, who emigrated to the Big Apple from his native Brunnen, achieved global fame with works such as Seven Magic Mountains (2016-2018), a series of seven fluorescently-painted totems placed at the far southern end of Las Vegas Boulevard. Owing to both its bright colours and strategic location on the Los Angeles-Las Vegas interstate, this ‘blockbuster’ piece would end up being seen by approximately 16 million people, confirming Rondinone’s position a creator of notable and fully accessible public art.

And now, Rondinone brings his trademark touch to Malta. ‘The Radiant’, unveiled for display at the Sa Maison Gardens last Friday, is a stone structure “dedicated to the children of Malta”. Crafted out of rough-cut blue stone in such a way as to depict the human figure “in its most archaic and elemental form”, the piece stands only roughly higher than the average human figure. It is both imposing and intimate, and melds tastefully into the surroundings of Sa Maison Gardens – certainly more so than the ostentatious, now crumbling, colonial intrusions in the space: chimeric lions eaten away by time, some with their faces sliced open to allow inter-generational graffiti to be cut through...

“The figure is made of stone – something that is definite, heavy and solid. But this is why we’ve also accompanied it with the tinkling bells that you see as you walk past the garden. These came about as the result of a collaboration with local schools. We asked each of the pupils of the 170 classes we take on board to express their wish. The results are spread across

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the garden – tinkling bells accompanied by writings stuck to the branches, which flutter and ring at the first sign of the wind, in a collective work we’ve called ‘Joy’. So you have a mix of something very grounded – the stone figure – and something very light,” Rondinone tells me as we sit down for a chat about his work last Friday.



The Radiant (Photo James Bianchi)

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And as it happens, I did spot the bells going in, and it made for a pleasant surprise as I trekked my way to the centre of the garden that now houses The Radiant, which will remain on public display until December 13. But the area was not as yet set up for a serene and personal encounter with the work; upon reaching it, and as expected, I found myself greeted by a construction crew servicing what was an international press meet-and-greet.

Because Rondinone's sculpture is not a one-off effort. The Radiant is a firm, definite landmark – a large stepping stone, if you will – in the run-up to the launch of the Malta Contemporary International Art Space (MICAS), set for an opening in 2021 but keen to establish itself as a capital project of note through a series of staggered events leading up to the fateful year. The site proper lies just northwards of the Sa Maison Gardens, and construction dogs our way as we walk up ahead to an open space which on Friday night served as a party area to celebrate the soft launch of the MICAS project. Essentially renovating the ditch that formerly housed the Knights' Ospizio – a derelict site just behind the Police HQ in Floriana – MICAS aims to serve as an ambitious space to cultivate contemporary art in Malta, with an international outlook always in mind.

Involving Rondinone at this stage in the project was a shrewd move, and not only because an artist of such international renown lends a necessary reputational boost to the would-be venue. Contrary to some of his more self-conscious peers, Rondinone is proud that his work deals in “child-like symbols”.

“They are very democratic, universal images that can be understood by everyone on an emotional level – the symbols I use are like a grammatical alphabet that anyone can read. The public sculpture I do is then really

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important for me because that's where people see them – it's for the people, and it should be understood on different levels.

Being explicitly dedicated to “the children of Malta” – and so to a spiritual commitment to secure a better future – The Radiant can be seen to send a powerful message of support to the in-progress project that is MICAS.

Describing the current realities of the art world in New York as nothing short of “tragic”, Rondinone bemoans how cynical speculation has taken over where the raw matter of a lively art scene was once allowed to thrive. “When I moved to New York in ‘96, it was a bit like Berlin is right now – young artists like me could afford to live and work on the Lower East Side, and you could actually figure out the zeitgeist based on the art that you see in small galleries. Now, however, the big galleries swallow up all the talent, leaving the smaller, budding ones empty-handed. So only a few rise to the top, and you get a very distorted image of what the actual creative currents of the time are.”

It's a bit of a cautionary tale for Malta too... in this rent-and-gentrification scenario, at least, we are closer to New York than we are to Berlin.

Ugo Rondinone's The Radiant will remain open for public viewing at Sa Maison Gardens, Floriana until December 31. Opening hours: 06:30 to 18:00 (Monday to Friday); 07:00 to 18:00 (Saturday and Sunday)