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PM comes out fighting over Franco Debono's outburst

Gonzi: I will not be blackmailed



Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi: I don't accept being put into a corner. Photo: Darrin Zammit Lupi

Steve Mallia

Lawrence Gonzi yesterday came out fighting against Franco Debono, saying the rebel MP has no right to usurp the trust of the people that voted for him and should resign from Parliament.

In an interview with *The Sunday Times* (pages 6,7), the Prime Minister says he feels betrayed by Dr Debono, who had "suddenly decided he will not support the government unless he becomes a minister".

"The crisis we have is not a government issue... instead we have a crisis of an individual"

Reacting to the Nationalist MP's statement yesterday that he will no longer back the administration while Dr Gonzi is at the helm, the Prime Minister says: "I don't accept being blackmailed... I would be doing a disservice to the country... If I were to establish this ridiculous scenario where a Prime Minister can't decide on a reshuffle because one particular MP who happens to be a single-seat majority holds the government by the throat."

Dr Gonzi also insists that the issue should be resolved within the Nationalist Party structures since the MP had said the Prime Minister should step down as party leader.

"The crisis we have is not a government issue... We have a crisis of an individual. His crisis is that he cannot accept me as his leader. Fine.

That is a party issue and I will, as always, face the challenge and take it in the forum where it deserves to be treated.

"Now I hope he will remain consistent and not change the rules of the game once again. If he's made this statement, I will hold him to his word. I will take this issue to the party and deal with it there."

The PN's Executive Council is set to meet this week to discuss the crisis, which is likely to lead to an early election given the government's one-seat majority unless an unlikely compromise is reached.

In a 90-minute press conference yesterday, however, Dr Debono insisted he would not resign and nor would he support the Nationalist Party unless Dr Gonzi stepped down as leader. "It is Dr Gonzi who should resign... I will support anyone else to lead the party," he said.

The Prime Minister says he will not accede to Dr Debono's demands and will only step down if he believes it is in the national interest.

However, although Dr Gonzi says he will do everything possible to avoid an election due to the severe economic challenges posed by the coming year, he acknowledges he will have no option but to accept "that an election would have to be called" if there is a loss of confidence in the government of the day.

Labour leader Joseph Muscat yesterday wrote to Speaker Michael Frendo asking him to urgently reconvene Parliament to determine whether the government still enjoys a Parliamentary majority in view of political developments.

Dr Gonzi will this morning address a pre-planned dialogue meeting in Marsaxlokk, which forms part of Dr Debono's constituency, where he is expected to receive a show of support.

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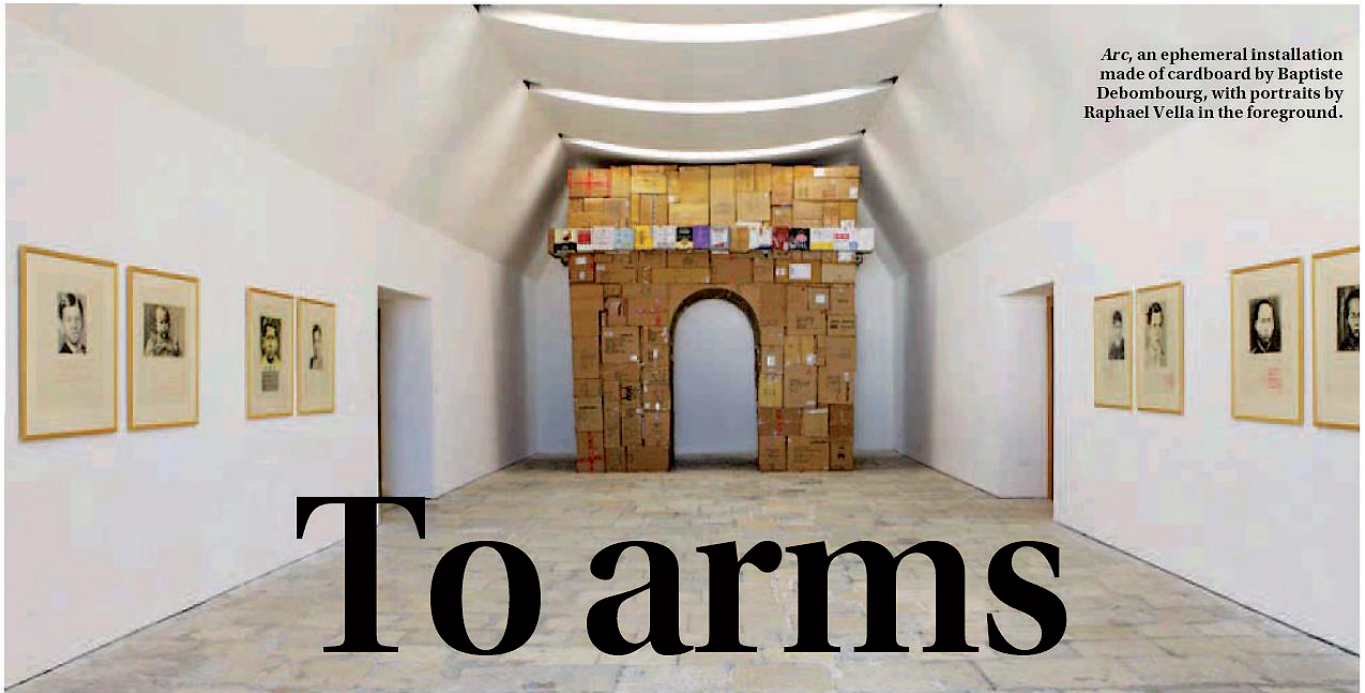


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Arc, an ephemeral installation made of cardboard by Baptiste Debombourg, with portraits by Raphael Vella in the foreground.



To arms

Aux Armes is an exhibition of contemporary drawings, installation and sculpture at St James Cavalier, Valletta, open until next Sunday. *The Sunday Times* speaks to Maltese artist **RAPHAEL VELLA** and French artist **BAPTISTE DEBOMBOURG**.

The exhibition has a revolutionary title, Aux Armes (To Arms). This is a clear reference to La Marseillaise, the French National Anthem. What does the title Aux Armes mean to you as an artist?

RV: I think the title is deliberately ambiguous. On one hand, it cannot avoid being identified with a kind of irony. To fight or even die for a cause sounds unrealistic in the western world.

One cannot help thinking there exists no ideology sacred enough to merit such an undertaking, especially one that involves a revolution on a grand scale.

On the other hand, as we have seen in the recent Arab Spring, the dream of being able to define one's own future as a people is far from extinct, especially in oppressive circumstances.

I think these dual connotations are evident in the texts that accompany several of my drawings in this exhibition and also in the fact that practically all the imagery in my drawings is appropriated from shallow photographic and internet sources and yet is ultimately manipulated manually.

BD: The title clearly refers to a collective demand for freedom, to the idea that people must be responsible for their own destiny, rather than a third party, politics, economy, and so on.

There is a notion of the 'hand-made', of people who free themselves from all forms of authoritarianism. Today it is important to take a global view of all the constraints imposed on us by society and to focus on more human and environmentally friendly fundamentals.

Do political and other current events often affect your work? Do you think the work you are showing in Aux Armes has been influenced by any historical or political undercurrents?

RV: A number of themes have recurred in many of my works over

the past decade or so, like the use of texts and books, politics and the media, the veil or other forms of hidden things, including self-censorship.

In *Aux Armes*, I decided to show some examples from a series of works related to the burka, especially as we encounter it in commercial sites on the internet, and another series of portraits of boys who grew up to become famous presidents, terrorists, popes and other religious leaders.

I showed these *Big Boys* in Tokyo in 2011. All these individuals look quite innocent as children. One of the portraits shows a very young Kim Jong-Il with his statement: "Great ideology creates great

"It is important to take a global view of all the constraints imposed on us by society and to focus on more human, environmentally friendly fundamentals"

times". He died one week into the St James Cavalier exhibition.

BD: Of course, I am a citizen before being an artist, and the Arab Spring we are experiencing nowadays is a good thing for our world, because people are rediscovering their freedom... but it isn't over yet unfortunately.

The series of drawings 'Tradition of Excellence' (drawings of weapons that have architectural plans on the inside instead of their regular mechanisms) were started in Sarajevo, Bosnia Herzegovina during an year-long artistic residence.

When I came into contact with people and places that had experienced the war directly, I felt like expressing something more optimistic and also reflect about this silent and traumatic violence of the past. But this residency was, above all, a human experience: it led to a series of drawings and other works.

I think an artist should confront different realities. Sometimes the comfort of the gallery or the museum is not conducive to creative things. It's good to leave its boundaries; in my view, this is the role of art in society.

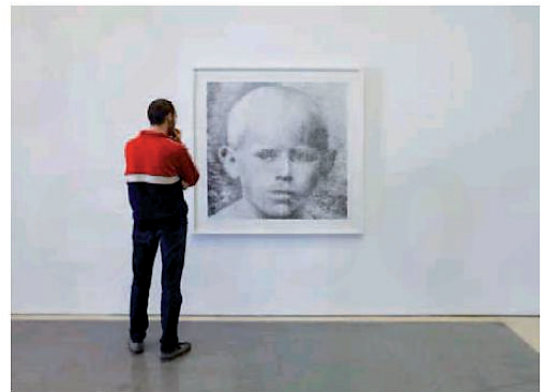
St James Cavalier, is itself a historic location with a military function. What do you think about the venue in relation to your work? Was it difficult to integrate your work in the Upper Galleries of St James?

RV: The military function of the building became incorporated into the exhibition fabric. Baptiste and I conceived each room in the Upper Galleries as an aesthetic whole, with works by both artists coming together to provide visitors with a sequence of works that generate conversations among themselves.

We had a preliminary plan about the layout, but this was revised once we had all the works on site. One could say each piece has a specific function and reason for being in that particular area of the galleries.

BD: The idea of exhibiting our work in such a historic and prestigious place represented a very interesting opportunity for our works. I think we wanted to respond indirectly to the political baggage carried by such a site. This functioned very well. Our works inscribed themselves in this history of power and also expressed a liberty that transcends this power.

Working in tandem with another artist is always a challenge. What were your experiences of this challenge in the context of Aux Armes?



Karol, graphite on paper, by Raphael Vella.

RV: I feel there is an affinity between some of Baptiste's works and mine, and this is what led me to invite him to come here and participate in a joint exhibition with me.

I have produced works that referred to weaponry in the past, so I was naturally very interested in his *Tradition of Excellence* series.

I think all the work in the exhibition – both Baptiste's and mine – deals with power and how we come to terms with it.

For instance, the power of social institutions, the power of political discourse, or the power of commerce.

Then there is the book I designed for the exhibition, which has a sort of flip book concept, and texts by Clare Azzopardi and Anais Delmas. So, actually, the exhibition also engaged other creative people.

BD: There were many challenges. First, the most challenging question was how to bring together the work of two artists in such a way that would not give the members of the public the impression that they were entering a duel between two artists.

Collaborating with Vella was a pleasure because the exhibition came together in a true artistic

exchange of ideas, which is extremely rare nowadays because many artists are very individualistic.

Secondly, St James Cavalier director Chris Gatt supported us a lot and allowed us a lot of freedom, a sign of trust and respect in our regard. I think we had all the right elements to realise a beautiful project.

Once the exhibition is set up, it doesn't belong to us any longer, it lives without us. It's up to the audience to judge.

What other plans do you have for the near future?

RV: I am planning a solo show abroad this year, and will participate in a collective exhibition of artists' books that will tour the US and the UK.

I am also looking forward to an exhibition of emerging artists that I will curate this summer, and the publication of some texts and catalogues I have been working on for some time.

BD: I am planning several personal exhibitions in Paris, Cologne and Quebec, as well as various collective events with other international artists.

In art, as in a revolution, one must strike while the iron is hot.