

## ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT PHOTOGRAPHY



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Trinity



# Photography and timelessness

Photography is a medium that sometimes acts like a time machine.

**Joseph Agius** talks to photographer **NICKY CONTI** about her current exhibition, *Memories of My Island*, at the Malta Postal Museum

**JA:** American photographer Paul Strand once said: “The artist’s world is limitless. It can be found anywhere, far from where he lives or a few feet away. It is always on his doorstep.” Is this the philosophy you follow? Is there material worth investigating just outside one’s home, besides the abundance of subject matter within the domestic walls?

**NC:** Yes, it is a philosophy I follow; however, the question with me is, where is home? Having lived away from ‘my island’ for over 17 years, I struggle to consider Malta as home, and yet, when I talk to strangers and my friends in the States, I always refer to Malta as ‘home’ or at least say, ‘I’m going back (to visit) home’. I guess I will always consider Malta my home country since it’s the place I’ve lived the longest in my life so far, especially having lived in three different countries ever since I left in 2005.

Photography heightens my sense of sight and observation. I never take anything I see in the streets for granted, especially in New York, which is where I’ve been living for the past 10 years. Fun fact: we have a ‘safety’ catch phrase in New York which goes: “If you see something, say some-

thing”. In my case, if I see something, I capture it. New York provides me with a visual playground the minute I step out of my apartment in Queens.

It’s where I started street photography, and four years later, the City and its boroughs still enchant me as I continue to photograph urban scenes in a creative way. Visiting Malta to be with my family gives me the opportunity to rediscover places, buildings, streets I knew and took for granted as a child, teenager and 20-year-old. I see ‘my island’ with both a native and tourist eye as old familiar places present themselves in a new light.

**JA:** I feel that you almost effortlessly seek pattern and geometry in your compositions, in much the same way as photographers Paul Strand, André Kertész, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Lucien Clergue. The audience is invited to walk into the picture. Are these photographers role models? Any other photographers you care to mention?

**NC:** They are all photographers I hugely admire, and among many others there are a few who have greatly influenced my work. Primarily, there’s my first street photography tutor,

Alan Schaller, a young and now world-renowned London-based street photographer. I had noticed his work on Instagram back in 2018, and in October that year he advertised a weekend course in New York. I was the first to sign up. Alan was an eye-opener. His tutorship and passion for street photography came at a time when I was still trying to find the ‘voice’ in my vision. I still apply the same capturing and editing techniques I learnt from him.



*I’m scared of losing sight of what constitutes our Maltese heritage and culture*

I’m also a big fan of Ray Metzker who is particularly known for his photos of Philadelphia and Chicago between the 1950s and 1960s. I learnt about him when a critic once compared my photography to Metzker’s for the

use of high contrast and chiaroscuro effect in urban settings. I was immediately drawn to Metzker’s work and have been inspired ever since.

Last but not least is our own Guido Stilon. I discovered Stilon through Magna Zmien back in early 2020. I wasn’t in Malta at the time, but my dad was lucky enough to see the exhibition at the Malta Postal Museum in Valletta just before lockdown. I still have a copy of the catalogue which I treasure. Stilon’s photos are compelling narratives of our society back in the 1950s and 1960s. I admire his eye for architecture and urban spaces, use of light and the framing of individuals and people in the streets.

**JA:** The title of the exhibition *Memories of My Island* indicates a remembering, a rekindling. In your words: “Memories are never one hundred per cent accurate. We only remember what was significant to us at the time, heightening certain details and dimming others”. Is this exhibition therefore about selective amnesia, as the “forgotten” parts of the memory are concealed by “dark shadows, negative space and silhouettes?” Being away from the island for a long time, does the

act of coming back to actually revisit the backdrops of those memories lead to disappointment as time tends to degrade cherished memories? Does the stark reality of the country scare you?

**NC:** My island’s identity lies in the centuries-old streets, houses and historical places. This identity forms my own. It is what shapes the way I see myself and the world. The ever-growing soulless and sometimes senseless construction is eroding our true and unique identity. One can argue that I’m using negative space and shadows to mask the encroaching dissonant, stark modern buildings. At the same time, I’m being selective in the memories I want to recreate and remember. I’m scared of losing sight of what constitutes our Maltese heritage and culture. This fear instigates me to grab my camera and wander around capturing sights I recognise and recollect from my earlier years. In doing so, I feel I accomplish two things: rekindling my Maltese identity and immortalising typical local street scenes in a photograph.

**JA:** You portray people in silhouette; their anonymity, however, adds greatly to the



Market Day

narrative and magical quality of the pieces. It feels like you need to 'silence' humanity, even if reality is noisy, like in your photo of what looks like a village market. Am I off the mark?

NC: I like using alternative ways to capture humans in everyday street scenes. I challenge myself to create magical moments out of the ordinary by experimenting with different angles, perspectives and finding geometric patterns in which to frame people in a scene. At times, I place a person centre stage, like in *City Center* (pun intended, or not!) as well as *The Staircase*, while in other photos people become the backdrop, just like in *Market Day*. I don't like disrupting the moment by either asking or making people aware that I'm photographing. It's also because I'm not asking for their permission that I utilise back-lighting, silhouetting and shadowing to anonymise them.

of *Vanishing Valletta* an urban landscape photo documentary since it depicts the city's state as it is. I find this similar to Fred Lyon's photos of San Francisco and Berenice Abbott's photos of Manhattan. I wouldn't consider these as portraiture photography necessarily since the void landscapes are the main subjects here, not people.



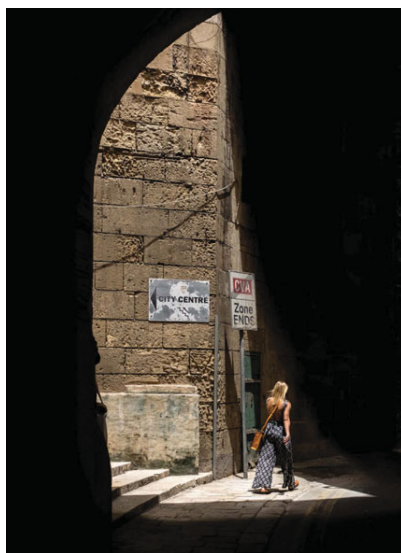
**I challenge myself to create magical moments out of the ordinary**

On the other hand, photojournalism puts people in focus and captures them in the heat of an occurring moment, such as protests, wars, events, ceremonies. Last but not least, I would classify anthropological and social photo documentaries as a portraiture aspect of street photography. Guido Stilon and Joseph Darmanin ('Gululu') were masters at this. They both observed and photographed everyday lives of Maltese people in the streets. In doing so, they articulated facial expressions, fashion, gestures, body language as well as social behaviour. They are also historians in many respects, as were Vivian Maier, Robert Frank and Gordon Parks in the United States.

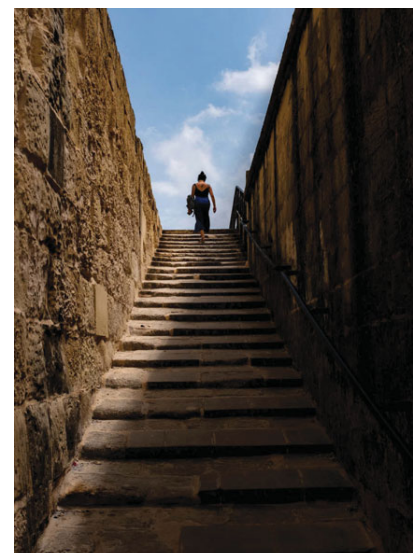
JA: When one mentions street photography as a Maltese genre, one is immediately reminded of David Pisani, the photographer-artist who documented Valletta for almost three decades. One could say that this seminal documentation of the gentrification of our capital city can be defined as a portrait of sorts. When does street photography become portraiture?

NC: There's more than one facet to street photography. The one I pursue is more along the lines of fine art; it focuses on the play of light in harmony with architecture, street and urban spaces, creating a unique and contemporary visual. I would describe David Pisani's collection

JA: Valletta is a city of grids and patterns; New York City, the city which has been your home for the last years, has also a grid-



City Center



The Staircase

like structure. What other parallels photographically do you find? Are the two cities both photogenic and *prima donnas*?

NC: Short answer, yes, both cities are photogenic *prima donnas*, and despite their grid-like structures they are completely different in many ways. Valletta offers honey-coloured, centuries-old, baroque style stone buildings, which are round and stubby in shape and size, while Manhattan is mainly made of modern, tall and skinny skyscrapers that cast endless shadows. Most of these are made of glass, which bounces off a softer and mellow sunlight onto the streets and a light which is different from the stark harsh Mediterranean sunlight.

Unlike Malta, which basks in the sun most of the year, New York changes every season. The winters are special. They bring along fresh snow falls which take the edge off the City and turn it into a winter-white wonderland, perfect for monochrome captures. The subway in New York is just another ball game. I spend hours underground photographing passengers, trains, anything that moves under the cold neon lights which serve as perfect key lights. The people in the streets are the same but different. There are more people in Manhattan so it's also more challenging to photograph since I shy away from crowds and look out for single individuals.

I generally apply the same techniques in capturing and editing images when wandering about both cities, however, I'm a different photographer; in Valletta I'm a romantic nostalgic expat, in New York I'm an adventurous solitary soul. Whenever I'm travelling to other countries and cities, I become a curious street cat, nourishing and feasting on the novelty that meets my eye.

*Memories of My Island*, hosted at the Malta Postal Museum, Valletta, is on until August 13. Opening hours are Monday to Friday between 10am and 4pm and Saturdays between 10am to 2pm. The exhibition is supported by Malta Postal Museum and iLab Photo Ltd. Entrance is free.