



An archaeology of belonging

Coveted by international investors and collectors, Maltese artist **Goxwa Borg's** paintings exude a timeless quality. Fresh from another tour-de-force solo exhibition, the Paris-based artist meets **Warren Joseph Bugeja** to scratch beneath the surface of her oeuvre.

PHOTOS BY JEAN-LOUIS LOSI

Marilyn, 2014, 146x89cm (80M)

PHOTO BY JO ZHOU



**GOXWA'S BIO READS LIKE A FILM SCRIPT
HEMINGWAY MIGHT HAVE WRITTEN.**

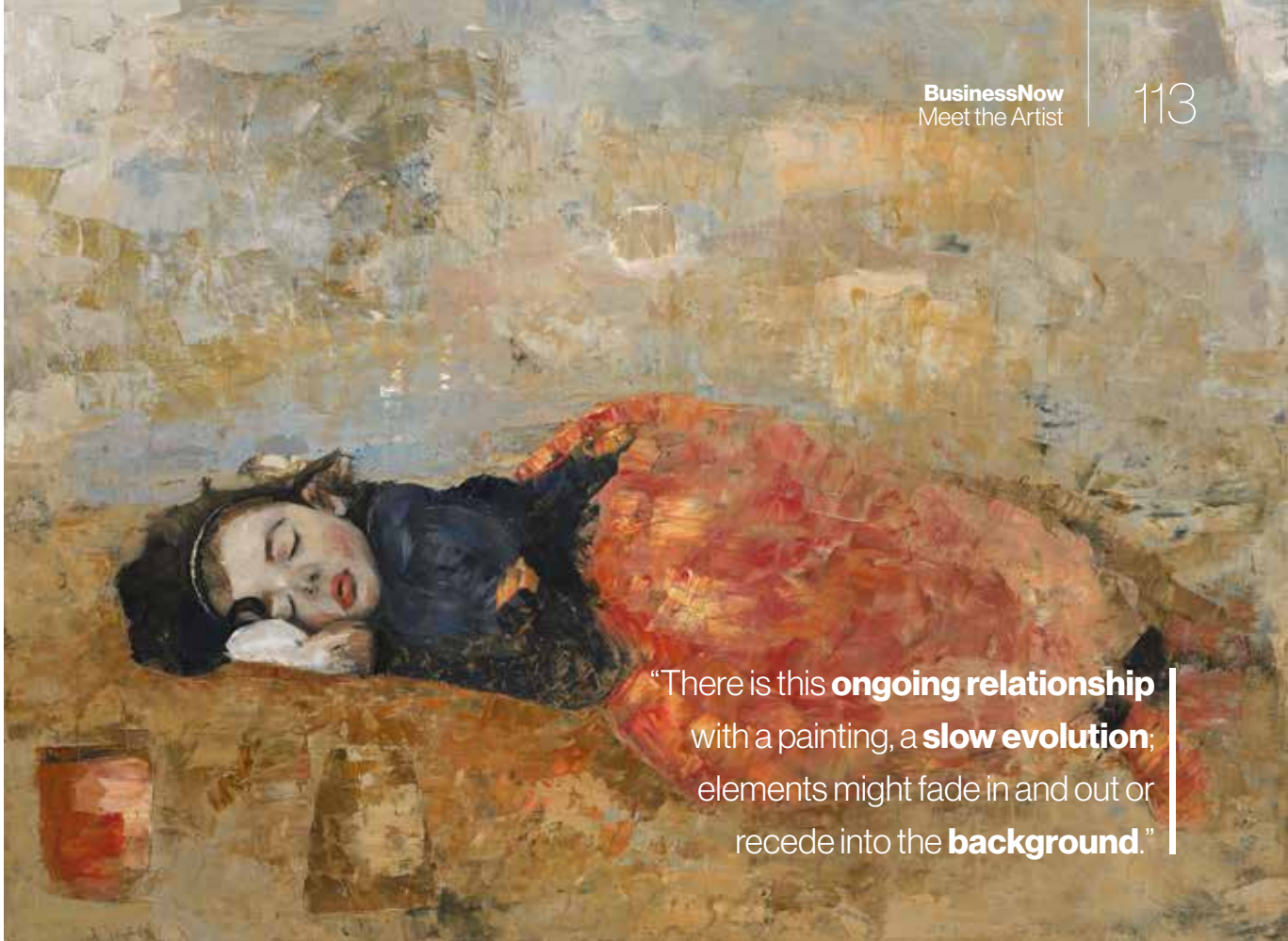
While training to be a professional athlete in a local hotel pool, she impressed both actor Robert Redford and director Alan Parker with her breaststroke, becoming the latter's village guide. When her Olympic dreams were scuppered due to a lack of government funding, Goxwa escaped a conservative future by shimmying down a rope made of knotted bed sheets to London, where she was accepted into St Martin's Art School.

Her love affairs and marriages were all to men of science. "I need facts", she says "intellectual support to balance my interior world". In her 20s, in between throwing great parties and waiting on fancy tables, Goxwa studied directing at Emerson College, where she met Dario Fo and later worked on a documentary about the Amazon Forest. Boston and Manhattan were her next ports of call. There, she assisted in directing plays at Huntington Theatre and the American Repertoire Theatre for 10 years, whilst she experimented with art. Torn between the two, she

eventually chose the language of painting "because it was stronger inside of me." Goxwa moved to Paris, where she won a scholarship for a year at the Cité des Arts in 1993.

Goxwa's introduction to the world of art was through her nose. In the 1960s, Strada Stretta, her Valletta childhood address, was a visceral, bohemian world of live theatricals, street dancing and laughter, brawling seamen, and waitresses of easy virtue. She was sent off to boarding school, where a novel smell prompted her five-year-old self to investigate its source. Following the wafting, pungent scent of oil paint, she espied, beyond the slightly ajar door of a cell, a nun dressed all in white, painting a portrait of the Virgin on a wall.

This scene, imprinted in the impressionable young girl's imagination, might be the reason why today, the only painting she possesses of her own work features the same subject matter. Titled 'Madonna ta' Giuseppi', it is one of her early works, and was created as a dialogue between Goxwa and her cousin, Giuseppe. The painting immediately found a



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Milly's World, 97x130cm, oil and wax on canvas

buyer, but the night before they came to collect it, the artwork appeared to the artist in a dream, urging her, “do not sell me” – and so, she listened.

Listening is what Goxwa (pronounced Joshwa, the old Maltese name for Josephine) does a lot of. She creates from silence. Beginning by painting all her canvases black, she watches and waits for form to emerge from nothingness. Sometimes, a distinct or abstract figure rises from the shadows.

“There is this ongoing relationship with a painting, a slow evolution; elements might fade in and out or recede into the background,” she

explains. Some of Goxwa's early work has the vivid quality of a Pompeian fresco; walls that tell tales, revealing some details and obscuring others under the flaky passage of time. The protagonists in these paintings meet your gaze with the intensity of a Russian icon. Nowadays, she says her art is “more grounded” and less transitory, although a leitmotif runs through everything that she does. “Once you leave your homeland you will always be a stranger to the familiar.”

In her landscapes, particularly her more recent ‘Red House’ series, there is this mythical longing for Ithaca, the birthplace of the eternal wanderer Odysseus, an Ithaca of the imagination, one, according to the Greek poet Cavafy, that cannot be regained. Even though the red cupolas of the churches echo Maltese skylines, in truth, she does “not know where these landscapes come from. I love buildings on water, the magic in the reflection.” Tellingly, Goxwa shares, “I have to miss somebody to love him.” Absence looms large in her paintings.

Bathed in northern light reflected in from the large windows in her high-ceilinged Montparnasse atelier and home, once the studio of President Pompidou's favourite painter, Pierre Tal-Coat, Goxwa spends up to 10 hours a day painting. She will work on several paintings at once “like a dancer fencing”, waiting for each in turn to “talk to me”, often forgetting to eat and only prompted to do so by her husband who will gently push a plate of food in front of her as dusk falls. “I am obsessive about work. I get depressed if I don't paint. I try to paint each day, and if I don't, I do it in my mind,” she states emphatically.

Often, she listens to plays, music, or news on the radio. “Stories inspire me. Literature is like eating good food,” she says. Using a palette knife, she layers her canvases in thick impasto strokes of the quick-drying oil-and-wax-based medium she uses, building up volume in splotches of colour.



Red House, 146x114cm, 2024



Bull, 2019, 146X114cm (80F)

“Stories **inspire** me. Literature is like **eating good food.**”

The dramatic painting of a black bull, charging towards the viewer below a blood moon and a swathe of red cloud, symbolic perhaps of a muleta or the tragedy due to unfold, depicts a story inspired by news of a matador's death on the radio. A fervent advocate of animal rights, Goxwa wanted to portray the “bull as a hero, not a victim.” The painting now hangs on a close friend's wall in Gozo.

Another sad item of news, that of the body of a migrant Syrian boy washed ashore on a Greek beach, prompted the painting ‘Milly's World’, where a young girl wearing a costume whose hues have been lifted off the dead Syrian's clothes, lies on a similar beach, but with her mouth open breathing, because “this is what childhood should be like.”

It appears Goxwa's paintings belie their original sources, subverting hopelessness into hope, despair into beauty. Sitting opposite the artist, sipping banana smoothies in a hotel café, Goxwa exudes a rare humility that co-exists effortlessly with her natural sophistication. Behind her dark sunglasses and the smoke from the occasional cigarette, she has managed

to nurture a delicate naivety in all her songs of innocence and experience. The child is very much alive in the woman in front of me, which is perhaps why many of her figures are of young or teenage girls.

On an Egyptian sojourn, Goxwa fell in love with the timeless Fayum mummy portraits. A girl named Melissa, whose Mediterranean features are “the reincarnation of one of these Graeco-Roman portraits”, was her model between the ages of nine and 18. As it happens, Goxwa's Nile paintings were the making of her as an artist. A chance encounter in 1998 with Jean-Marie Felli, one of the most important art dealers in France, led to her portfolio finding a home in the prestigious Galerie de l'Europe on the Rue de Seine.

Still, despite being impressed with her technique and the ageless quality of her work, so different from the conceptual art being banded about at the time, she was not considered the right candidate for the then-upcoming Art Paris exhibition. That changed overnight however, when a member of the Art Paris board visited Galerie Felli prior to the make-or-break show, and was mesmerised by Goxwa's portfolio, choosing her over the selected contemporary artist.

Goxwa's reputation was sealed. From her first major show in 2001 in Paris to her dramatic opening at Axelle Fine Arts gallery in Soho in New York, as well as others in San Francisco and New Orleans, and her latest solo show at the Galerie Felli in the Marais this past June, her paintings sell like hotcakes.



Wild Flowers, 100x100cm

“Art is about **life** and **death**.
To be an artist is to **feel pain**.”

Across the pond, from 2000 until his death in 2015 in a hand-gliding accident, Bertrand Delacroix, her American art dealer, had an unwavering belief in her talent, which he carefully curated. One year, he instructed her to paint up to 70 paintings (which left her utterly exhausted), such was the demand for her work. Thanks to the determination of her Parisian and American art dealers, Goxwa's *oeuvre* commands five-digit price tags, which means she has many international collectors who see her art as an investment and snap it up before the paint has barely dried.

Goxwa has no say in how much an artwork is priced and only turns up to a vernissage or opening if it is in Paris. She paints for herself, only very rarely accepting commissions. However, because the prices of her art cannot go down, she has turned to a technique called *marouflage* to make her art more accessible to young collectors.

Marouflage, she explains, is a process that transforms part of a high-resolution digital print of an original painting onto a wooden panel and reworks it in oil and wax to create a singular work. With *marouflage*, she can set her own prices, as these do not compete with her paintings.

Our conversation returns to Goxwa's current odyssey to find her own 'red house' – a quest to replace her beloved atelier, which she will eventually have to give up once the lease is terminated. This weighs heavily on Goxwa's mind, and she tears up speaking about it, expressing that she will never be able to replicate the aura of that studio elsewhere.

She also talks lovingly of her long-time neighbour and mentor, the writer Robert (Bob) Wernick, known to locals as Monsieur Cent-trois Marches – the number of stairs he had to climb to reach his apartment. Bob famously interviewed Marilyn Monroe while eating ice-cream and riding a Ferris wheel. He wrote that 'Marilyn Monroe' was a character Norma Jean could switch off and on at will. Goxwa once painted the Marilyn Bob knew, a vulnerable artist but also not a victim. In the painting, there are intimations of impending mortality in Marilyn's wispy sensuality. Again, the red swathe features in the distance, seeping through the darkness. It was sold immediately.

“Art is about life and death. To be an artist is to feel pain,” Goxwa declares softly. Her paintings speak of the pain of separation, of revealing what lies beneath, constantly navigating against security to avoid complacency – certainly something this artist cannot be accused of. “Otherwise, you would be repeating. To create is to be always on the edge; a painting never feels finished. I'm always doubting, even as a painting is leaving the studio, perhaps I could have done a better job.” **BN**

Find out more about the artist's work on www.goxwa.com



PHOTO BY JOZHOU