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Decadence, Now, Malta Society of Arts,
Palazzo De La Salle, Valletta, 11-31 May 2023

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Moving through and beyond the *fin de siècle*, *Decadence, Now* was comprised of a multidimensional display of artistic works, paraphernalia, artefacts from museums, galleries and private collections, and contemporary art. This was accompanied by musical performances in the fashion of salon gatherings, featuring songs and operatic extracts from Italy, Germany, and France, as well as the premiere of a song cycle by Karl Fiorini, composed in response to the music of the *Belle Époque*. Curated by Andrew Borg Wirth and featuring art by Luke Azzopardi, Andrew Borg Wirth, Maria Theuma, Michael Zerafa, and Rebecca Bonaci, the exhibition considered ‘decadence’ as a unifier of numerous artefacts across a breadth of styles, epochs, and subject matter, while foregrounding the curatorial process as an artistic manoeuvre in its own right.

The array of exhibits and performances juxtaposed the historic with the contemporary, the local with the foreign, and the visual with the performative, and invited viewers to reconsider the legacy of *fin de siècle* decadence for a twenty-first century audience. The central concern of this exhibition was always in focus – in an age of virtual reality and media-saturated culture, what reaction does decadence provoke now?

Occupying the earlier spaces in the exhibition were artefacts dating mostly from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, of European origin, and centred on representations of mysticism, decay, and degeneration, with a particular interest in the *femme fatale* motif and the trope of human life as a balancing act between life and death. These concepts were well delineated in a series of artworks, including Félicien Rops’s *La Buveuse d’Absinthe* (1865) and *Le Vice Suprême* (1884), Man Ray’s portraits of Luisa Casati (1922 and 1935), and Giuseppe Cali’s *Woman Carried by the Sea* (1900), and which functioned as a prologue to the ensuing exhibits. An array of historical artefacts including a first edition copy of Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* (1891), pamphlets from the former

Malta Royal Opera House, a late nineteenth-century day jacket, a fan belonging to the Empress Zita of the Hapsburg empire, and issues from the Catalan literary publication *Pèl & Ploma*, highlighted characteristically decadent concepts. Serving as a connective thread between these exhibits and displayed sequentially between the artefacts were illustrator and tattooist Rebecca Bonaci's reactions to these items. She also illustrated the poster for the exhibition.

The experimental artworks in the following spaces offered new perspectives on the lasting influence of decadence on modern culture, drawing on the concepts of decline and decay as a driving force for self-expression, and exploring the extent to which decadence moves freely across media and centuries. Mike Zerafa's *Head on a Plate* (2023), a mirrored installation suspended in a curtained-off enclosure, is a contemporary take on the symbol of Salomé from Richard Strauss's 1905 opera of the same name, infamous for the dissonant chord heard a few moments before Salomé is killed and echoing the monstrous degradation to which she has descended. The installation, which the viewer can step inside, quite literally invites audiences to immerse themselves in the moment of decapitation. In another room, Maria Theuma's *For its Sake* (2023), braided hair woven to spell the word *Pèl*, was hung adjacent to green velvet partitions on which bird feathers, bones, and tufts of human hair are presented as remnants on display. This installation paid homage to the hair and feathers of the *Pèl & Ploma* journal on display in the preceding room, envisioning the transformation of the literary into the visual.

The last two reactionary artworks are meditations on personhood and the self – Luke Azzopardi's *Heat You Can't Beat I and II* (2023) and Andrew Borg Wirth's *Thirty* (2023). Drawing inspiration from Empress Zita's fan as an object that morphs according to the identity of whoever holds it, Azzopardi's two portraits personify the dichotomous and changing attitudes of character. Similarly, Borg Wirth's installation, motivated by Man Ray's hazy 1935 portrait of Luisa Casati as she appears in motion, reckons with perception and the modes in which something may be seen or understood. The assortment of iPhone covers form a refracting kaleidoscopic three-dimensional self-portrait and serve as a fitting culmination to a project that searches for the

timelessness and the persistence of decadence in the twenty-first century, tracing the endurance of fin-de-siècle arts and attitudes within a time that might seem decadent, now.