



VALLETTA CONTEMPORARY  
ARTIST INTERVIEWS:

# Carlos Coronas

**Ann Dingli (AD):** Before we discuss *Territorios Soñados*, can you talk about how you came to use light in your work. Your early work has been described as chromatically-focused – how did colour progress into luminosity?

**Carlos Coronas (CC):** I have always been interested in the integration of the work with the architectural spaces, or the way a work of art inhabits a certain space. From a formal point of view, I have therefore developed my work in an expansive, or invasive, way, if you like. But that doesn't just refer to colour, but the rest of the formal elements. The planes of colour and the lines or the fundamental gestures in a painting gave way very quickly to elements that were becoming independent of the basic structure of the square frame. When we stand before a painting or a conventional sculpture, communication depends on the attitude of the viewer – the viewer's perspective directs the work. With light irradiation, light travels in space and acquires an active role in this process. The use of light has allowed me to interact in a double directional sense, similar to the way luminous advertisement signs work in large cities. The light of colour transects space and catches the viewer's gaze.

**AD:** Can you also describe how your practice moved from painting into three-dimensional work. Is it accurate to say that you moved from 'painting with light' to 'sculpting with light'?

**CC:** I'm not sure that would be the exact expression. Without light there is no vision, and therefore whenever there is a visual work of whatever category, there must be light to be contemplated. The art of the late twentieth century has broken with all the conventions of the nineteenth-century, as well as the type-castings of the plastic arts. Therefore, to speak of painting or sculpture no longer has any transcendence in a strict sense. We could say that my work is pictorial on a conceptual level, although in reality it occupies the three-dimensional space that becomes the true support of the work. The difference is that in painting, three-dimensionality is simulated, as in a *trompe l'oeil*. But I do not see that difference to be transcendent. With three-dimensionality what has been gained is that you can inhabit the painting, you can circulate around it and feel the way

in which the presence of these species of luminous creatures and their actions invade the neutral and inert environment of architecture. They appropriate that environment by impregnating it with their same chromatic quality.

**AD:** The neon tubes used to build the structures in *Territorios Soñados* are simultaneously angular and fluid – angular in their shape and fluid in their pulsating, modulating lighting sequences. Could this contrast represent the built environments we live in, versus the organic territories our bodies occupy?

**CC:** That is one way of seeing it. I had never thought of it that way, although I am interested in a work open to multiple readings. This angle-fluid duality is also present in the relationship between the geometric exterior and the random and chaotic interior of electrical cables. This contrast represents order and chaos, something that keeps together with something that changes or transforms, a coexistence between structure and change. The world we live in is governed by chaos, by totally unpredictable phenomena that, at the same time, endow it with meaning. Life is a fight against entropy, understood as the degree of disorder in nature, something we can all observe in ordinary life. It is a way of representing those contradictions of the world. When I see all these tangles of cables and electrical connectors necessary for the geometric and rational structure to illuminate, I think of the drawings of the neural systems made by the Spanish scientist Santiago Ramón y Cajal. They are fantastic drawings that show us how all our neural systems are apparently anarchic in terms of their organisation; and how our rational and ordered world (like the Platonic solids from which my structures originate, for example), arise from neural connections that are completely entangled.

**AD:** This exhibition is concerned with 'territories' – the occupation of space is tangibly felt through the scale of the works. They fill the gallery entirely – suspending from the air, in some cases almost touching the ceiling. What does this seizing of space represent?

**CC:** I entitle my luminous sculptures *Lampyridae* (The scientific name for fireflies). The fireflies are coleoptera that use light as a claim – in this case a claim of sexual attraction between the females and males of the species. My sculptures are reminiscent of zoomorphic forms. Sometimes they are exempt, separated from the whole, and sometimes they are in a kind of symbiosis of

organisms that have migrated here from different points to form a macro-organism. Constantly interfering with their own modulation of the light, the *Lampyridae* change their luminous intensity through electronic systems in cycles of several seconds – regular variations of a metabolism that powerfully evoke the slow breathing of hibernating or sleeping beings. The main theme of my works is the perverse use of beauty by power. Light also represents the issuers of mass communication and advertising. Like fireflies, the luminous signs of the big cities, television commercials, or computer screens use coloured light as a claim – an invasive light that creates an image that is evocative and beautiful. Here we're discussing a malicious and interesting beauty exploited by power, be it economic, political or religious...

**AD:** *Territorios Soñados* showed at the Centro Niemeyer in Spain before coming to VC. You've made some changes – the reflective stainless sheets have been omitted, the composition of the structures themselves have changed. Can you talk a bit about these changes and whether there is a narrative reasoning behind your edit.

**CC:** In this exhibition I wanted to show, in addition to the large format pieces, a new series of drawings made expressly for Malta. I call them Grand Harbour because in all of the drawings' backgrounds there is a view of Valletta taken from the sea – always as a subtle and slightly enigmatic image, barely recognisable. At times they are even rotated because I don't intend them to function as real images, but rather as a kind of mental substrate – something that persists in our consciousness. What are the thoughts – or dreamed ideas – of the territory that those who come to the island have for the first time, whether they are invaders, immigrants, or simply tourists?

At the Niemeyer Centre I used reflective platforms to create a metaphorical image of islets or territories on which the pieces were reflected. The metaphor is the same as in the drawings. Light, on the other hand, moves in space, transcends boundaries and borders, provokes mirages and creates optical illusions – each of which can be seen from the other side of the wall, in all their splendour.

**AD:** In relation to Malta and its geo-political history, is

*Territorios Soñados* commenting on 'borrowed' space? Your structures are permeable – does this reflect Malta's eternal position as a host for passers-through – whether visitors, colonisers or immigrants?

**CC:** Malta is a territory through which multiple cultures have passed. It is an island with a strategic and privileged position within the Mediterranean. It is attractive from many angles, yearned for over millennia by conquerors, tourists, immigrants; defended by its inhabitants with walls and complex defensive devices. The dreamed territories, with their coloured lights, represent all those illusions and evocative ideas. They are the idealised vision of the one who wants to arrive, of the one who is outside. They represent real spaces like Malta, or mental ones like Shangri-La, utopias where chimeras are deposited of something that is desired. The United States for wetbacks, Europe for Syrian refugees and African immigrants, or the imaginary islands drawn on the maps of the ancient navigators.



Los territorios soñados  
Centro Cultural Internacional Óscar Niemeyer,  
Avilés, Asturias, Spain, 2016

# Eberhard Bosslet

**Ann Dingli (AD):** Your work is largely characterised by the industrial/commercial materials chosen to create it. Can you talk about how you select your materials – how do you source them, what research do you do to understand which materials will give you the physical attributes you desire?

**Eberhard Bosslet (EB):** My choice of material depends on my interests. My interests are motivated by states, circumstances and processes to which I react with sensory reflexes, or which elicit a critical interest. Since our world – a man-made world – is made up of profane things and materials, which stimulate and excite particular circumstances and conditions, so my materials and methods of application in my art are equally profane. I am interested in the construction of buildings and their accompanying circumstances, of private, public, indoor and outdoor spaces.

**AD:** How is your process affected by the materials you work with? Does their weight, the tools you need to use to manipulate them, and the space you need to contain the materials inform the ideas in your mind when you set out to create a composition?

**EB:** My artistic plot is based on the phenomena that I want to engage myself with, and those which I believe will be of interest to viewers. I always try to keep it simple. Everyone can do what I do. Often skilled craftsmen can do it better than I can, which is why I let them help me out. The size and the weight of the materials I use does not matter to me when I'm making decisions. What needs to be done, should and can be realised. I do not think about artistic compositions as such.

**AD:** Your show at VC includes three works. What was your selection criteria for the exhibition?

**EB:** Since 1985, I've had a set of works that I am able to produce all over the world within a short time, with the help of sponsors. Mostly, I can borrow free technical equipment and materials on site wherever I am. If the created work cannot be sold within the exhibition time, the loaned systems and materials will go back to the lender. Drawings, photos and parts-lists make it possible for me to build a similar work later in another location. It is comparable to a musical composition or a theatre play – the works can be reinterpreted and thus re-performed.

My selection criteria was formed on the basis of what could be procured in Malta and then technically and formally realised in the premises of VC.

**AD:** A lot of the work you create is site-specific, does the work you are showing in Valletta take on a new dimension owing to its new spatial context?

**EB:** Only one work in the exhibition will be site specific. It is installed in the exhibition space, so it absorbs the dimension of the space and restructures it. It will be a work from the group of supporting measures, using steel props and building construction panels. The second work I'm showing will use decorative street-lighting elements I've borrowed from a local provider. This work is therefore indirectly site specific. In the third work, I use polystyrene fish coolers and packing tapes which I looked for in Malta. This work is also, therefore, only indirectly related to the location.

**AD:** Malta at the moment is going through a construction overhaul. There is a big national debate on the over-development of the islands, the eradication of our natural environment and heritage. Do you think that this public discourse will feed into the viewers' reading of your work in light of its chosen materials?

**EB:** No, I visited Malta for a week a year ago, and now am only staying for another week. That's not enough time to develop a truly Malta-specific work.

**AD:** Often you return the materials used in your works to their original context. Do you feel as though this process is an extension of the artworks themselves? Is the environment and its conservation a theme that you would like viewers to consider when experiencing your art?

**EB:** Yes, borrowing and returning as a resource-conserving aspect is a conceptual component of my actions. And, yes, if the viewer reaches an understanding of my work, I would agree if this theme forms part of that understanding.

**AD:** Finally, do you think you will be exploring the islands in search of new materials for future works?

**EB:** No, as I said, I would have to be here for longer.

# Roxman Gatt

**Ann Dingli (AD):** Before we discuss the work that was selected to be featured in VC's first group show, *here&now*, can you talk about your art practice in broad terms. Your portfolio is distinctly multidisciplinary – what are the main themes you strive to address, and do you have a preferred media?

**Roxman Gatt (RG):** Love and loneliness have been two ongoing themes that have significantly influenced my work. I am most often looking at the artist in the studio – usually alone – with the only human interaction being via taps on the keyboard. In 2015, I created a video piece reflecting on a realisation I had once in the studio, where I recognised that I was spending more time in contact with my swivel chair rather than with my then-partner. This prompted me to create a piece of work where I was having a 'moment' – writhing up my swivel chair in the studio as if we were the two lovers (*Sexual Healing*, 2015, video, 4:13mins).

A new body of work that I am working on at the moment continues to look into these themes and is inspired by a tragic love story – a car crash. The work will somehow manifest in the form of a dismantled car. It is examining the humanisation and interaction with consumer objects. This work uses the consumer object to delve into themes that relate to the real and the fake; fiction and non-fiction; dreaming and reality. These notions and provocations have evolved through a series of poems and texts that discuss love and the pain it brings. It is a depiction of contemporary love and its complexities. The work is vulnerable and intimate, drawn from the personal, yet it is universal and relevant to anyone who has loved, been loved and is just trying to figure out why love hurts.

I want to make these texts tangible, visible. My praxis exploits various media depending on what seems fit for the emotions being evoked. For instance, at the moment I am looking into wax as a material, since it is very symbolic of the flesh. I am also inspired by hyper-real wax sculptures, and how, as [Umberto] Eco explains in his book *Faith in Fakes*, the hyper-real wax sculpture becomes more real than the original, which becomes somehow invisible.

This work explores what's real and what's fake and the close proximity between the two. Soft and hard are two words that often resonate within the work, and also help determine the choice of materials to work with. I am making use of wax, which in my case symbolises the softness of the flesh, and harsher materials such as the car components often made of steel that symbolise the pain and tragedies that contemporary love brings with it. Recently, movement and dance has become a crucial part of my practice and I feel that it is mostly through this medium that I can truly and honestly express the work at its best.

**AD:** Your work has a very present and relevant relationship with the Internet and its users, which you very often describe as being unavoidable and prescriptive of the way of life of your generation. Can you expand on your relationship with the Internet and how it manifests in your work?

**RG:** I feel that there is a less obvious reference to the Internet as a subject in itself in my present work; this is not because it is not relevant to me now, but because it is part of our existence and it has become inbuilt within us. Everything I do is 95% connected to the Internet, and I guess that is how it gets manifested in the work as it is unavoidable. Like, for example, looking at social media where it can be seen both as a tool by the artist as well as an anxiety inducing organism.

**AD:** Your work *I Want 2 Protect U*, which was included in the *here&now* group show, seems to be a culmination of earlier videos in your portfolio – heightening your interrogation of female sexuality, vulnerability, power and lust. Can you describe how this work came to be and what you hope it will communicate to viewers?

**RG:** I was thinking a lot about how it seems and feels as if there is little difference between how we sometimes fetishise or consume an object, to how we fetishise or consume a human being. The desiring, possessing and the making of an icon, as well as the act of disposing, replacing or upgrading to a better version, sadly and even horrifically is at times uncanny. Humans don't come in latest models.

We are vulnerable and fragile, we want to protect our loved ones, yet sometimes it is from us that they need the protecting. It feels like we are born without the proper tools to live – we have been denied the instruction manual book at birth, and now we find ourselves a bit like lost wild animals, trying to navigate through all of these complexities that the world puts before us.

**AD:** Unlike many of your other videos, *I Want 2 Protect U* juxtaposes your own performance against an earthy, if desolate, natural landscape. What does this backdrop signify?

**RG:** I wanted the human to seem that it is being taken care of by mother earth, yet they still upset her and they are sad that they are doing so. However, they don't know otherwise, and despite wanting to show respect and love they end up injuring her and themselves.

**AD:** How relevant is a typical Maltese upbringing in relation to the reading of your work (fervently Catholic, patriarchal, community-driven). i.e. Does your work relate to the universal feminine persona, or feminine identity specifically in Malta?

**RG:** I would be lying if I had to say that there is no relation to this in my work. Being born in a very conservative and catholic country has impacted me as a human being as well as my work. The work has definitely changed throughout

the course of leaving the country and religion is not really a theme I find myself referencing in my work as much now – but that wasn't always the case. Societal norms, gender norms and the patriarchal system are unavoidable. They are important issues that I will continue to be aware and reference in my work as they are universal issues. However, I somehow find Malta more exciting if not more important as a place to bring my work and ideas to, as I still find it is still suffering greatly from certain inbuilt tropes concerning gender, sexuality and the patriarchal system in general.

**AD:** Your treatment of sexuality, physicality, language and profanity is prevalent in most of what you create, not least in your work for the Malta Pavilion at the 57th *Venice Art Biennale* (*Virgin Mary's Love Juice*, video, 1:18mins). In interviews about the work, you expressed trepidation about its reception with the Maltese public – were your concerns justified?

**RG:** Maltese people are still quite conservative when it comes to certain topics such as religion and sexuality. This work for some was too provocative and they weren't pleased about it at all. However, with the new legislations related to censorship, as well as the start of a new era for Malta's Contemporary Art scene, I think it came at just the right time! Some people were very against it, to the point of not wanting to be part of the *Biennale*. However, others saw its importance and relevance – they fought to have it shown there and that means everything to me.

**AD:** Do you feel the Contemporary Art scene in Malta is changing?

**RG:** Yes, I really do think that things have changed quite drastically within a very short period of time, there are a couple of really great people who have worked hard to put our country on the Contemporary Art world map, and I am hoping that these efforts will be amplified even more in the next couple of years. There is a lot of potential and I am very interested and excited by the idea of the younger generation setting afoot and making a mark in the local Contemporary Art scene.

**Ann Dingli (AD):** Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase, "the medium is the message" rings especially true with the introduction of new media around the 1960s. You, in fact, talk about the tools and technology of cinema and TV as equalisers between mainstream media and art. Until the advent of Video Art, artists had been breaking down traditional conventions in painting and sculpture in order to demystify the image of the artist and transform the role of the viewer. How does video, as a medium, figure in delivering this particular message (that the artist is no longer 'god', or to be revered)?

**Vince Briffa (VB):** Since its inception, video has been a problematic medium to define. In his book *Being & Time: The Emergence of Video Projection*, Marc Meyer describes video's enigmatic character and its unstable relationship with the plastic arts as one that "would connect it more appropriately to the temporal arts of music, dance, theater, literature or cinema". He explains that through a set of complicated electro-magnetic devices, "video is more an end than any one specific means; it is a series of electronic variations on an audio-visual theme that has been in continual progressive flux since its inception". When looking at the medium from the already established, plastic arts point of view, Meyer at the time of writing explains that "video's theoretical and practical possibilities are so inconceivably vast, its versatility so immeasurably profound and of such perplexing unorthodoxy, that even after a quarter of a century, the medium's defenders are still struck with vertiginous awe as if glimpsing the sublime".

In this light, it becomes rather clear why video, unlike many other mediums of creative expression, was practiced in mostly unorthodox ways. So much so, that in the 1960s and approximately the decade after, the art world was still trying to allocate it a suitable art-historical pigeonhole in order to make sense of what a relatively small group of artists – who understood the medium's intellectual and communication potential – were producing and showing on TV sets\*; the same devices that had by then become the most popular source of information and entertainment dissemination.



Virgin Mary's Love Juice, video, 00:01:18, 2017

It was, therefore, through this strange amalgamation of intellectual and increasingly political artistic practice, carried through this popular mass communication device, that Video Art practice deconstructed and dismantled the 'preciousness' of the art product, and, subsequently, the revered status of the artist.

\*The TV set and the vision monitor were the only means of dissemination of Video Art prior to the video projector, which was only developed in the late 1980s and popularised in the early 1990s.

**AD:** The use of sound and moving imagery in Video Art sought to eradicate conventions of meaning transferral between artist and viewer. Eventually, when Video Art became widely accepted within the gallery space, this dynamic was once again transformed. Do the works selected for *Electromorphologies* seek to capture that moment in time before Video Art was inducted into the mainstream gallery/museum experience?

**VB:** *Electromorphologies* brings together some of the earliest exponents of the moving image in Contemporary Art and presents works that precede Video Art's dispersion within the mainstream of the museum and gallery convention in the 1990s. The exhibition focuses on two areas of artistic concern and handpicks key works that manifest artists' engagement with the many layers of language – particularly those of a conceptual and linguistic nature. It also includes works that propose audio-visibility's aesthetic as a new language of creative expression.

This curatorial decision was taken in light of the fact that this exhibition was to be the first of its kind presented to a local public in Malta. The exhibition's body of work belongs to the experimental phases of Video Art when, even internationally, the work struggled to establish itself within the mainstream art scene. It certainly had little or no relevance to the local artistic scene of the time when it was being presented in the 1960s and 70s – so these specific parameters were key to the selection of works. Locally, Video Art started being practiced and exhibited towards the mid-to-late 1990s, when the genre had already somewhat taken form internationally.

**AD:** Aside from the influence of cinema and TV, did scenes from the news reportage of the time shape the way Video Art took course? With televisions in the average viewer's home showing scenes from high-profile assassinations (JFK, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, John Lennon, etc.), and politically motivated riots and demonstrations (Vietnam War, Berlin Wall), did emerging Video Artists induct the lexicon of real-life commentary into their work?

**VB:** Definitely. If we rewind some fifty years to the late 1960s, a time where Conceptual Art, Body Art, Arte Povera, Kinetic Art, and Minimalism had already been around for a decade, and where Installation Art was taking its form, the artist was now able to add another tool to his or her arsenal – the Sony Portapak. This combination of camera and portable recorder equipped the artist with a device that could record and instantaneously play back sound and vision, unshackled from the more expensive process of celluloid film which needed developing and projection. With the Portapak, the artist could not only speak with the same language of the journalist, but also blur the boundaries between the plastic and the media arts. It is through the availability of such technology, and its appeal to the grass roots of society, that a lot of early Video Art was able to be used to expose or spread awareness on issues and information of a political nature. The innovation of the medium particularly appealed to artists who were trying to push limits in contemporary society. Spreading the artist's message took on a whole new dimension, as can be seen in the Feminist Art movement of the time, where video became the medium of choice for many female artists who sought to distance female and male artistic production and sensibility.

**AD:** I ask about the news and its influence on these artists because, as a pattern, the time-frames within which a lot of the artists showing in *Electromorphologies* worked was fraught with tensions between conservative politics and the progressive public. Do artists like Mona Hatoum, Gary Hill, and Joan Jonas use Video Art for greater impact in delivering politically-motivated messages? If so, how is language specifically used as a tool in this respect?

**VB:** Although all three artists have in some way or another used their work as vehicle to carry messages of political nature at some point in their careers – and I contend that at the outset that all artwork in one way or another, and to varying degrees, cannot escape being political – the works

chosen for the exhibition were not selected for their political motivation but for their involvement with language, both textual as well as material. Hatoum's work can be regarded to be the more political of the three artists in question. Made at a very early stage in her career, when she was forced to settle in the UK from her native Lebanon caught in the outbreak of civil war, cut off from her family and fearing for their safety, the work reveals the face of a woman while two male hands gag the woman and cover parts of her face, sometimes even completely. The work encapsulates this difficult personal situation through the voice-over, spoken by the artist herself, which nauseatingly repeats the phrase "so much I want to say".

Gary Hill's *Why do Things Get in a Muddle? (Come on Petunia)* is a very complex work that explores the relationships between the direction of time and the order of things, employing an elaborate technique of reversing the characters' lines – originally performed through phonetic interpretation backwards. The work purposely mixes forward and reverse actions in the video and audio to suspend meaning. On the other hand, Joan Jonas's *Volcano Saga* ingeniously translates a previous performance by the same artist into a video narrative that uses the science and technology in its own materiality as metaphoric layers of illusion and reality.

**AD:** In the 1980s artists like Haring and Basquiat were taking their art to the streets, breaking down traditional artist-viewer conventions in the most immediate and palpable of formats. How implicit or explicit has Video Art's relationship with activist art been over time? How strong is the relationship between the two?

**VB:** In his introduction to *The History of Video Art*, Chris Meigh-Andrews mentions that the beginnings of Video Art were not only problematic due to video's ambiguous relationship with the broadcast media, but because Video Art was referred to by many different names, namely 'artists' video', 'experimental video', 'artists' television', 'the new television' and even 'Guerrilla TV'. The latter reference arguably came about through the radical youth movements of the 1960s and '70s, and the larger alternative media wave that swept across the US, particularly through the political use of media vehicles – radio, music, film, video, and television; but also including newspapers and magazines, as well as the fine and performing arts practices.

Video naturally was one of the most utilised mediums, even to the extent of coining the phrase 'video activism' – an activity that actually preceded the 1980s breaking of artist-viewer conventions by nearly two decades, through its process of mass dissemination on the airwaves. This strong bond between Video Art and activism has found an even better platform for wider dissemination through the introduction of the World Wide Web, and particularly through the many social media channels available on the Internet.

**AD:** Bringing our conversation forward to present day – at a time where language has taken on increasingly new roles in media, commentary, and communication – has its power become diluted in these works? Or is it all the more potent in an allegedly post-truth world, where metaphor has largely been usurped by explicitness and unedited commentary?

**VB:** When one looks at technology and the speed with which it is changing the media scenario and the way we communicate – particularly at how the moving image (as the term 'video' has quickly become obsolete) is being produced and disseminated – one cannot help but wonder how this most common 'language' of communication has evolved to become even more reachable by all. In less than a decade, the production of a 'video' – which ten years ago needed dedicated equipment to be shot and edited, and which needed some resource allocation in order for it to be distributed – can nowadays be handled by tools at everyone's disposal. The advent of the mobile phone, movie software, video platforms, social media, and live streaming apps have made the language of activism not only available to anyone, but also virtually extremely difficult to monitor, as one can see from the huge number of terrorist propaganda and hate videos one can find online. This raises serious doubts about the democratisation of the 'language' of video, and its distribution channel that we call Web 2.0, a platform that focuses entirely on the ability for people to collaborate and share information online.

# Alex Attard

**Ann Dingli (AD):** This isn't the first time you've worked on a project over an extended period of time (*The Overlooked Performance*), can you talk about your process on the *Parallel Existences* project – how long have you been working in the archives, and what would one of your typical visits entail?

**Alex Attard (AA):** In a similar fashion to when I had worked on *The Overlooked Performance* project, I always try to cultivate some sort of relationship with my subject. I started researching the archives project in 2015, and it was important for me to connect to the archives at many different levels – for me to feed and foster this personal relationship with everything within the space. What this looked like was a ritual of me regularly visiting the archives and observing the spatial quality of the building, the way it represented the passage of time, the way people conducted themselves within it, the light it captured, and its general aura. Understanding the architecture and infrastructure of the context in which these documents were kept was important to fully grasp the expansiveness of their history. I would visit the archives about three times a week, at varying times of day in order to experience different light. I explored the entire premises and initially took photos of anything that captured my interest. The archives are expectedly packed with material – shelves upon shelves of unending boxes and files. Within these files lie thousands of notarial deeds, each representing evidence, contracts between parties. They represent indisputable facts. The deeds I was looking at specifically were from a time where these transactions were handwritten, recorded in elegant ink-calligraphy on noble paper. I took my time and I observed the way they were bound and held together, some had parchment bindings that are secured to the text block with leather straps. Eventually when I got to know about the cardboard boxes in the 'crying room' – all this information helped put together the concept and purpose of this project.

**AD:** What triggered your interest in archival material?

**AA:** Dr Joan Abela, the curator and founder of the Notarial Archives Foundation, wished to open up the archives to more than just research for academic purposes, so she invited me to a tour of the archives and asked if I would

be interested in working on an artistic project about them. I had no idea what I would do at the time, but this initial visit left me with a mixture of strong feelings, from sadness to frustration to joy, and an intense gut feeling that something worthwhile could come out of this. So, I accepted her offer to look into it.

**AD:** Malta is defined so categorically by its past – a history marked with the stamp of colonisers, passers-through, wars, immigration and so on. Were you thinking about the identity of the Islands whilst working on this project?

**AA:** It's unavoidable to think about your country's identity when you spend time at the archives. It's a place where one can actually hold in their hands and read documents spanning a period of over five hundred years, from the time of the Knights, onto the French occupation and the British Period, and the reality of how one century intervenes over the next. What's remarkable about the Notarial Archives is that through these documents one gets a perspective of not only the Noble and the wealthy, as is very often the case, but also of the common man.

**AD:** In the very recent past, and currently, Malta has been swallowed wholly by a post-truth discourse that has changed people's reading of politics, the news, and even each other. In an age where authenticity is constantly questioned, is the crying room and its remnants a metaphor for how we have seemingly begun to discard facts?

**AA:** Interesting question. Notarial deeds are documented evidence of an agreed set of facts created between parties to avoid possible misinterpretation and to stand in a court of law. Post-truth, as I understand it, is what appeals to people's emotions rather than facts. People who choose to understand and believe what suits them independently of facts and circumstances, very often to serve their own ends either consciously or otherwise and reinforced by others who similarly do not evaluate facts. These crushed documents, which once held the facts, have been manipulated into their present forms as a consequence of a war on mankind to impose an ideology. Likewise, one may argue that truth has been crushed in a post-truth world to serve political purpose based on emotion rather than fact.

The 'crying room' and its remnants may – as you say – be viewed as a metaphor for how we have seemingly begun to discard facts.

The photographs, on the other hand, offer a parallel existence inspired by beauty in their forms – a beauty shaped by light and an inspiration meant for the collective benefit of a common good. Personally, I can't see any lasting beauty in a post-truth world.

**AD:** Many artists have found beauty in the decayed. Can you describe your instinctive, tactile reaction to the manuscripts you found in the archives?

**AA:** The moment I was shown one of these blown up documents I instinctively knew I had found what I was looking for, and the more of these destroyed documents I discovered and studied, I realised how although decayed and rendered useless, they could still serve a purpose on many different levels.

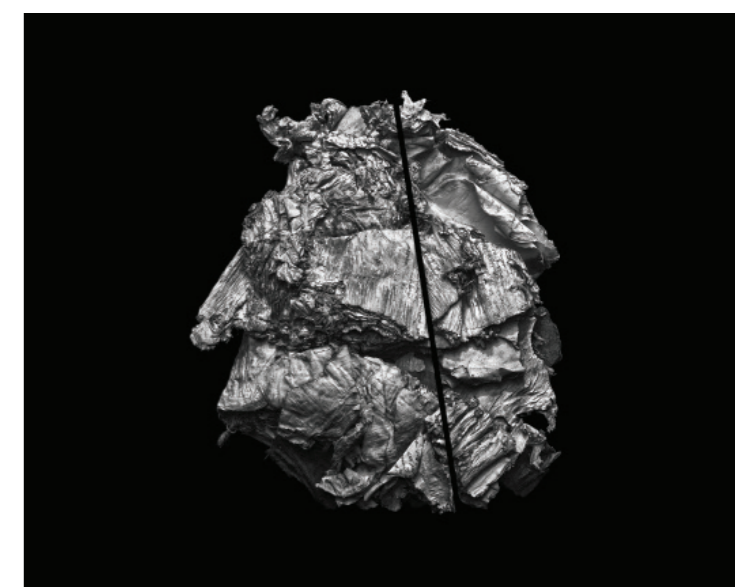
A large chunk of our history lay in brown cardboard boxes, useless, forgotten and in a state of stasis. They were of no use to anyone anymore. But I recognised another soul of the archives within them. Lifting them out of the boxes where they had been buried for all these years and looking at how the light was falling on them and how sculptural they looked was inspiring in so many different ways. The idea of restoring memory to history was an exciting possibility. The difficulty lay in how to get the viewer to visualise what I wanted to portray through a two-dimensional photograph, and without any prior knowledge of their history.

**AD:** Visually, your images elevate the clusters of destroyed documents to the status of relics, or even biological organisms being examined under a microscope. How did you come to the decisions you took on composition, size and colour for this series?

**AA:** The technical process revealed itself once the concept became apparent. I envisioned creating alternative identities for these documents by blurring the line between reality and art. By presenting the photographs as a document and as an artistic expression I hoped to return time and

memory to history by providing a parallel existence for these documents. Through this deliberate ambiguity I hoped to capture the viewers' attention and influence their perceptions by suggesting alternative layers of interpretation and for them to question what they were looking at, thus providing history with a sense of continuity. Furthermore, I decided to photograph the documents in monochrome against a black background to focus the viewers' attention solely on their sculptural form.

My idea was also to create images that verge on the beautiful because I believe love follows beauty and when one loves anything one is more inclined to care for it. This is also what the Notarial Archives Foundation stands for and wanted to promote about the archives.



Artist: Alex Attard  
 Title: Document No. 27 Dated 1770  
 Medium: Canson Rag Photographique 310 gms  
 Size: Various sizes  
 Editions: 10 + 2AP  
 Date: Photographed 2017