

## MAGNIFY MALTA

Myriam Thyès, 2010, 50 photographs

C-prints on aluminium DiBond, 60 x 90 cm (+ image for the ceiling, 150 x 150 cm) - or installation of slide projections



Magnifying Malta ... Since Malta joined the European Union in 2004, refugees have been arriving in palpably increasing numbers on the island's shores, especially from East Africa – in rowing boats. They come in hope of a better life in Europe.

At the same time as the arid island is witnessing a construction boom with speculators building hotels and holiday apartments which often stand empty or incomplete for long periods, the refugees pending deportation live in custody in refugee camps of condemned buildings, of tents or even in an aircraft hangar. They do not want to stay in Malta; but the large countries of the EU relieve the little island state of precious few of these people. Some few do manage to find work in Malta, in construction or, less frequently still, in the tourist industry.

Brimming with ritual and manifest in stone in the many churches and statues of saints is the deeply devout Catholicism practised by the Maltese. The architectural style on Malta combines baroque and arabic elements. (The Maltese language is an old arabic dialect. But the people of Malta tend to deny their arabic past.)

Malta's battle-ridden history as a bastion of the Western-European-Christian world in the face of Turkish, Arab and North African incursion becomes visible in the traces of the Order of the Knights of St John. In that era (the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries) many combatants and galley slaves of all parties lost their lives in naval battles in the Mediterranean; today, many refugees drown in that sea on their way by water from Africa to Europe.

The fortification walls and cannon emplaced under the rule of the Knights of St John recall Malta's ability to defend herself and by which she kept intruders out. Today these walls are moorings for ships from World War II, when Malta was a British colony, for elegant yachts, and cruise liners of ever-increasing scale. And the cannon don't stand in fortresses only, but as well in front of palaces, churches, and hotels.

The Mediterranean was for centuries the arena of innumerable wars and raids, both between competing West European rulers and between Christian and Muslim powers. In addition to this, came piracy, kidnapping, the slave trade and galley slaves. Consequently, for large parts of the population along the Mediterranean coast, abduction, exploitation and violent death were everyday occurrences. The constant presence of death is apparent in the intarsia images decorating the Knights' tombs in St. John's Cathedral in Valletta - the deceased are represented as "living" skeletons.

Malta has a population of only around 410 000, but new buildings proliferate and the Maltese islands are chock-a-block with cars (more than 300 000 of them, and increasing). The Maltese drive along their narrow streets and roads at speeds as if above all things they must gain time.

In all these aspects, Malta is like a small model – a metaphor for Europe.

This photo series contains some photomontages; they extend and condense the documentary aspect to exemplary "history paintings". The space in Thyès' images approaches the viewer like a theatre scenery and works as a stage for reflection.

### Michael Staab in 'GLASGOW STYLES / MAGNIFY MALTA: The Whole Picture. Take Widened':

"... To attain a widening of the first glance beyond the pure idyll is the goal in Myriam Thyès's photographic series, *Magnify Malta*. The picture area she has selected in each case and the compilation sequences of images show no nature shots but the constructed states of mind of the inhabitants. The raw, Mediterranean charm of the craggy island environment and the special quality of the light quickly become conditional with citadel-like, rambling residential estates and log-cabin constructions of unwelcoming, fort-like air. In a number of the pictures, these observations undergo yet further heightening through compositional intervention. Within the photographically recorded observations, almost imperceptible digital manipulation on the artist's part intercalates religious artefacts and military apparatus from different centuries, to emerge into view on modern house walls or in current city prospects. Astonishingly, these photo-montages do not appear in the least provocative or exaggerated, but rather, self-evident and natural ..."