

HESSE FLATOW

Villa, Angelica. "The First Malta Biennale Draws Visitors to a Surreal Fortress." *ARTnews*. April 24, 2024. Online.

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## The First Malta Biennale Draws Visitors to a Surreal Fortress

BY ANGELICA VILLA April 24, 2024 4:52pm

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Adama Delphine Fawundu, *A Meditation For the Dispersed*, 2023.  
COURTESY MALTA BIENNALE.ART

Gozo, the second largest of the Maltese islands in the Mediterranean Sea and located between Northern Libya and Southern Italy, was the latest site of Mexican artist Pedro Reyes's collaborative project "Artists Against the Atomic Bomb." For years, Reyes has commissioned artists to produce posters calling for nuclear disarmament. In its latest iteration, he hung them from industrial wires running across the island's narrow streets. The installation was one of

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more than 80 artworks installed on various sites across [Malta](#) as part of the country's first [biennale](#), which opened on March 11 to when

As part of an ambitious bid to elevate the country's arts image, the government's administration has heavily backed into the biennale, as well as Malta's forthcoming contemporary art museum, Malta International Contemporary Arts Space (MICAS). The museum is set to open in October within a complex in Floriana, a fortified town just outside the capital city of Valetta. Mario Cutajar, chairman of Heritage Malta, oversaw the exhibition's line-up of heritage sites that were used as venues. Both project share similar aims: to not only reorient Malta's cultural identity, but to draw it out of its militarized the past.

Biennale organizers gathered 72 artists—including biennial veterans such as Tania Bruguera and Laure Prouvost—from around 30 countries for the first edition and spans twelve historical sites across Malta's cities. The main exhibition, curated by Sofia Baldi Pighi, is titled "Insulaphilia", prompting artists to respond to Malta's reality as a converging point of North African, European and Arab influences, as well as the politics born from its remote location.

There were many concerted efforts by its curatorial team, rounded out by Elisa Carollo and Emma Mattei, to gently interrogate the social conservatism of Malta. In an interview with [ARTnews](#), the three curators said the culture leans heavily misogynistic, and that the biennale was a rare chance for them to dialogue with feminist concepts in a public setting.

On the biennale's opening day, more than a hundred visitors flooded into Valetta's Grand Master's Palace, situated next to the National Library next door. The first of four themed exhibitions, titled "The Matri-archive of the Mediterranean", centered women. A focal point of it was a video installation produced by Adama Delphine Fawundu, a Sierra Leonean-American photographer, titled [A Meditation For the Dispersed](#). Fawundu traveled to Malta in December, shooting a series of footage that follows a black model lingering out at sea, culminating in the film.

Issues related to migration appeared throughout, as Malta's position between two major continents as involved it in migrant crisis; according to Italian government data, some 34,000 migrants made the treacherous sea voyage to

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**Malta in 2023.** The second day was staged at the Birgu Armory, a 16 century military site in Malta's Southeast, which staged a work by Cuban artist Tania Bruguera. First produced in 2012, it consisted of the European Union flag on the building's façade, across which the artist also commissioned a graffiti artist to scrawl the phrase: "The poor treatment of the migrants today will be our dishonor tomorrow." A crowd gathered to watch the performance, which ran for nearly 45 minutes.



Zineb Sedira, *Middle Sea*, 2008. Courtesy maltabiennale.art

Speaking to [ARTnews](#), Pighi described how securing Bruguera's presence there was somewhat of a diplomatic move, as her high-profile status protected her from requests from the Malta government for works to be changed or worse, censored. "With migration in the Mediterranean, I thought that in order to

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address this very sensitive topic, we needed a big name to do that. In a sense, she's protecting all the other artists," said Pighi.

That same day, other internationally established artists drew on the main pavilion's sea theme. Also at the Birgu Armory was Zineb Sedira, a French Algerian photographer and video artist. Her 2008 work *MiddleSea*, a single screen video installation, is an eerie sequence that follow a man traveling on a ferry between Marseille and Algiers. In the opening shot, the camerawork vibrates as the man walks across the boat's floor.

Other moments across the preview's three-day run were far more surreal. On the third day, a performance piece titled *Embassy* by Suez Canal Republic, a collective of Italian artists, involved one of the group's members interacting with a metal exploration rover. The piece produced some head-tilting from onlookers, as they watched a woman loiter alongside the remote-controlled machine as it traveled across a flowered field nestled in the highest point of Gozo, a Citadel that could only be reached by ferry. Another orchestrated by an Italian choreographer found itself competing with a baffling view of the Mediterranean, as dancers lured onlookers to the edge of Hagar Qim cliff near a megalithic temple. And one brought viewers underground, with a film by Rosa Barba, titled *Inside the Outset: Evoking a Space of Passage*, installed in a medieval tunnel underneath Valetta's main tourist center. The only source of light came from Barba's shots of Cyprus, underwater and across its centuries' old sites.

With Malta lacking any real arts infrastructure, the biennale offered a few young Maltese curators exposure for their efforts to realize these exhibits.

In the Franco-German pavilion located near the exhibition's Fort St. Elmo site, Andrew Borg Wirth, a Maltese architect said it was a year-long process working with Berlin-based conceptual artist, Mariana Hahn, to acquire eleven wooden doors from a condemned Valetta fish market owned for her installation. For the piece, Hahn covered three doors with mounds of white salt, a process she said lets the element eventually erode their surfaces.



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*Embassy by Suez Canal Republic. Courtesy maltabiennale.art*

Before the biennale launched, its artistic director, Sofia Baldi Pighi, told [ARTnews](#) that with the backing of Cutajar and an undisclosed Qatari foundation, she planned to bring on Palestinian artists for a national pavilion. At the Venice Biennale, which runs concurrently, Palestine does not have such a stage, as Italy does not recognize it as a sovereign nation. The plan, however, was not realized.

But even without the presence of Palestinian artists, Pighi and other artists were vocal in recognizing the war in Gaza. At the end of a state-sponsored dinner thrown to celebrate the government's backing of the biennale, Pighi ended her speech with a call for a ceasefire.

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In Gozo, the conceptual artist Mel Chin arrived on the remote island unexpectedly, where he unboxed a new set of 18-inch-long drawings: a scrolled penciled rendering of a news image of a Palestinian infant killed in Gaza taken in December by photojournalist Ali Jadallah. Chin placed it next to another drawing, this one of a US-made MK-84 bomb. Chin, speaking to a small room of viewers, said he's been thinking of the weapon's aftermath, which can be seen in satellite imagery in the form of cratered.

He explained why he used soil from his North Carolina studio to make the artwork: "I excavated dirt to create this. Using earth to create the piece was necessary."