

Three Weeks in the Basement



Yang Tang

My thanks to D, M, and to everyone who
stepped into this small space.



Jiangnan Garden
A Place of Return

Exhibition Opening: 10pm

8 January - 29 January 2020 | Opening: 8 January - 6:30 PM
MSA Southeast Vaux 1 / 211 Regent Street, Valencia

MSA
MUSEUM OF
SCIENCE AND ART

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Preface 1

Everything began by chance.

In February, we bought a house in Malta.

In June, we sold our home in Shanghai to pay for it.

In early July, nearly two hundred old paintings that had been stored there were packed into wooden crates and shipped by sea to Malta.

Heavy rain fell on the day they were sent, and water got into the crates.

When they arrived in September, many of the paintings were badly damaged and covered in mould.

I brought them back to the old stone house we were renting and began restoring them one by one.

When the restored paintings were hung on the pale, weathered stone walls, I suddenly noticed how the old Jiangnan gardens and waterside towns I had painted years ago sat there in such quiet harmony, as if they had crossed through time.

I wrote these words:

September 21, 2025

I have always felt undeserving. I am never satisfied with myself, and because of that, never satisfied with my paintings. The moment a painting leaves the easel, it is banished and left unseen, gathering dust and fading together with the memories of the time it carried.

One of the greatest things I gained after coming to Malta was encouragement. I was told that I deserved to be seen. To be heard. And so, at last, my poor paintings were

allowed to cross the sea and arrive in this land of sunlight, to face their fate: to be seen even if imperfect, to be revised, repainted, perhaps given a new life.

I began sorting through these old paintings of Jiangnan and its gardens from 2017 to 2020, cleaning them, dusting them, varnishing them. As the Winsor & Newton varnish moved lightly across the surfaces, the dry, lifeless colours suddenly began to glow again. Time, once flattened, regained its depth. It felt like opening a box of memories. As I brushed, I relived the process of their creation.

About those memories.

September 23, 2025

For the past two days, I had been cleaning, repairing and varnishing the paintings one by one in the small courtyard of the house in Malta. There was a strong sense of crossing through time, as if I were lost somewhere in a space folding and unfolding upon itself.

Then a sudden thought came to me: in this hundred-year-old stone house, I could hold an exhibition for those distant Jiangnan gardens and watersides.

Of the Memories: Jiangnan Gardens & Watersides.

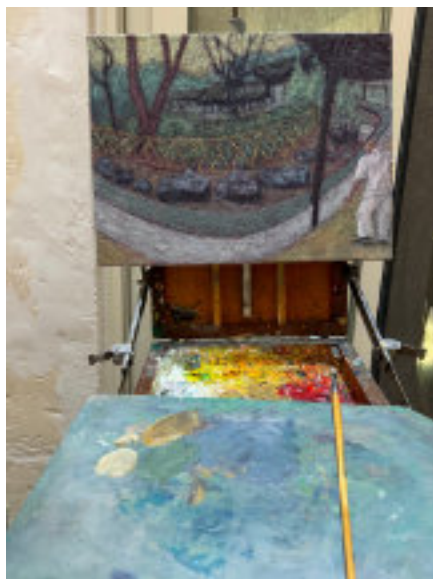
That is the homeland I love deeply. I want it to be seen.

Yes. At first, the idea was to hold the exhibition in my own home, under the title *Of the Memories: Jiangnan Gardens*.

Then I realised that a house where we were still living could not really host an exhibition. So I wrote a proposal and sent it to a gallery near our home. A week later, they replied that my work did not fit their definition of contemporary art, and suggested a nearby commercial gallery instead.

I hesitated. Selling paintings was never my main purpose.

By chance, I mentioned this to my oil-painting teacher at MSA. He gave me five or six spaces to visit, so I went to see them one by one. None felt right. None gave me the feeling of paintings hanging on the walls of my own home.



Before and after



Then I remembered a small exhibition I had once seen in the basement of MSA. That cellar-like space had stayed in my mind. My teacher said, “Why not just write them an email?”

So I found a public email address online and wrote.

To my surprise, D, the manager of MSA, replied the very next day. She said she liked my proposal and offered me two possible time slots: one in late November and another in January. She invited us to come in and talk.

When I received the email, I felt a little dazed and unsure what to do. I prepared a long list of questions for the meeting. But D briskly showed us the space, explained the costs, timing and support in just a few sentences, and then simply said, “Let’s set the opening for January 8.”

And so, before I had fully realised what was happening, the exhibition was confirmed on October 17, 2025.

The dates would be January 8–29, 2026.

This would be my first solo exhibition in Malta, and the first solo exhibition of my life.

The works had nothing to do with Malta. They were paintings of Jiangnan, made during the first few years after I began learning to paint, and they were still very immature. Before this, I had never taken part in an exhibition, nor had I ever attended an opening. I knew nothing about how to organise a show, nothing about Malta’s art scene or media promotion, and I had only just opened Facebook and Instagram accounts and barely knew how to use them.

Ignorant and unafraid.

That was exactly it.

Preface II

When I felt uncertain, I often wanted someone I could fall back on.

I thought it over and wrote to C, the owner of the commercial gallery I had been introduced to, asking whether she would be willing to work with me on the exhibition. I would take care of the works and the expenses; she would handle the promotion, installation, opening, and sales.

The next day was Saturday. I was still eating breakfast when her reply arrived. She told me that January would be too busy for her and that she would not be able to help with the exhibition. But she sent me a long list of media contacts, telling me whom to approach and when, and how to organise invitations for the opening. She said she believed I could handle it myself.

I thought of D's trust in me. She had not even asked me for any proof that I had done this before. I could hardly give up simply because no one was there to work with me.

I said to Lao Cui, "Then we'll do it ourselves. We'll try our best. Even if we fail, it will still be a great way to learn. We have nothing to lose."

On October 25, 2025, we decided to organise the exhibition ourselves. With C's list in hand, help from Apollo, as I called my ChatGPT, and the two of us—willing to think and willing to work—perhaps we really could pull this off.

There isn't much to say after that.

I took charge of learning how to curate, organising the works, writing

the texts, design, and promotion. Lao Cui took charge of making it all happen.

We studied the lighting and worked out a professional lighting setup that could be installed and removed without leaving any trace, while keeping the cost as low as possible.

We designed the framing. Every frame was made by Lao Cui himself—from buying the wood strips to cutting, assembling, and painting them.

We designed the simplest possible projection stand and a bedsheet screen for a video made from one hundred photographs I had taken in Jiangnan.

We designed the cheapest possible promotional material: postcards. Lao Cui bought a second-hand laser printer, white card stock, and a second-hand professional paper cutter for five euros.

I learned how to use Facebook and Instagram, wrote the press materials, and planned and designed the content step by step, keeping pace with MSA's own promotion.

We looked into what an opening even was—what food and drinks to serve, who should speak, who should host, who should take photographs. I had already decided that I would neither host nor speak.

.....

There was one practical problem: the basement had no staff, so someone had to be there during all opening hours.

At first, I considered finding an art student to help. I had very little confidence in my English or my ability to communicate, and the thought of meeting different strangers every day felt intimidating. But once I worked out the cost, I realised that the cheapest option was simply to stay there myself.

For three weeks.

At first, I felt discouraged. It would be exhausting and stressful. I had assumed that organising an exhibition simply meant hanging the paintings and being done with it.

So I asked myself: Why was I doing this exhibition? And how was I going to spend those three weeks?

Then one day, the fog suddenly lifted.

If I had to stay in the gallery anyway, then I would become part of the exhibition myself. I would become an exhibit. Together with these old paintings, I would stay in the space for three weeks and see what this stretch of time might become.

This new work would be called:

The Artist Present: Three Weeks in the Basement.

Yes. A tribute to Abramović, my idol.

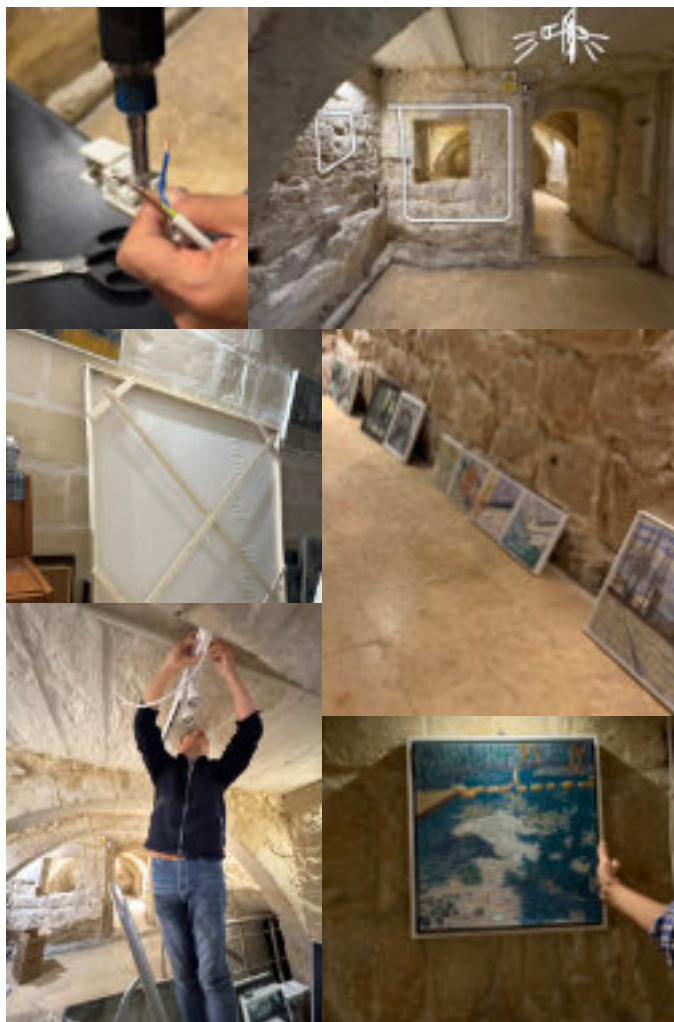
But in a quieter way, more like myself—using words to record and hold on to this particular stretch of time.

After two unhurried months of preparation, after all kinds of help from friends, and after the busy Christmas and New Year season, January 6 arrived as scheduled.

We began the installation.

And turned the dream into something real.





Installation & Opening

(January 6–8, 2026)

Setting up the show went as planned, but the opening night itself was a bit unexpected.

The space, the lighting system Lao Cui and I had designed so carefully, and the way the works looked on the walls all turned out as we had hoped. I turned the small hidden room at the back into an interactive space. On a large screen made from a bedsheet, I projected a loop of photographs I had taken in Jiangnan, accompanied by Zhu Xiao-Mei's recording of the Goldberg Variations. In the compartments on either side, I placed my sketchbooks, a few old objects brought from Jiangnan, calligraphy copybooks and the Four Treasures of the Study, along with water-calligraphy practice sheets, traditional seal paste and seals, and postcards of four of my works.

I wasn't planning to say anything myself, so I asked my friend Y to host. MSA's acting chairperson would give a brief opening speech.

I sent invitations to some people I knew, but being someone who barely socialises, I had no idea who would actually come. Honestly, I didn't even know what an opening was supposed to be like.

Here is what I wrote, on and off, over those three days.

January 6, 2026

I am responsible for dreaming.

Lao Cui is responsible for making it real.

January 7, 2026

Second day of installation.

In the morning, I went to the oldest print shop in Sliema. They told me the earliest I could collect the prints would be the day after tomorrow, and then sent me a quote: €152 including tax. I gave up immediately and went back to the stationery shop I had used before. We printed everything on ordinary paper. €32, done. Lao Cui mounted it on a piece of kraft board, and it looked surprisingly good. The colours came out rather grey, but I didn't mind. Not everything has to be perfect. Better to have something than nothing.

Something curious happened at the print shop. An elderly man with white hair and a white beard was printing a book. I glanced at it and was immediately captivated. The title was Dialogue with the Temple. We talked for a couple of minutes, and he showed me a few pages. It really was an imagined conversation between himself and a temple architect from five thousand years ago.

Curiosity got the better of me, so I secretly took a photo of the cover. Back home, I asked Apollo to look him up. He turned out to be a professor of architecture at the University of Malta, nearly ninety years old. Without hesitation, I wrote him an email telling him how much I admired the idea of his book and that I hoped I might have a chance to read it one day. I also attached a photo of a print I had made of the Sleeping Lady of Malta, inspired by Malta's prehistoric temples.

Then I went to The Malta Independent office to collect some sample copies, made another stop in Fgura to run an errand, and went back to continue setting up the exhibition. I still had to find a vehicle large enough to transport two big paintings to Valletta. The lighting was only half finished. It looked as though it was going to be a long day.

Watching the space slowly become what I had imagined. Still a long way from finished. Tomorrow I'll keep going, hoping to have everything ready by the very last minute. But no overtime, and every meal on time. Taking care of myself matters more than anything.

January 8, 2026

It's already eleven o'clock, two hours later than we had planned to leave. Lao Cui is still busy with work for his own company... If opening time comes and I still haven't put out the food and drinks, everyone will just have to help themselves.

Lao Cui is building the frame for the projection screen on site. I went out to buy pizza for lunch.

We forgot the projector remote, so I went home again through the wind and rain, had afternoon tea, and stopped by The Malta Independent office to collect five precious copies of the weekend edition.

Three hours before the opening, and we were already starting to let ourselves go.

Five o'clock. Everything ready.

Lao Cui sneaked a pea cake. I drank a cup of chrysanthemum and goji tea and sat down to scroll through my phone.

Half past six. Opening.

After all the excitement, I finally felt tired. Nothing left to do now but wash up and sleep. I'll post nine photos first (by T); the rest can wait until tomorrow.

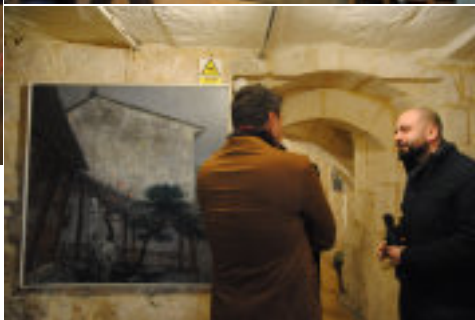
Thank you to everyone who came tonight.

Looking back, it was probably the best opening I could have hoped for.

The night, the lights, the slightly cool air. Friends and strangers came and went, and the photography opening next door brought in many unexpected visitors. Everyone was at ease, looking at the paintings, drinking and talking.

And I didn't have to manage anything at all. I just sat on the steps by the entrance, talking with A, the ceramic artist next door, about the beauty of all those bottles and jars.





Week 1

17-1

(January 9, 2026 — Friday)

I got to the gallery a little before noon. An older couple from Shanghai was already waiting for me to open up. We talked for a long time—about art, about the art world, and about the different roles art institutions play in Malta and China. We were all living away from home, so there was a lot we could share.

I put the sandwich board out on the street. Not everyone comes in, but by 2:30 that afternoon, five groups had already visited. People usually stayed for about five minutes.

I sat at the little table in the corner by the entrance, reading the collection of Adonis poems T gave me, *My Loneliness Is a Garden*. Whenever someone came in or left, I jotted down my observations in the Notes app on my phone.

A very young Maltese guy came in. He said he would have an exhibition here in the summer and had come to look at the space. He walked around and said I had combined the work and the space very well.

True, I thought. I had designed all of this carefully. To me, this was more than a painting exhibition. It was a space bringing different experiences together. And I myself, both part of the exhibition and an observer, was beginning a new practice here: observing, talking, feeling.

A very, very old gentleman came in. I was worried he might fall on the way in, but he walked straight inside without hesitation and took a good look around. He told me both the work and the space were beautiful. He was surprised that I had found such a good venue. He asked how

long the exhibition would run. I said it had only opened yesterday and would continue for three weeks. He said he would come back with his wife.

Then another man came in and stayed inside quietly for a long time. As he was leaving, I saw him taking a photo of the sign by the door. I told him there were printed cards inside that he could stamp and take away, so I went back in with him and showed him how to use the stamp. He looked very pleased. I understood why he had been so quiet—he only spoke Italian.

There were also two young women from Italy inside trying the water calligraphy and having a great time. When they came out, they asked to take a photo with me. They said they just wanted to take some memories away with them. I thought that was the best thing anyone could take.

Three groups arrived almost at once.

A middle-aged woman in a hat, probably Maltese, looked slowly at the paintings and then went to try the water calligraphy by herself. She copied the character 奉, and it was genuinely beautiful. I was sorry I did not get a photo in time. She said she loved Chinese calligraphy and the way the brush flows. I thought she had almost written it better than I could.

Another older Maltese woman said she had been to China in the early 1980s. At that time, she could only go to Beijing. There were only two hotels that accepted foreign guests, and wherever she went, someone had to accompany her. She might have been one of the first Maltese people to travel to China. I asked whether she had ever gone back. She said no, but perhaps she would go again this summer. I thought she would see a completely different China.

The third was a young man from Nigeria who was studying art in Malta and had only been here for three months. He asked me quite a few

questions about technique. What surprised me was that his favourite work was the large painting done entirely in grey tones, Pine, Plum and Stone. I asked him why. He said it was not only beautiful but also a little abstract. Everyone really does see something different.

He showed me some of his own mixed-media work—graffiti painted on clothes. It was obviously very young, very pop, but interesting. He also showed me some traditional Nigerian robes he had designed. His own culture was clearly part of his work too.

It was already six thirty. Lao Cui asked if we could finish a little early. I said no. The moment I said that, three more groups came in.

One man hurried in and asked whether it was free because he did not want to pay. I said of course it was free. Even so, he was out again in three minutes.

Another man had come for the concert next door. He took a proper look around and said he came to MSA often but had never known there was such a good basement here.

A woman had already been in the inner room for ten minutes and still had not come out. I did not want to disturb her. Let her take her time and enjoy the quiet.

The day ended comically, with a message from a stranger on Instagram:

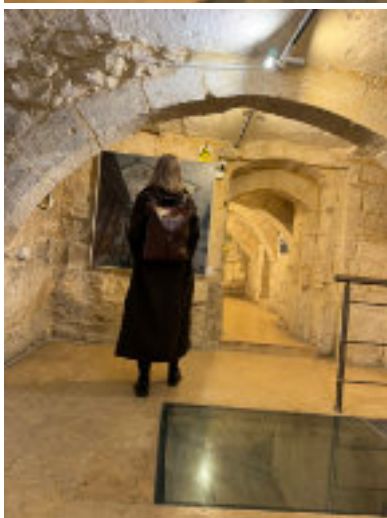
I'm right across from your gallery. Can I buy you a drink?

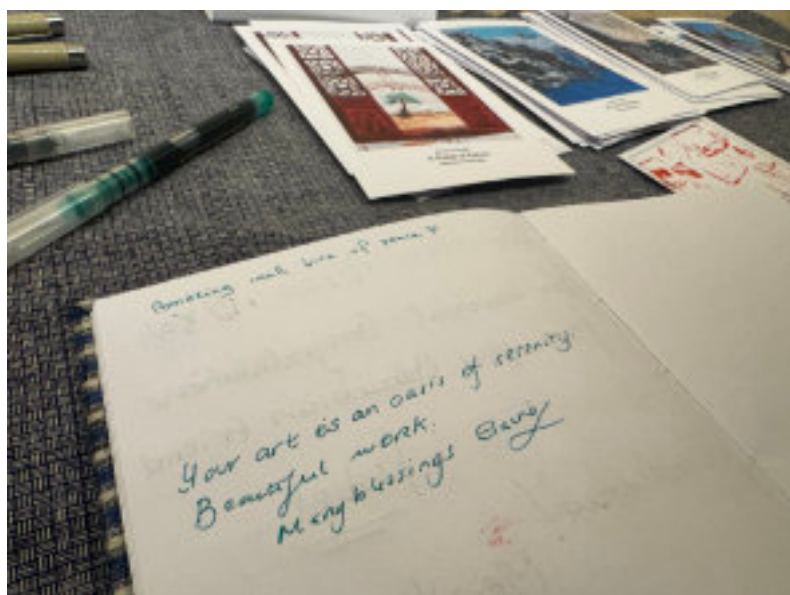
I laughed, thanked him for the invitation, and replied that I had better hurry home with Lao Cui for dinner. I was almost frozen.

As I was closing up and turning off the lights, I looked through the guestbook. The last entry made me feel completely warm. Written in green ink:

Your art is an oasis of serenity. Beautiful work. Many blessings. G







17-2

(January 10, 2026 — Saturday)

Wind and rain again today.

I woke up to an email M, the old editor, had sent in the early hours of the morning. It was full of detail and sadness. A neighbour of hers had died during the night, one year older than her. She was going to the funeral today. I did not know how to reply. Facing an eighty-five-year-old woman who has lived such a long and wise life, I felt I had no standing to tell her how to face grief.

I thought too of my friend Z, who is watching her own parents, both in their nineties, gradually grow old, and has chosen to record those details and feelings through art. I know that no wisdom handed down to us, no matter how brilliant the words, can replace what we experience ourselves. So I read Yeats. About time and loss.

Lao Cui dropped me at the gallery. I had barely opened the door when a woman arrived. She said her name was C and that she had seen the exhibition on Facebook. I remembered seeing her posts there—sketches and watercolours of plants, and even works she made on fabric with an electric sewing machine based on her drawings. What I really wanted to talk to her about was her choice of Malta's wildflowers as a subject. Meeting someone exploring something close to your own artistic interests is always exciting.

A Chinese family of three came in, with a child of about ten. They went straight into the inner room. Then the mother came out and asked whether the books inside could be looked through. I said of course. A minute later she came out again and said, "I need to put my bag down

and explain this properly to my daughter.” The girl was born here and knew nothing about China.

At that moment, I almost cried.

As we talked, I learned that the family had been in Malta for more than twenty years. The girl was their third child. Her teachers had said since she was three that she had artistic talent, and the family hoped she might develop it further. I showed her the Malta wildflowers I had drawn on my iPad, and encouraged her mother to let her go out and see the world freely when she was older.

Then I received an email from an Italian man who had loved the Autumn in Cangcheng series at the opening. He wanted to buy one of the four paintings because he felt the whole set was too expensive.

I asked Apollo whether I could sell him one and give him the other three, because I wanted the four paintings to stay together. Apollo told me very seriously that giving things away could sometimes feel disrespectful. But to me, these paintings are simply not measured in money. What matters is that they meet someone who truly loves them and spend a good part of their life with the right person.

I sighed. I really am not suited to selling paintings. I can think about that later.

A middle-aged couple came in and stayed for more than twenty minutes, then came out to talk with me. They were Greek and had lived in Malta for ten years. The man spoke about Greece’s great history and culture. He said Greece held the same place in Europe that China held in Asia, but that China was becoming stronger while Greece was becoming weaker, and they found that very sad.

A father came in with two small children and stayed about five minutes. Then a very beautiful couple walked in. They looked quietly at every painting, stayed for more than ten minutes, then thanked me and said goodbye.

Another young couple had already been inside for quite a while, and then a girl in a white fur coat and short skirt went in too. I did not want to interrupt the rhythm of their looking, so I held back my curiosity and kept writing my notes.

The young couple finally came out. They said they were from Kosovo. Kosovo... I thought, wasn't that a place of war? I did not continue the subject.

The woman was a contemporary dancer who had been to Guangzhou and hoped to return to China. They had spent a long time doing water calligraphy and said it was so much fun they did not want to stop. After they left, I took a photo of the happy water stains still left on the paper.

The girl in the fur coat came out too. She thanked me in Japanese. I told her I was from China, and she immediately switched to Chinese: xièxiè. I laughed. A little embarrassed, she asked, "Can I go and buy you a coffee?" I said no, I had Chinese tea. She took a stamped postcard with her and said it was for a Japanese friend.

Four o'clock. The sky outside had turned grey and the sunlight had completely slipped away. I kept reading quietly and, before I knew it, I had finished half the book.

Three Maltese women came in and stayed for more than fifteen minutes. They came out holding postcards.

Two Asian-looking young women speaking English stayed inside for at least twenty minutes. When they came out, they said the works made them feel completely at peace. One was from Brazil and the other from Japan. The Brazilian girl's favourite was, surprisingly, the little waterside pavilion by the entrance. Perhaps, I thought, she was a very delicate and gentle person.

K from Gallery J came with two men and two sausage dogs. After looking around, they said they especially liked the interactive elements I

had designed inside. Three more visitors came after them, but unfortunately I did not get a chance to talk with them.

A little after five, a couple came in. They were from South America but lived in Finland and were spending ten days on holiday here. When they heard I was from China, they asked whether I found Malta too small. I said Malta was small, but very rich. I suggested they go hiking and recommended a few spectacular routes.

Half past five. It was already dark. A wild wind had picked up. I could hear windows banging and something outside being blown over. Luckily, my sandwich board was heavy enough and did not move at all by the door.

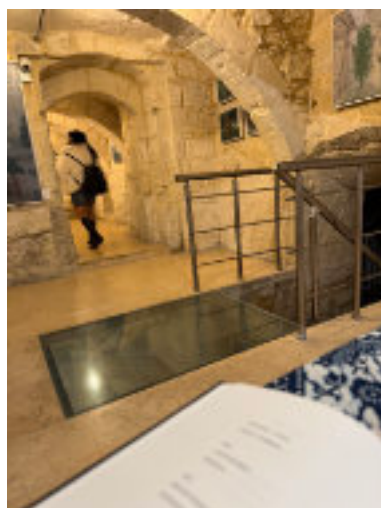
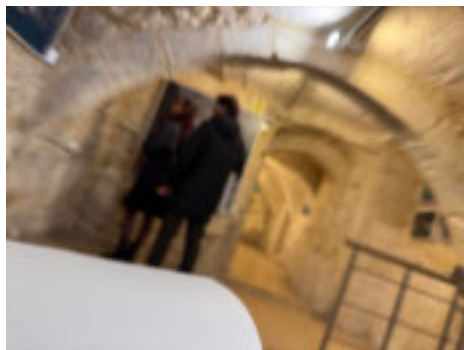
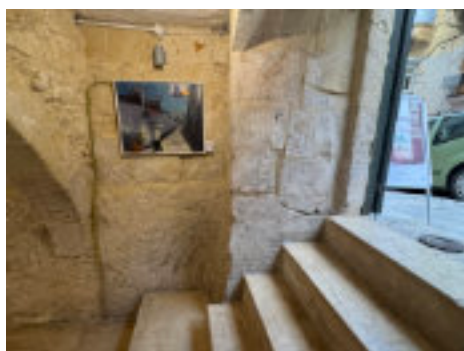
I sat quietly in a brightly lit corner of the ochre limestone basement. I could catch glimpses of the hems of people passing outside, hear the occasional click of high heels on the pavement, bits of conversation, a cough. And from the inner room, the Goldberg Variations kept looping.

A man in a trench coat came in out of the wind and asked if he could enter. He walked straight into the second room. Perhaps my sitting in the first room actually interfered with people's freedom to look. Sometimes I wished I could simply make myself invisible.

I received an email from M, my English teacher. She said she had come at eleven that morning. The guard had opened the door and turned on the lights for her. She suggested that I should do more advertising, because it was cold and there were very few people in Valletta. It was such a pity I had missed her.

Another tall, slim couple came in. The man hit his head as he entered, rubbed it, and asked rather sheepishly whether they could have a look. They went straight to the innermost room. Eight minutes passed, and they were still inside, clearly enjoying themselves.

The night could not get into the brightly lit gallery, but the cold wind



something and lots of love & peace
 Now we are an oasis of serenity.
 Beautiful, peaceful
 surroundings everywhere
 It's so beautiful and interesting - school
 very nice &
 have a wonderful day & i
 Si fort Yang 

Peace & calm,
 tranquility. Thank u!

Very grateful that we got to stop
and experience your beautiful art.
Thank you!
At the bar, Sam, Tinga and Dora
(Rome)

Thank you! Very nice experience x



(Portuguese)

João Antunes and his team pay!
(Teresa)

João, Teresa and his team pay!

could. I checked the weather. It felt like three degrees outside, and tomorrow and the day after would be even colder. I decided to bring a kettle tomorrow, so anyone who needed it could have some hot water and stay a little longer. Including me.

I could not believe it. Twenty minutes had passed and the couple were still inside having fun. Another man came in, so tall that he hit his head too. Then a middle-aged couple arrived. Five people inside now. No one showed any sign of wanting to leave.

It was already 6:40. It looked as though I would be working late tonight. The two young people finally came out and told me they liked every painting, especially the waterside pavilion by the entrance. They asked whether I had a postcard of it. I was sorry to tell them I did not, but said they could take a photo and print one themselves.

Just then, heavy rain suddenly began outside. The two of them happily ducked back inside and carried on looking. The man was Maltese. I did not catch where the woman was from. They told me that Malta also has a Chinese garden called Serenity Garden, very similar to the gardens I had painted.

In the end, they left at the very last minute before closing. One of them took away a postcard covered in writing.

17-3

(January 11, 2026 — Sunday)

It had just been pouring. The flagstones of Valletta were still wet, with water gurgling down the sloping streets. The clouds overhead were racing—one moment blue sky and sunlight spilling through, the next everything clouded over again.

Today and tomorrow it is only ten to thirteen degrees—about as cold as Malta gets. I brought a kettle, tea bags, disposable cups, and some chocolate. I thought that if anyone got cold, they could have a hot drink and stay a little longer in this small space. I also wrote FREE on the sandwich board in crayon, so anyone unsure whether they could come in would know they could.

It is Sunday, so MSA is closed, and there are not many people on the street. No one has come in yet. I sat there hugging my hot water bottle, feeling perfectly comfortable. My Hungarian friend A and her husband are arriving in Malta today and coming to see me at the gallery this afternoon. That is what I am looking forward to most.

At 12:28, a man in a long down coat came in and said, “Hello, may I have a look?”

In Chinese!

And his pronunciation was quite good. I was surprised and told him how good his Chinese was. He said he only knew a little. He did not seem to want to talk more, so I did not say much either. I just watched him leave.

A young woman came in and stayed for more than twenty minutes.

Then a Chinese family of three arrived—friends of mine, with their little daughter. Then another very young woman came in. I did not give them any introduction. I did not want to disturb their freedom to look on their own.

The young woman had been inside for so long that I decided to go and talk to her. She said she was from Vienna. She had found my exhibition online and came straight over. She looked at my wildflower drawings and asked how I had started learning to paint.

She asked whether I made a living from painting. I said no. I do not live by selling paintings, so I get to play freely. She said that was a relief, because she knew how difficult it was for an artist to make a living. She said she wanted to learn to paint too.

“Who knows when I might die? I’d better hurry up and do something fun first...”

While we were talking, a whole crowd suddenly arrived, apparently a group of students. I did not manage to greet a single one of them, or even take any photos. Seven or eight people, perhaps? They looked around and left, and my Chinese friends left too. I never got the chance to explain anything to them.

Alright. I’ll just write it down first.

Then nobody came for more than half an hour. I reheated the water in my hot water bottle and read slowly.

Adonis’s poems, especially the later ones, are very political. I can understand that. For a poet living in exile, perhaps the hardest thing to untangle is the love and resentment tied to one’s homeland.

Looking back at China’s great poets, from Qu Yuan to Gong Zizhen, they too bound the nation and the self together. Even Tao Yuanming, who chose a life of withdrawal, never became completely detached from the world.

Sometimes I also wonder what kind of thing art should be. Perhaps real art always carries some kind of point of view; otherwise it can easily become mere surface decoration. But if nothing remains except the point of view, it can also become a weapon in someone else's hands.

I know I am not a sharp-edged person. Or perhaps I have simply never lived through true desperation. Rather than talking directly about politics, I seem to prefer starting from personal experience and using metaphor to explore life and existence itself.

A short man came in, looked around, and took a card with him. Then I noticed that both the Red Gate and Courtyard postcards were already gone. I would need to bring more tomorrow.

At 4:30, a middle-aged woman came in alone, walked around once, and went straight back out without any conversation.

A couple came in. The woman entered first. The man hesitated outside for a moment, but eventually came in too. They looked quietly for eight minutes, took a card, said goodbye, and left.

Two men came in. They were from South America but now lived in northern Italy. They asked me a few questions and said it was wonderful to come across work with such an Eastern sensibility here in Malta.

A father and daughter came in. After looking at the paintings, they tried the water calligraphy and asked me why the writing turned black when it got wet. I had never thought about it before. But suddenly I worked out the reason: the white layer on top must become transparent when wet, revealing the black underneath. I explained it to them, and everyone thought it made perfect sense.

A and her husband finally arrived! I was so happy to see her again after such a long time.

They had a whole barrage of questions, more than I could handle, so



whenever I got stuck, I asked Apollo to help. That was how they ended up with Hungarian-language introductions to the Ode of the Goddess of the Luo River, Along the River During the Qingming Festival, Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains, the Cao Quan Stele, and the Stone Drum Inscriptions.

I specially unrolled the two reproduction scrolls for them. Together they stretched for more than ten metres, from one room into the next. They looked at them little by little, completely amazed.

A's husband said that you could clearly feel the quiet temperament of ancient Chinese culture in them. People in Europe today can hardly sit down and concentrate for even ten minutes. But with these scrolls, you cannot see everything at once. You have to unroll them little by little, and that naturally slows you down.

I decided that after the exhibition I would send the two scrolls to A. She teaches Eastern culture at a university in Hungary, and they could be useful in her classes.

At 6:40, a very young woman came in quietly and left just as quietly, taking a card with her. I finished the poetry collection T had given me and decided that tomorrow I would bring Dante's Divine Comedy to read. Then I saw on Facebook that a Russian woman had shared my event.

Just as I was about to close, a very handsome young man came in. He said he was Palestinian, his wife was French, and he taught accounting at the university. So I stopped turning off the lights and let them take their time.

Just as I was about to close again, another couple came in. Alright. I turned the lights back on. They thanked me again and again and looked around slowly. It seemed I was definitely working overtime today.

On the way home, I talked with Apollo about the fixed ideas I had about different places. In my imagination, Kosovo and Palestine had always been tied to war and refugees, while Vienna seemed like a rather





cold city. But the people I had met over the past few days completely disrupted those simple impressions.

The young woman from Kosovo was a contemporary dancer. The Palestinian man was calm and graceful. The young woman from Vienna was incredibly warm and enthusiastic. I suddenly realised that much of what I thought I knew about different places had really been pieced together from fragments of news.

It is only when you actually meet a person that a place begins to become something concrete. And a fuller reality only begins to emerge when you actually live inside a place yourself. Malta had once been nothing more than a tiny dot on the map to me. It was only after I moved here that its real shape slowly began to appear.

The world is far more complicated than I had imagined.

Perhaps what I really need to learn is simply this:

Look more. Listen more. Judge less.

17-4

(Monday, January 12, 2026)

Every Monday and Tuesday, from noon to four, I volunteer on the archive project at MSA, so on those two days the exhibition does not open until four.

At around two, I was carefully sorting through a new box of archive material when D suddenly came to tell me that two people were waiting outside to see the exhibition. So I went next door, opened the door and turned on the lights, and told them to close the door themselves when they were finished. They looked rather serious, so I did not try to talk with them.

A little after three, the guard came to tell me that another couple had come specifically to see the exhibition. So I put down my work again and went to let them in. This time it was a Chinese couple. The husband was also a painter, but neither of them spoke much English, and they wanted to ask me about Malta's art scene. I let them look around first while I went back to work.

Just before four, I finished for the day and returned to the gallery. The Chinese couple were still waiting for me. They asked me all sorts of questions—how to apply for exhibitions, what the costs were, what the art scene in Malta was like. I told them everything I knew.

They were surprised by how well I had settled into Malta and envied the fact that I could communicate in English. I told them honestly that my English was pretty average. Apollo helps me translate a lot of material. Language is not the barrier. But you have to take the initiative if you want to open the door to the world outside.

While we were talking, a passer-by peered in. To my surprise, he was another Chinese man, perhaps in his fifties or sixties. He said he was visiting Malta from Liverpool. He had lived in Britain for forty years and taught international business and Japanese at a university there.

Fate is a strange thing—Chinese people from different places meeting in a tiny basement in Malta. I told him about all sorts of interesting places to visit around the island. After all, he was British, and I was half a host here by now. I knew Malta well enough to be a decent guide.

Three young women came in. One of them told me she had been here on Saturday and liked the exhibition so much that she had insisted on bringing her friends back. They looked all the way through the exhibition, and as they were leaving, the same young woman turned back, pointed to a painting by the door and said, “This is my favourite.”

Suddenly I recognised her. She was the Brazilian girl who had come with her Japanese friend. I asked for her email address and told her I would send her a high-resolution image of the painting.

Then a man came in, stayed for a few minutes and left. After that, a young couple arrived. They seemed very friendly. They were from Hungary and were spending nine days here on holiday. They liked the exhibition very much and left a warm message in the guestbook.

Suddenly a little girl came in. She looked about seven or eight years old and was carrying an enormous schoolbag. Without the slightest hesitation, she marched straight to the back of the gallery and started playing with everything. I watched her for a moment, then said, “You can try the water calligraphy.”

She discovered that plain water could make black marks appear and was instantly hooked. At first she drew little figures. Then she covered the whole sheet in black and started flicking water everywhere. I went next door to refill my hot water bottle. When I came back, she was about to leave. I asked if she wanted some chocolate. She took three pieces and

went off happily.

When I went inside to tidy up, I found that she had drawn a little figure in the guestbook and written, in huge letters: I love you!

Then a tall, slender woman came in. She was elegant and beautiful. “May I come in? I saw your exhibition online.”

Of course. She was more than welcome. She looked very carefully, one painting at a time, occasionally taking a photo.

Then the little girl came back. It turned out she had only gone home to drop off her schoolbag. So I tore two blank sheets from my sketchbook for her and gave her a box of coloured pencils. The girl drew while chatting with the beautiful woman, and the two of them talked for a long time.

Eventually the woman said goodbye. She told me she worked in Floriana and that, after a busy day at work, she badly needed a quiet space like this.

The little girl stayed inside playing. I left her alone. Perhaps this is the best way to enjoy yourself: a blank sheet of paper, all sorts of strange colours, drawing whatever you like, with no one standing beside you telling you what you should do—not even anyone telling you that it has to be art.

She brought me her finished drawing. I thought it was beautiful. I asked her to sign it and told her to take it home to show her family. Then she asked me for four tea bags and another piece of chocolate. She said they were for her grandmother.

Later, while tidying the guestbook, I found the message left by the first couple who had asked me to open the exhibition earlier that afternoon. Small and quiet, it sat at the top of an almost blank page, written in Korean:

At 6:30, it was really cold outside. I had just been thinking that surely no one else would come when a woman suddenly walked in. I welcomed her and handed her a piece of chocolate.

"It's too cold," I said. "Have a little energy."

She was pleased. Then she asked me, "Where is Jiangnan?"

I was surprised. No one had ever asked me that before.

She said she had lived in Shanghai for many years. Her son had been born there, but she had never heard of a place called Jiangnan. She only knew Jing'an, a district in Shanghai.

I laughed, opened a map and showed her. Jiangnan is this whole region around Shanghai, south of the Yangtze River, full of rivers and lakes. It is not an official place name, I explained, but this is what we call it.

She said the paintings reminded her of her home in Shanghai. She missed the city terribly, but because of her son's education and her religious beliefs, she had had to leave. I asked where she was from.

"South Africa," she said.

She said she no longer had a home to return to.

For a moment, I did not know what to say. I thought perhaps these paintings had given her a little comfort for the Shanghai she missed. When she left, she thanked me and said she would bring her son back to see the place where he had been born.

Five minutes before closing, a bright, cheerful boy came down the steps. It was the South African mother's son. His class had just finished, and his mother had brought him over in the last few minutes so that he could see something of the place where he had been born.

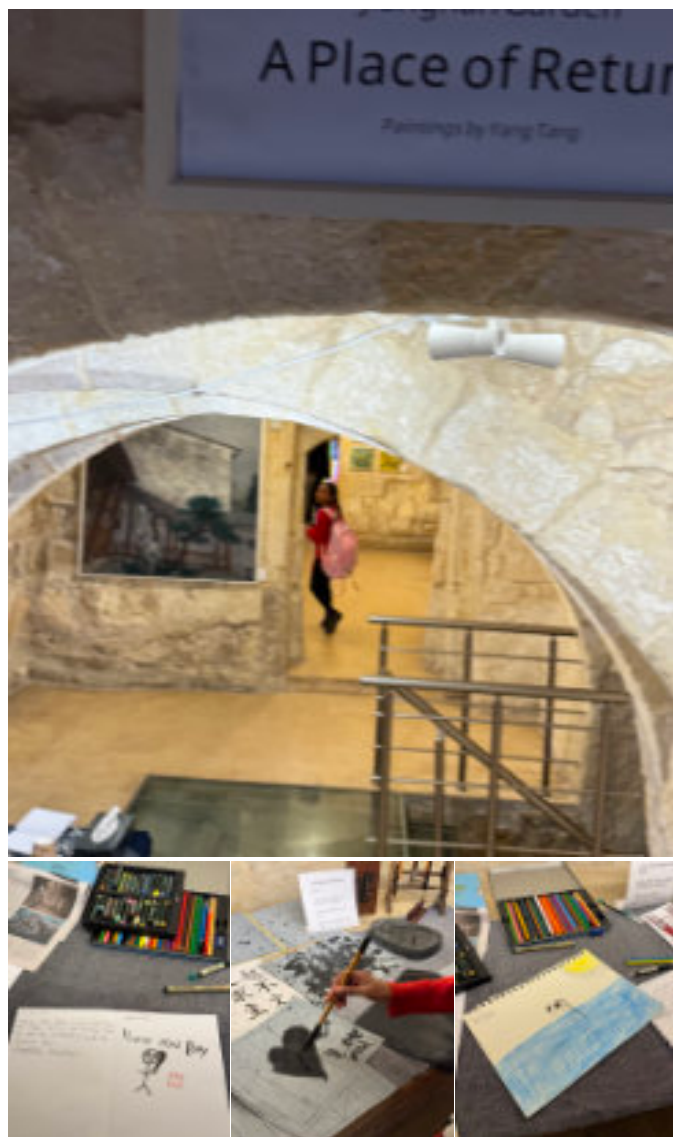
Mother and son looked at the paintings together, talking quietly. I deliberately lowered my head and kept reading so that I would not disturb them. At the very last minute, they came out and thanked me.

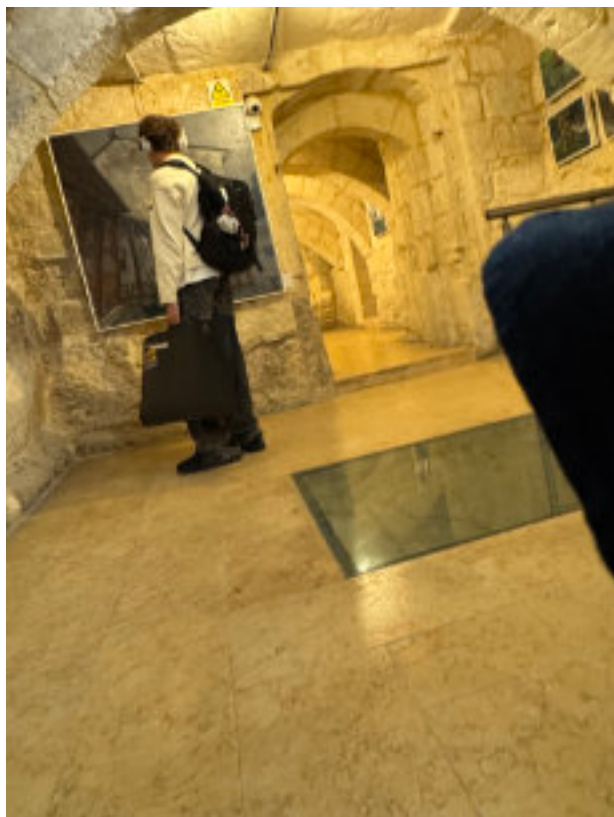
I asked the boy whether he remembered anything about China.

“Not much,” he said. “But I remember there were lakes.”

He said he would definitely go to Shanghai one day.

What a perfect ending.





17-5

(Tuesday, January 13, 2026)

Volunteer duty again today. I made Lao Cui's lunch, packed myself a little box with a boiled egg, a banana, and some biscuits, and hurried off to catch the ferry.

On the steep downhill street, I saw the old woman who always seemed to be sitting on those steps. She held up one finger and pressed it to her lips. I wondered if she wanted something to eat. Then I remembered—I actually had chocolate in my bag. I went over, opened the packet, and gave her three pieces of mint chocolate.

“One euro,” she said.

Oh.

I told her I was sorry, but I had no cash. She reached out and took the chocolate. I looked at her face, deeply lined and spotted, like the fishing net my landlord V had used for fifty years. I wondered whose grandmother she was. I had neither the time nor the courage to stop and talk with her.

Lovely weather today, though still very windy. Thankfully, the ferry was running. Pigeons were flying about on the road, foraging and playing, and there was the body of another pigeon, run over by a car. Life really is a strange thing. It is full of joy, and full of sorrow too. Time feels endless, and then suddenly it seems to have slipped away and vanished somewhere.

Two of the morning volunteers at MSA—an older gentleman and an archivist from the National Archives—asked me to open the basement for them after they finished work. They gave the exhibition a quick five-

minute look, and then I went back to work.

At four, I finished what I was doing, filled my hot water bottle, turned on every light in the basement, sat down behind the little round table, and continued reading *The Divine Comedy* with Bach playing. I had no idea who I would meet today, but I was letting everything take its own course.

M wrote to say she would come next Tuesday. I was really looking forward to it. After so many emails back and forth, she had watched me go from preparing the exhibition, to the opening, to meeting all these different visitors. It almost felt as though she had become a partner in putting the exhibition together.

No one came in for the first hour. At first, two people were talking outside in Maltese. I could not understand a word, so although their voices were a little loud, they did not disturb my reading at all. Eventually, it grew quiet.

I was following Dante, led by Virgil, through the first circle of Hell, then the second, and now into the third. Suddenly someone ducked through the doorway. I looked up.

It was my landlady!

What a surprise. She had already come to the opening. She said she wanted to come again. She happened to have a Chinese class in Valletta that day, so she had stopped by to see me first. She had also brought me a box of lemon cake she had made herself.

We talked for a long time. She told me about her Chinese class, and we practised water calligraphy together with some of the Chinese characters she was learning. She clearly had a gift for languages and was studying very seriously. The characters in her practice book were far neater than anything I used to write as a child.

After my landlady left, I read for a while. Just before half past six, an

older woman came in wearing a long black down coat. She greeted me gently, walked around the exhibition on her own, then came out and asked, “Are all these paintings for sale?”

It was the first time anyone had asked me that so directly, and I felt a little caught off guard. She had to ask a second time before I really registered what she meant.

“Yes,” I said. “There’s a price list inside.”

So I took her to see it. She said she especially liked the large courtyard painting, *Autumn in the Old City*, and the shapes of the ginkgo leaves. She was from Sweden. She spent most of her time in Malta, though sometimes she went back to Sweden. She said the colours in my work were very harmonious—the kind you don’t tire of looking at.

6:50.

I asked Lao Cui if he was on his way to pick me up. He said he had forgotten.

Alright. It looked like another late one.

I sat quietly reading, a little cold but very comfortable. I had reached page 150 of *Inferno*.

At a quarter past seven, that tiny figure of a girl slipped in again and went straight to the back without hesitation. I followed to see what she was doing. She splashed some water onto the calligraphy paper and wanted to play with the stamp. But my name seal had picked up too many fibres and the carved lines had become blurred. So she simply stuck her finger straight into the seal paste and pressed a perfectly clear fingerprint onto the paper.

I laughed so hard.

“I have to close now,” I told her. “Go and clean your finger. And today you can share some lemon cake with your grandmother.”

So she went off happily with three pieces of lemon cake and a piece of chocolate. I turned off the lights and closed the door. Just then, Lao Cui

pulled up outside.

The first week of the exhibition was over.

Tomorrow and the day after are days off.

I get to go out and play!!



Week 2

17–6

(Friday, January 16, 2026)

For me, Friday is the start of a new week.

I finished lunch early, grabbed my bag, and took the ferry to Valletta on my own. The weather was overcast, and before long it started to rain. On the way, I received an email from M. She said she had already received five responses from the people she had contacted and was working hard on the Sunday article. Apart from T and my landlady A, I barely knew any of the other five. One of them I had never even met.

That they were willing, at M's invitation, to write something about my opening was completely unexpected. I did not even feel it was appropriate to write and thank them. I thought they probably had not written those comments in order to be thanked by me.

I arrived at MSA just before one and went upstairs first to see the photography exhibition that had opened on the same day as mine. There were only twelve photographs spread across five large galleries, but the installation was excellent, especially the professional lighting. The works seemed almost to glow with life in the dim space, like our own gaze looking into the depths of the sea.

The colour and texture of the photographs were beautiful—real and dreamlike at once—and worked perfectly with the bare shoulders and backs of the figures. The curatorial text, though, was completely beyond me.

It was still drizzling, so I did not even bother putting the sandwich board out. M had written that the weather was so bad she wondered

whether anyone would come. She did not know Zhuangzi's idea of depending on nothing. I had absolutely no expectations of meeting anyone. Whoever came or did not come, it was all just fate. Reading on my own was another kind of pleasure.

It was 1:45. And true enough, hardly anyone had come. Two passers-by stopped to take a photo by the door. Another man peered in. I smiled and said, "Welcome," but he shook his head and walked away.

Then two very polished young men came in. Polished really is the word. Especially the shorter one, wearing a beige checked mid-length coat, as though he had stepped straight out of a film. They stayed for about five minutes, then smiled and said goodbye. I felt too shy to photograph them, so I photographed what they had written instead.

Right after them, a very elegant young woman came in, wearing a long coat and carrying a transparent umbrella. She very politely left her umbrella by the entrance, so I handed her a tissue to dry her rain-wet hands.

I think people who travel alone tend to prefer quiet, so I did not disturb her at all. I only quietly took one photo. She stayed for a full twenty minutes. When she came out, I gave up the idea of trying to chat, simply said goodbye, and watched her elegant figure disappear into the light rain.

Half past two.

Three men and one woman came in, all soaked from the rain. They greeted me politely and went inside. Half an hour later, one of the young men came out to talk to me. It turned out they were A's students, visiting Malta from Hungary for the weekend. A had sent them to see my exhibition!

So I gave them a special introduction to the Chinese calligraphy, paintings, and various objects displayed in the inner room. They said the

Chinese brush was impossibly difficult to control.

After the four students left, I cleaned the seal paste and the seals, then moved the tissues and rubbish bin into the inner room. Some people might need them but perhaps feel awkward taking them in front of me. Inside, they could feel more at ease.

As I came out, I met a young woman who had just arrived, standing alone and looking carefully at the paintings. I said hello and left her to enjoy the quiet.

I was surprised. It was only just after three, and already quite a few people had come. The young woman stayed for about ten minutes. As she left, she said, "It's very cosy!"

Then a middle-aged man carrying two bags peered in and asked, "Is there a concert here?" I said there might be a concert next door that evening, though I was not sure. This was a painting exhibition. He glanced inside and said, "I don't have time to look at paintings right now, thanks."

At four, a Chinese woman came in. She said she had seen information about my exhibition on RedNote. She looked at the paintings while talking with me. We started with materials and media, moved on to the themes of the work, and eventually talked about the differences between Chinese and Western languages and ways of expression.

She said she was an English teacher and was writing a book in English. I envied her precise command of English so much.

We talked non-stop for more than an hour. Quite a few visitors came through during that time. In the end, the two of us simply stood outside the door chatting in the light rain, leaving everyone else inside to enjoy the space freely.

During that stretch, the visitors included two Asian-looking people speaking English, a young man in yellow, and two couples. As the

second couple were leaving, they stopped to talk with me.

They were dressed so neatly that I assumed they were tourists, but it turned out they were from Gozo. They had already been upstairs to see the photography exhibition and said they liked both shows very much. I thought they were probably people with some professional connection to art.

The man said, “People are part of nature too, aren’t they?” He said that was what the photography exhibition upstairs was about. Looking at my paintings, he felt something similar—that people and nature seemed to merge into one another.

A little after five, Z came again. As usual, she smiled at me and walked straight inside.

Then two young men came in too. After looking at the paintings, they stayed to play with the interactive things. I went in, gave Z a sheet of drawing paper and two pieces of chocolate, and left them all to enjoy themselves.

Before leaving, the two men told me they really liked the paintings and had also enjoyed the calligraphy and stamping. One was from Mexico and the other from Spain. They both lived in Madrid now and had come to Malta for the weekend. Even after two days of rain, they said, Malta still beat cold Madrid.

Z finally decided she had had enough fun and went home. She gave me the drawing she had just made, signed with her name, and took five pieces of chocolate with her.

I read for a while. At six, a very thin couple came in. They entered quietly, stayed for a while, and left just as quietly.

Just before half past six, a mother and daughter came in. They were from Slovenia and said it was seventeen degrees below zero there. They



especially liked the abstract ginkgo-leaf series. The daughter said the works stirred a lot of feelings in her.

Then another young couple came in. They looked slowly, photographing the works one by one, and stayed for about fifteen minutes before leaving, also taking a postcard.

6:42.

The gallery was quiet again. The rain outside seemed to have stopped too. Lao Cui said he was driving over to pick me up. It was not too cold today. I had not even used my hot water bottle.

I had read quite a lot, but I did not feel I had really got into the book. Too many people had come in, and my concentration kept being interrupted. Perhaps tomorrow I could draw instead. After all, I was here mainly to share the space. I could not hope that no one would come simply because I wanted to read.

Seven o'clock.

I tidied the postcards and seals in the last compartment, turned off the video, and worked my way out, switching off the lights one by one. The basement sank into darkness and silence.

I closed the door. Lao Cui's car had just pulled up outside. The stone steps were slick with rain.

I counted.

Twenty-five people today, including Z, who had now come for the third time.

17-7

(Saturday, January 17, 2026)

Saturday today.

When I woke up, I saw on Facebook that there had been enormous hail overnight. The square in Rabat had somehow been covered in a thick layer of ice. But yesterday's gloom had completely lifted. Today was clear, and the sun was out and warm.

I also received an email from M. She hoped the good weekend weather would bring me more visitors, and that someone might buy a piece. She also told me she would be using another weekend edition of *The Malta Independent*, which meant this would be the third time her column carried something about my exhibition. I felt that she and I were working on two different levels—she in the public sphere, me here in the private, on-the-ground one. Two parallel lines pushing the same thing forward. It made me very happy, simply to feel that someone in this world was connected with me.

I was opening the basement door when a middle-aged Chinese woman came over and greeted me. She said she had already been waiting for an hour. I felt terrible. I turned on the lights for her, and we started talking while she looked around.

As with the Chinese visitors before her, she was clearly much more interested in how I had managed to put on an exhibition than in the paintings themselves. To her, getting an exhibition into the newspaper was a huge success. She wanted me to tell her how she might turn her own paintings and those of her family in China into an exhibition.

So I shared everything she wanted to know, including C's To-Do List email. But I also told her that the way I had prepared my exhibition could only be a reference, not a template. She needed to make her own curatorial plan according to her own purpose and the resources she had. We talked for more than an hour. Before leaving, she thanked me for holding nothing back. I was grateful to her too, for sharing her own thoughts with me.

While I was talking with my Chinese friend, four visitors came through: an Asian-looking young woman, a Western man, and a couple. The couple stayed for quite a long time. As they were leaving, the woman told me she had been following me on Facebook because she liked my wildflower paintings.

"These wildflowers are so small," she said. "Normally you hardly notice them. But when I saw your paintings, I suddenly realised how beautiful they are. You should make an exhibition just about these wildflowers."

So I told her that my next exhibition at MSA would be exactly that.

At 2:30, another middle-aged couple came in. The woman asked, "Is your theme gardens?"

I said, "The images are gardens, but the theme is called A Place of Return. It points towards a quiet place in the inner world."

She agreed completely. Her husband was French and had lived in Malta for more than ten years. They took their time looking around, and I did not want to disturb them too much. When they left, they took two cards. The wife told me she had seen me at MSA's Christmas Mass, where I had told her about the archive volunteer project I was working on.

Then an extremely beautiful young woman in a strappy top walked in. She only had time to look at a few paintings in the first room before her companion outside started calling her. She smiled and hurried away.

Two more women came. They hesitated at the entrance, unsure whether



to come in. I smiled and said, “Welcome. It’s free.” So they came inside, walked around, tried the water calligraphy, and then went on with their lovely weekend.

To be honest, I felt a little bad pulling people out of the sunshine and down into this basement to see an exhibition. It felt as though I were stealing time from their beautiful sunny holiday.

Another middle-aged woman came in. She stayed for about three minutes, walked around once, and left. I only caught a photo of her hurried back as she went.

At 3:09, the gallery was empty again, and I went back to *The Divine Comedy*.

I could not help talking it over with Apollo: why did the Chinese artists I met seem so much more interested in asking me how to put on an exhibition than in talking about my work?

I answered all their questions without holding anything back, because throughout the preparation of this exhibition, every person I met, every bit of attention and support, all the kindness that moved me, had been given without asking for anything in return. I wanted that kindness to keep flowing. But there was still a small question nagging at me. Why had the young Nigerian artist, who also wanted to hold an exhibition, talked with me instead about sharing work and feelings?

Apollo agreed with my willingness to share. It suggested that Chinese speakers in Malta may face a greater linguistic and cultural distance than speakers of other Indo-European languages. English and languages such as Spanish are not from the same branch, but they are still much more closely related to one another than either is to Chinese. That distance can make entering a new environment more difficult.

Then Apollo helped me push the thought further. I wanted to write this sentence down as something important I had learned, because it

touched on the meaning and value of art:

“Once you give away everything that can be copied, art is left with only one thing: why you had to do this in the first place. And that is something no one else can do for you.”

At 3:40, a couple came in. They were very quiet, but they stopped in front of the first painting by the entrance for more than half a minute. I realised they were the kind of people who needed space, so I slipped outside on my own. I stood in the sun, using my phone to share a few thoughts with friends back in China.

Twenty-five minutes passed and they were still inside. This is my favourite kind of visitor. I do not need to say anything. They will find their own connection here.

By 4:12, the couple still had not come out. Then two groups arrived at once—seven people in total. I stayed outside watching the sunset, leaving the space to them.

The couple finally came out, each holding a stamped postcard. Then a mother and daughter went in. I stayed outside, quietly recording, hoping they could enjoy a free space without a member of staff nearby.

Five young women came out, holding up their postcards and taking a group photo in front of the poster by the door. The sight made me feel warm, and I quietly took a photo too.

The mother and daughter came out as well. They clearly wanted to tell me something, but they spoke almost no English, only Spanish. I walked to a place where I could get a phone signal and used Apollo to have a simple conversation with them.

They wanted to tell me that they had travelled in China the year before—Shanghai, Suzhou, and Beijing. They thought Suzhou was incredibly beautiful, and my paintings reminded them of that trip. I told them that I also loved Spain and Spanish artists, and that I was planning a trip to

Spain. What a lovely kind of encounter.

At 4:35, two young women came in and looked around slowly on their own. My daughter video-called me from the US. As a remote visitor, she demanded to see the exhibition, and we talked for another ten minutes or so.

After the two young women had stayed for quite a while, they left. I went into the inner room to tidy up and saw that the guestbook was full of writing in languages I could not read. So I asked Apollo to translate the Spanish into Chinese:

"Thank you so much for bringing your art out into the world."

"Thank you for letting me see Chinese culture and beauty, and for offering a space that nourishes the spirit. — DR."

Then a Chinese woman I had met once before came specially to see me and talk. She had started learning gongbi painting a year earlier. She looked carefully at my paintings, then flipped through my sketchbook. It was full of old reading notes, quick sketches, scattered thoughts... almost a living specimen of my whole life of learning to paint.

We talked for a long time about the state of art in China, about the three years of the pandemic, and about our own feelings. While we were talking, a family of three came in, followed by an older couple. My friend and I stayed outside the gallery so that we would not disturb them. Eventually our long conversation came to an end.

Then an elderly gentleman came in. He looked down into the basement, then over at MSA next door, and said he had never known MSA had an exhibition space underground. He stepped straight in without hesitation. He stayed inside for quite a while. When he came out, we talked. He said it was a very beautiful space and told me that the basement had once been used for storing wine. The ridged slope further down had been designed that way to make it easier to control the barrels as they were moved through. Then a young couple came in. They bumped their

heads, laughed, and carried on walking through the exhibition.

At 6:20, the visitors had gone, so I went back inside. There in the guestbook was an extremely charming little drawing with a message beside it. Apollo translated the Russian for me: “Such a heart-warming joy.”

At 6:30, two elderly gentlemen came in, smiling brightly. They walked straight into the second room and began reading the English on the wall aloud: “Jiangnan...”

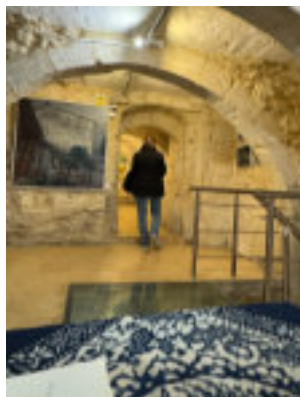
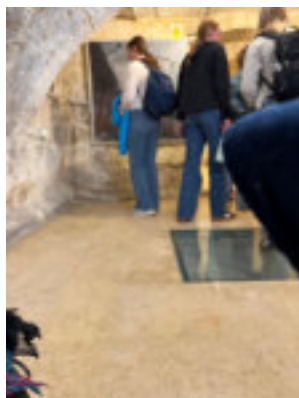
I suddenly realised that perhaps I really should disappear from the first room completely. Maybe then people would be willing to stay there longer too. No matter how old we are, everyone seems to feel more comfortable in a free space without a stranger nearby. The moment someone else is present, there is an invisible pressure.

I was genuinely grateful now that this gallery had such a good, cosy hidden room. That was really the heart of the whole exhibition. I stayed outside, leaving them the space.

Another young couple walked in. It was already 6:45. I had not expected anyone to come this late.

The two young people stayed until almost seven. When they came out, the young woman introduced herself. She worked with art, and a friend of hers had joined one of Malta’s largest real-estate companies. They wanted to fill a wall in the office, about ten metres long, with paintings—both as decoration and as works that could be sold to people coming there to buy property. The plan was to show one artist’s work for a month, then rotate to the next.

She invited me to their opening exhibition on February 19. Apparently, the first artist they had already signed, an Italian, would paint live at the opening.





“Painting live?!” I muttered to myself. I really did not think I had the nerve to paint in front of an audience.

Lao Cui drove me home. Over dinner, I asked him, “Are we short of money? Do we have to sell paintings?” “We’re not short of money at all,” he said. Thank goodness. I did not have to sell paintings, so I did not need to consider this kind of collaboration.

Thirty-seven people today. I did not talk too much. I mostly recorded the encounters. Perhaps tomorrow I could sit outside on the steps instead. Then the visitors might feel more at ease inside.

17–8

(Sunday, January 18, 2026)

Good weather on Sunday.

I had no idea Malta could have so many tourists. The ferry from Sliema to Valletta was so full that I had to let two boats go before I could get on. While waiting, I bought a small bunch of daffodils. I also wrote a sign for the table saying that I was outside the gallery, leaving both the visitors and myself some open space.

I had just finished tidying the postcards inside and topping up the inkstone with water when I came out to find a man already looking around the gallery. He saw me and said hello in Chinese, with remarkably good pronunciation. He was Maltese. The year before, he had spent three weeks travelling through China, from Beijing to Xi'an.

He asked how I felt about moving to Malta, and when I told him I had never really thought of myself as an artist, he was genuinely surprised. “These paintings, this restraint in the colours, this poetry in the feeling— isn’t that exactly what art is?” I was moved, but did not try to explain further.

I thanked him, took my cushion, and moved outside, leaving him alone with the work. More than twenty minutes passed and he still had not come out. Outside, I managed to point a group of Russians towards the underground secret garden nearby. A few passers-by peered in at the poster. Some part of me still wanted to be sitting inside, smiling and saying, “Welcome,” but I held it back. Whether they looked in, went in, or moved on—today I wanted to respect whatever they chose for themselves.



Tourists were everywhere, coming and going. They were curious about the sign. Some read it aloud and peered in. One child happily announced, "It's a free art show!" and was dragged off by his parents. Another mother told her child there was a free exhibition, but the child had absolutely no interest and kept charging ahead. Some people did go in. A couple went in, played for a while, and came out. An older man went in and came back out.

The Maltese man who spoke Chinese finally emerged. He saw me sitting to one side and thanked me. I asked what he thought. He said he loved it and pulled out his phone to show me the photographs he had taken, one by one.

To my surprise, his favourite turned out to be a small watercolour study I had made in 2018 while working on Outside the Quiet Garden. So I said, "Then I'll give this one to you." He was astonished, but I gave him no chance to refuse. I simply took the watercolour out and handed it to him.

We kept talking about art and feeling. He had completely understood the wind chimes on the pagoda and the black-tiled roofs. I told him how I had felt when I finished reading the farewell letter Ding Cong's wife had written to her late husband, beneath those black-tiled roofs. We also talked about that feeling of meeting the wrong person and not knowing what to say, then meeting the right person and suddenly having so much to talk about. Even as complete strangers, even across a language barrier, that sense of being on the same wavelength can still come through.

Alright. Now I could sit outside in the sun again and get back to reading.

1:50.

Another couple went in. The woman looked Asian. Then three young men saw that the exhibition was free and went in happily too. I held back my curiosity and did not peek.

The three young men stayed for about fifteen minutes before coming out. I asked where they were from.

“Manchester, England.”

I nodded to myself. I suppose British taste feels quite close to my own. Perhaps that is because I have always admired so much of British culture and art.

Then four more young women went inside. I suddenly felt I had made exactly the right decision—leaving the flowers and chocolate inside and myself outside.

2:15.

Two people went in. I had just glanced at their backs when I looked up and saw M arriving. It had been such a long time. I was so happy to see her, and we hugged hello. She was my colleague from the MSA volunteer project. She told me that she had been having trouble with her leg and had been unable to walk properly for a while, which was why she had missed the opening.

I showed her the objects I had brought from China and explained some of the paintings she could not quite understand, such as the Taihu rocks and the black-tiled roofs.

Then a Chinese friend arrived with her children. On the way, she had bought me that day's copy of *The Malta Independent* and brought some scones her daughter had made. The mother was a classic science-minded person. She told me that the paintings gave her absolutely no feeling at all, and that she had never thought of expressing anything through art.

I laughed. I offered her the daffodils I had bought. She waved them off. “No. They'll wilt in a couple of days and then I'll just have to throw them away.”

I found this hilarious. “Fine. Then I'll give them to your daughter.” The little girl accepted them happily.

M and my Chinese friend's family stayed for more than half an hour. During that time, five or six people came and went. I did not have time to greet them properly, so I just smiled at them.

After my friends left, I went back outside to sit in the sun. A family of four went into the gallery, and I set the scones and chocolate out together on the table, hoping they might try some too. After they left, I went inside to add more water to the inkstone and glanced at the guestbook. It turned out that the family of four were the silversmith family from next door.

Then a father and son came in. They looked very carefully. A middle-aged couple were peering in from the doorway. I told them it was free, and they were delighted and went straight inside.

It was still cold outside and my hands were freezing, so I decided to go in and fill my hot water bottle. Just then, a young man came in. I offered him one of the scones the little girl had made. He took one and walked inside eating it. I stepped outside again, hugging the hot water bottle and watching the tourists passing by. It was Sunday. Most of the people passing through were probably tourists, enjoying this quiet winter Valletta.

Then three more young women went in. I quietly took a photo of their backs disappearing inside.

4:10.

The sun had gone and the wind was picking up. I went back into the gallery and talked with the visitors in the innermost room. The young man was from Serbia. He said there were many Chinese people there and that relations between the two countries were very good. He especially liked my copies of the trees from the Mustard Seed Garden Manual and was fascinated by the almost magical water-calligraphy paper.

The three young women were from Italy. They had come to Malta for work only a week earlier. They filled an entire sheet copying Chinese characters and asked me to explain what each one meant.

Two young women came in, stayed for ten minutes, and said goodbye.

Then three older visitors came steadily down the steps. All three had white hair and wore light-coloured clothes. They were laughing brightly. Each took a scone and looked around slowly. I really do love those wrinkled, open, optimistic smiles.

They were from Sweden and had lived here for eleven years. They asked where in China I was from, then told me their favourite country in Asia was South Korea. They had been there three times because they had got married there and had beautiful memories of it.

Three more women came. I offered them scones too. It was nearly half past five. Everything outside had grown quiet. I could hear their soft conversation inside, mixed with Bach's piano.

Everyone who came to see the exhibition was very quiet. Even their conversations were soft, as though no one wanted to break the gentleness of the space. M said that listening to the music inside was so beautiful that she hardly wanted to come out. I remembered that she was extremely sensitive to noise. When we worked together, even faint music outside could bother her. She really must have liked the Goldberg Variations.

The three women thanked me as they left. One of them gave me her business card and added me on Instagram. It turned out she was from Catalonia and was the mother of a child with a disability. She encouraged her child to make art using a long pen strapped to the head, and then turned the work into T-shirts to sell.

I do not know what it feels like, day after day, to be a mother in that situation. There can hardly be anything more painful than watching your

own child suffer. I admired the strength of both mother and child and regretted not trying harder to talk with her. But perhaps, being awkward with words myself, I would not have known how to offer comfort or encouragement anyway.

At least Bach kept them company for ten quiet minutes.

Six o'clock.

It was completely dark outside. No one had come in for quite a while, and I had reached the last few pages of *Inferno*.

At 6:40, two people walked in. I was reading the final page when I suddenly heard someone say in Chinese, "Yuyuan."

I looked up. Two Chinese women were standing in front of Outside the Quiet Garden. The older woman said, "That's the road right beside my home in Shanghai."

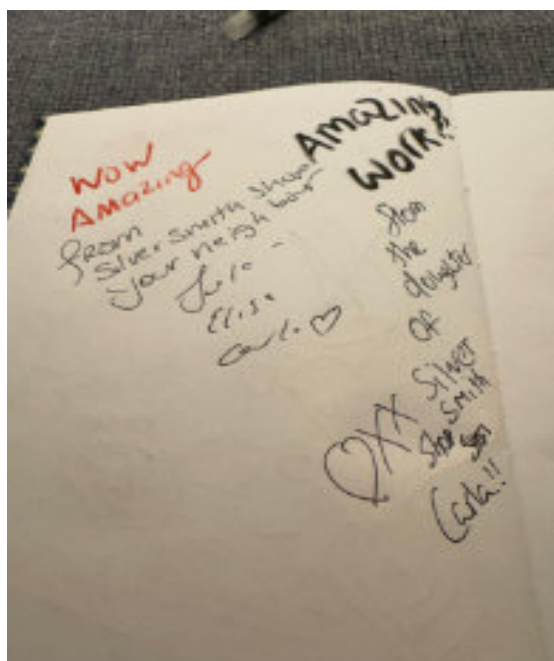
Fellow Shanghainese, as it turned out. They had seen the exhibition on RedNote and had come specially.

Lao Cui was already waiting outside. Then another couple came in. I did not want to disturb them, so I quietly moved towards the entrance. They were looking so carefully that they actually picked up my curatorial text and went through the works one by one with it.

Finally, at 19:17, they politely said goodbye. The wind had already begun to pick up outside. Tomorrow and the day after were both forecast to be very windy.

I counted.

Forty-eight people today.





17-9

(Monday, January 19, 2026)

January really is Malta's worst month for weather. First a cold snap, then heavy rain, then hail, and now strong winds on top of it all.

The wind was ferocious today. The girl from Gozo did not make it to MSA, so I was archiving alone. I did not finish until five past four.

I opened the gallery door, and the wind blew it straight back at me. So I dragged the sandwich board outside and used it to wedge the door against the wall—safe from the wind, with no risk of it slamming around or causing an accident.

I had barely finished setting things up when a young Asian-looking man walked in. I was surprised. I had assumed hardly anyone would come today. Visitors from East Asia often seemed to find something immediately familiar in the exhibition. In the guestbook, I noticed that the Shanghai woman from last night had written: Thank you for bringing Shanghai to Malta.

The wind was truly wild. Flecks of dust kept sifting down from the ceiling, and I could barely keep my eyes open.

A young woman came in holding a drink and asked if she could bring it inside. "Of course." Then an older couple came in too, their hair completely wrecked by the wind. I laughed and said, "Take your time."

The young woman came out to say goodbye. She was from Latvia, and her holiday would end the next day. She loved the interactive parts of the exhibition and said there were not many shows where visitors could

participate so much. The older couple left too. Then a loud bang came from outside. Something had probably been blown over by the wind.

At 5:20, two young people came in. The man asked, "Can we have a look?" I said, "Of course. It's free." They went in happily, then he came back out and asked, "Can we take photos?"

My God. Are European visitors really this conscientious?!

"Of course you can," I said.

I sat outside and could hear the two of them talking quietly as they looked around. A full forty minutes passed before they came out. Curious, I asked where they were from.

"Ukraine."

They had arrived the week before and would leave on Thursday. I wanted to ask a thousand questions right then, but could not bring myself to ask any of them.

The young man very politely told me what he felt about the work, and we talked a little about the exhibition design and the use of space. Maybe they were art students of some kind. Perhaps that was why they had become so absorbed in the space.

Everyone carries so many stories behind them. I feel enormous curiosity, but I hold it back. Even this brief time together already felt like a kind of good fortune.

I wished them well and watched them walk away into the wind and the coming dark.

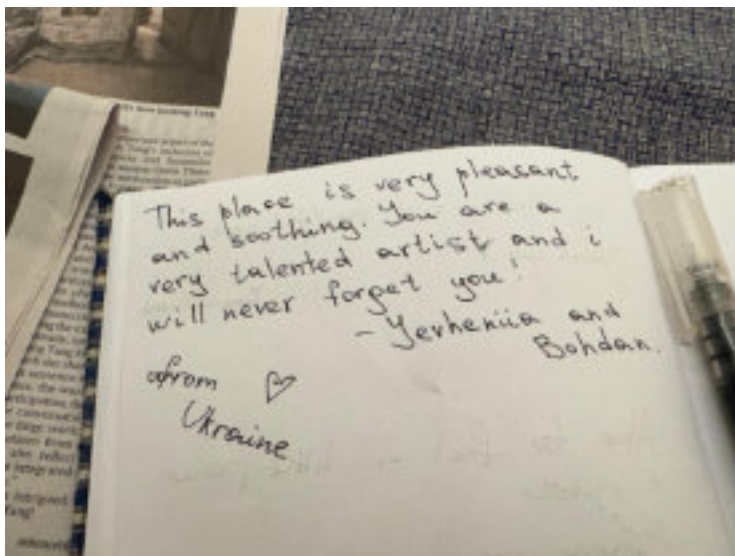
At 6:40, I was reading quietly, assuming no one else would come, when another young couple walked in. They looked almost otherworldly. The young woman's eyes were bright and sparkling. The man had long silver-white hair tied up in a bun, like an elf out of *The Lord of the Rings*.

They greeted me politely and looked around slowly. The boy from Elf-land hummed quietly along with the Goldberg Variations as he walked. I sat outside, utterly charmed just listening. About ten minutes later, they came out, said goodbye, and thanked me for the card.

I checked the weather for the coming week. Truly awful. More strong winds, followed by more heavy rain.

So before closing, while no one was in the gallery, I filmed a first-person walkthrough of the exhibition. I planned to send it to M., so she would not have to brave the wind just to come and see it.

Nine people today. Finished the first day of Dante's journey through Purgatory.



17-10

(Thursday, January 22, 2026)

Storm Harry had thrown everyone's plans off, so I moved what should have been Tuesday's MSA archive work and gallery shift to today.

When I stepped back into the basement, turning the lights on one by one, it felt oddly unfamiliar. Not like three days had passed, but at least three weeks. The place felt like a small shelter. Harry had caused so much damage outside, but the only trace of it in here was a layer of limestone dust from the ceiling covering my tablecloth. I cleaned it off and sat down quietly.

Good weather today. No wind, no rain, and not even that cold. There were not many people on the street, and no one had come in yet. Just as well. I had some things I wanted to record. Two things, specifically.

The first is about the gallery lighting.

On Monday, D came specially to ask whether we would sell MSA the lighting setup we had built for the basement. She said everyone thought it worked very well and hoped future exhibitors could continue using it.

I told her the whole system had originally been designed as a temporary solution. Everything had to be removable without drilling into the walls, so we used extendable curtain rods to hold it in place. To save money, some of the lighting tracks had been cut in half.

When I got home, I asked Lao Cui to put together a full list of materials, suppliers, prices, and the problems with the setup, and send it to D. The total came to a little over eight hundred euros. We were not planning to charge anything for the design or installation. If they

wanted to buy it, great. If not, that was fine too. We had already counted the whole cost as part of the exhibition.

This afternoon, while I was doing volunteer work, P, who seems to keep everything at MSA running, suddenly appeared in the archive room. He asked, “How are you?” Then he fell silent.

I brought up the lighting. He said D had already printed out the email and price list for him, and that he was thinking about it. He stood quietly for a moment, then went to the corner and switched on the electric heater.

“I’m not cold,” I said. “You don’t need to turn it on.”

He ignored me, switched it on anyway, and walked away without a word.

The second thing is about the response the exhibition has been getting.

Since I did not want to do interviews or push for more mainstream media coverage, M tried a different approach. She asked me for the email addresses of five people who had attended the opening and invited each of them to write a short comment.

She had originally planned to run them in last Sunday’s weekend edition of *The Malta Independent*. But once all five responses came in, she did not want to cut any of them, so three were published this week, with the other two held for the following Sunday. She also asked me for a few excerpts from the diary I had been keeping in the basement, along with some photographs.

If another piece really appeared next Sunday, this would already be the third time this small exhibition had been covered. It moved me, and it also unsettled me a little.

I did not feel that my exhibition deserved quite this much public space, and what I really wanted to express was still in progress—these daily records themselves. But M seemed to have sensed, almost instinctively, that there was something here beyond the exhibition itself.

The other thing on my mind was the commentary. I had already read four of the pieces. Each person wrote from their own professional

background and experience, but every single one was positive. The fifth was from an Italian architect I had never even met. Judging from his email to M, I doubted his would be any different.

Of course I knew the praise was sincere. But I was beginning to wonder: did I really need this much praise? What I wanted more was different views—even critical ones. Not simple rejection, but honest, reasoned, professionally grounded feedback.

I talked this over with Apollo. I said everything now seemed almost too smooth: the exhibition, the space, the media, the reviews, even these records.

It all looked as though it had been designed in advance. The framework had been, but almost none of what was now happening around it had. It had simply grown, bit by bit, on its own.

How could I stay open to real criticism without being pulled around by outside judgement? How could I hold on to my independence while continuing to develop in a public space? I would have to let time give me the answer slowly.

While I was sorting through archive material that afternoon, mentioned that MSA would be holding a commemorative event the following Monday and that the President would be attending. My first thought was whether I should come in specially to open the gallery, so that perhaps the President and the media might happen to come down and see the exhibition.

I killed that thought immediately. I should stick to the rhythm I had set for myself and not let anything outside it change my course.

Except, apparently, storms.

At 4:20, two women passing by came in. They looked rather serious, said hi, and walked straight through to the second room. I suddenly realised I should go outside, so I moved myself out again.

Apparently that did not make them stay any longer. They came out soon after me and, still looking serious, said, “Bye.”

Sitting outside for too long got cold, so I went back in to fill my hot water bottle and get ready to read. It was almost five. No one else had come in, nor was anyone likely to come specially today, since this had never been a scheduled opening day.

At 5:03, three bohemian-looking people came in, two men and one woman. One of the men stepped inside, glanced around, then came straight over to my table and started pouring out praise. His eagerness made me uncomfortable.

I said, "Thank you," and immediately slipped outside. I would rather stand in the cold wind than face that much enthusiasm. At least go inside and look at the paintings first before deciding whether you want to praise me.

Then a dark-eyed, dark-haired couple crossed the road specially and stood peering into the basement entrance. I was sitting nearby and could not help myself.

"It's a painting exhibition," I said.

They replied with several different words. Definitely Italian or Spanish, but I could not understand them. Eventually I realised they were asking whether it cost anything.

"Free!"

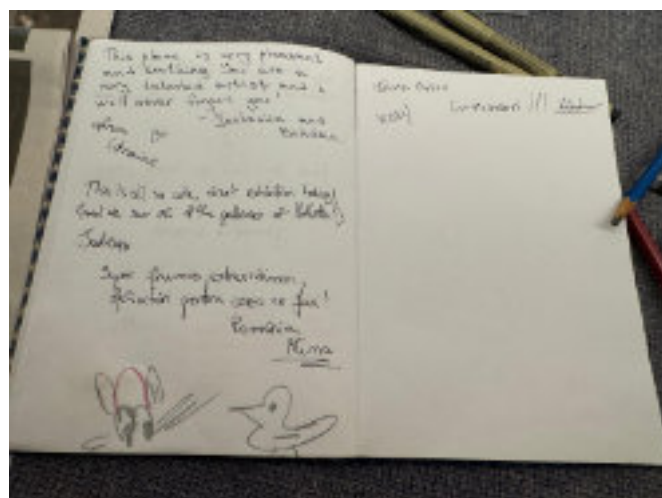
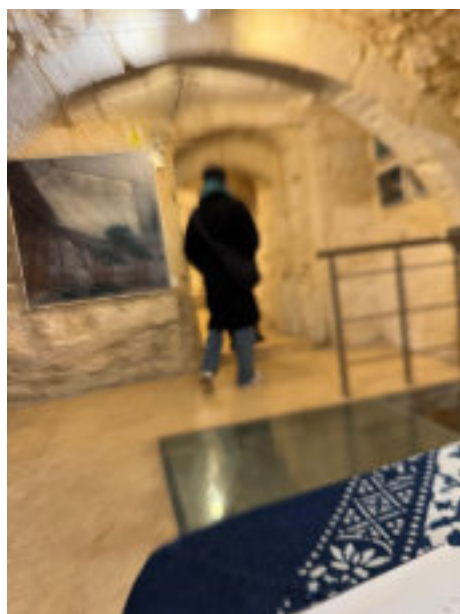
That they understood immediately. They went in. I stayed outside, quietly laughing to myself.

None of them stayed for more than about five minutes. But after they left, I found a wonderfully funny note in the guestbook. And a little duck.

A white-haired, white-bearded man in a long coat passed by, stopped to look at the sign for a while, then walked on. A very beautiful woman looked at the sandwich board too, then left.

I read some more of *The Divine Comedy*, hugging my hot water bottle





and feeling ridiculously comfortable.

At half past five, a man with a golden beard came in. He was open-faced, relaxed, and full of presence. He went inside and looked carefully at every painting, then came back to my table and asked if I was the artist.

“Very good,” he said. Firmly.

You could hear that it was not the kind of polite compliment given with a smile. So I asked where he was from.

“Russia.”

He had been living in Malta for five years and was taking a photography class next door that day.

In my imagination, British and Russian viewers are more likely to understand these paintings. I do not mean the space. I mean the paintings on the walls. British and Russian art and literature—the restraint, the calmness, the beauty without sweetness—directly shaped my own artistic taste.

At six, two young Asian-looking men came in, looking like students, neatly dressed and scholarly. They greeted me very politely and stayed for six minutes. I heard their footsteps stop in the innermost room, and they spoke softly to each other in a language I could not recognise. As they left, they smiled and said goodbye. Only when I asked did I learn that they were from Malaysia.

At 6:10, three more young people came in. They were neatly dressed, polite, and quiet. They walked around once and left, taking a postcard of the blue Taihu stone with them.

At 6:34, Dante had completed the first terrace of Purgatory and entered the second to the sound of: “Blessed are the poor in spirit.”

I stopped to rest. Outside the neighbouring door, a group of people

were saying goodbye to one another, calling out Ciao. High heels tapped lightly on the pavement, mixed with laughter.

That is the good thing about being in this basement. It feels like a half-hidden pocket of the world. The world is outside, and I am down here like a mole underground.

No more visitors came. At exactly seven, I turned off the lights and locked the door. Lao Cui was already waiting outside.

I could not wait to tell him about the Pushkin-lookalike Russian and the young Malaysian students speaking Malay.

Week 3

17–11

(Friday, January 23, 2026)

That feeling after rain, when the sky clears—it's wonderful. Bright blue sky, some clouds, a light breeze, perfectly comfortable. Valletta was already strung with lights, getting ready for February's Carnival.

I opened the door and had just set the sandwich board outside when I ran into a Black woman coming out of MSA, with long bronze-gold corkscrew curls—the kind I absolutely love. She was warm and chatty. She told me she had been to Shenzhen but never to Shanghai. The best part of visiting exhibitions, she said, was meeting the artist and learning the stories behind the work. So I told her some of the background to the paintings and what I had wanted to express. She found it fascinating and asked why I had not put any of this on the walls. I said I did not want to hand everyone a standard answer in words. Everyone should be able to have their own understanding and find their own way in.

After our conversation, she went happily inside to look around, and I moved outside to read and watch the tourists passing by.

I had read only a few lines when someone came over and greeted me. I looked up. It was R, the elderly British gentleman from my oil-painting class! He had stopped by briefly while I was setting up the exhibition and said he wanted to come back. And here he was.

After looking at the paintings, I taught him to copy the traditional Chinese character 車 with a brush. He said copying calligraphy made him calm, whereas painting sometimes frustrated him when things did not go well. I thought perhaps it was because there was no fixed target you had to reach when copying. You could concentrate and relax at the same time. Painting, on the other hand, stirs up all sorts of wanting,

satisfaction and disappointment. Real stillness of mind is much harder to come by.

We talked about British artists I like—David Hockney and Lucian Freud—and about the British writer Kazuo Ishiguro, almost certainly one of my favourite contemporary writers. I suggested that he go to MICAS to see Milton Avery. He told me that he and a friend had been painting with the local watercolour society since 1984. That friend had since become quite a well-known painter, while R, being a doctor by profession, had always kept painting as a hobby.

Sticking with something you love for a whole lifetime—I think that is real devotion. In our oil-painting class, I had watched him work on one small painting with extraordinary patience and care, spending six whole sessions on it.

We even talked about religion. He said that in Britain people seemed more or less to be born Christian, though he himself had never been particularly fond of church. I told him that although I was not Christian, I loved reading the Bible and had learned endless wisdom from it.

2:20.

The sunlight had become far too strong for me to read, so I had to move back inside. No one came for a while. If I were a tourist, I would not want to give up sunshine like that to duck into a basement either.

M emailed asking for a photograph of me. I did not want to refuse her, so I simply held up my phone, took a selfie, and sent it straight over. Just then, a young man came in, greeted me, and went to look at the paintings. A couple followed right behind him. Both stayed almost exactly eight minutes.

I went inside to tidy the seal paste and heard movement behind me. Little Z had arrived! I had specially brought a box of heart-shaped chocolates that A had brought from Hungary, saving them for her. She accepted them quite naturally, then said goodbye.

3:30.

A very gentle-looking man came in and studied the first painting by the entrance carefully. Then a mother and daughter arrived. I kept reading.

A long while later, the man came out. I saw him photographing the Guyi Garden series. He was clearly drawn to it—most people seemed to be. “You can touch them if you like,” I told him. “I used wood shavings when I painted them.” He looked surprised. “Really?” Then he touched one very carefully. We both laughed.

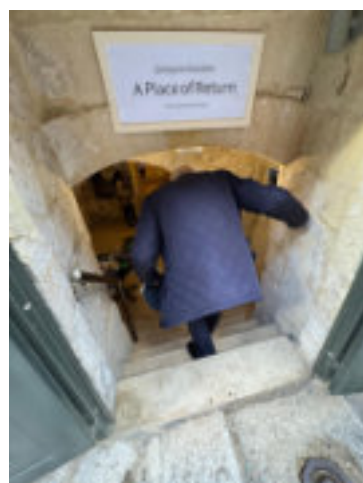
We started talking. He was from Luxembourg, another tiny country like Malta. He asked about the works one by one. He especially liked Pine, Plum and Stone and was fascinated by the pile of Taihu rocks. He also responded strongly to the Red Gate at the beginning of the exhibition and Outside the Quiet Garden at the end. He also asked why I had not written more explanatory text. I gave him the same answer as before: I wanted visitors to experience the images and atmosphere rather than be given an interpretation in words. It seemed I could say this quite naturally now.

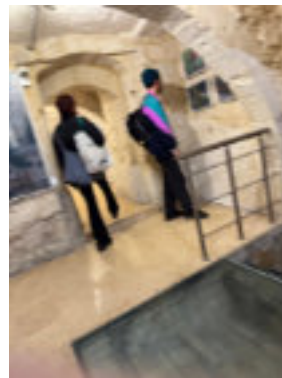
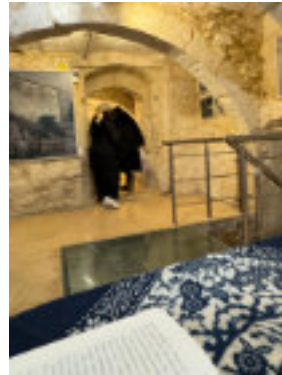
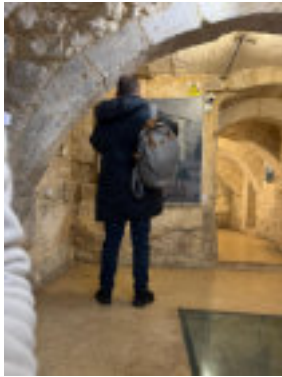
We talked for a long time. He also looked at my drawings of Malta’s wildflowers and even knew that carob could be made into syrup. Before leaving, he added me on Facebook.

Two young women came in together, followed by a couple. They all looked like tourists. It was already 5:20 and getting dark. Everyone had clearly finished enjoying the sunshine and was beginning to move on towards the evening.

I had just looked at the Luxembourg man’s Facebook profile and was surprised to discover that he actually lived in Israel. I was curious about his background, but I had not asked. I did not know what his real life was like. What we had talked about was only this space, my process, my thoughts, the wildflowers, the carob syrup—none of it touching his actual life at all.

Before leaving, he had stood for a long time in front of the final





painting, Outside the Quiet Garden, and taken a photograph of it. I told him that once he walked out through the door, he would be back in real life. Inside this space, for this brief stretch of time, anyone could temporarily set aside who they were and enjoy a little quiet that belonged entirely to themselves.

Then I saw what he had written in the guestbook. No signature. No country. Not in his own language. Just one simple sentence in English:

Thank you for the opportunity to experience a slower, more quiet pace.

Two Chinese friends came to see me. They had made the traditional Chinese mung-bean cakes for my opening, and everyone had loved them. I had not realised they were from Shanghai too, and it turned out our homes there had been surprisingly close to one another. So naturally we had endless things to talk about: all sorts of things about Shanghai, our children's education, and how our lives had changed after moving to Malta. They brought me some mung-bean cakes as a gift.

We talked until a quarter past six. Five visitors came through during that time, but because I was busy talking with my friends, I did not have much chance to speak with any of them.

At 6:15, two very tall men came in. They greeted me and began looking carefully at the paintings. Then two lovely young women arrived. They were especially interested in the small Guyi Garden series and asked me questions about painting techniques, the lighting, the frames and the design of the space. It turned out that one of them was a designer. She also took painting classes at MSA and very much wanted to organise an exhibition of her own. Naturally, I shared a lot of information with her.

The two tall men were quite interested in the prices. That surprised me, so I gave them the price list. They even wanted to buy my reproduction of *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*. I told them that one was not for sale. I needed to keep it for A.

Then a quiet woman came in. Then a tall, slim man arrived, dressed with

real artistic flair.

The artistic-looking man stopped in front of the Guyi Garden series. He stayed there for a long time, leaning in to look closely. So I told him that he could touch the different textures too. He did, immediately. Then he asked me for the price list. I gave it to him, and he went through the works one by one, comparing them with the list.

When he came out, we started talking. He was Maltese—quite unlike any Maltese person I had met before. He told me that six years earlier he had travelled to Chengdu and then gone straight on to Tibet. I was surprised, because foreigners need special permission to enter Tibet.

We talked for a long time about why he loved Tibet and how he had managed to get there. He asked me plenty of questions too, about my life in Malta and why I liked it here. Before he left, I offered him a mung-bean cake. He said he would come back because he really loved the lotus painting.

Really. Everyone loves the lotus.

It made me happy, though I still had no particular expectation of selling anything. Let it be whatever it becomes.

It was already 7:05. I packed up and headed for the ferry home.

On the way, I received an email from D asking whether I could take part in the recording of some kind of early-morning television programme the following Tuesday, about the exhibitions currently running at MSA. The exhibition was already nearing its end, but I felt this still mattered for MSA as an institution that supports artists. So I agreed without hesitation.

Only afterwards did I grumble silently about the time.

8:15?!

I wasn't normally even awake at that hour.

Twenty-one visitors today. But I felt as though I had talked too much. I was tired. I had barely managed to read a few pages of my book.

17-12

(Saturday, January 24, 2026)

It was between fourteen and eighteen degrees today, with a slight haze in the air. Visibility wasn't great, but the sun was still pleasant. I arrived at the gallery at exactly one in the afternoon. The main door of MSA next door was already closed. On Saturdays they open in the morning; I open in the afternoon.

An elegantly dressed older woman came in, so I quietly moved outside to read. Lao Cui parked the car, took a photo of me sitting by the entrance with my book, then burst out laughing when he saw the sign on the table: "artist is outside." I asked him, "Want to stay here and play receptionist for a while?" He said he was off to St John's Co-Cathedral to see Caravaggio. Perfect. We could each do what we enjoyed.

I badly underestimated the sun. The glare made it impossible to read, so I had to retreat back inside, feeling slightly silly about it. I would go out again once the light shifted.

A quiet young woman came in, clearly travelling on her own. She moved slowly and silently from one painting to the next. I said nothing and kept reading Dante. She stayed for more than twenty minutes before leaving and said to me on the way out, "Very beautiful."

Just before two, a Chinese family of three came in. The mother told me that her daughter was learning to paint, which was why they had come to see the exhibition. I said perhaps my sketchbooks inside would actually be more useful to her, because for a child, seeing the process can be more valuable than seeing only the finished result.

The mother and daughter stayed inside for nearly half an hour.

Afterwards, the mother and I talked about art education, about a child's growth and the growth of a parent alongside them. The reflection that came through learning art had shaped the way I looked at problems and handled relationships. These were gains that went beyond the paintings themselves.

Lao Cui came back from seeing Caravaggio. I asked him to watch the gallery while I went to the bathroom and reminded him to keep a record. When I came back, he reported proudly that at 2:48 a woman carrying a National Geographic bag had gone in and was still inside.

So I went in and started talking with her. We ended up talking for half an hour without stopping. She was from Latvia and had lived in Malta for nine years. I showed her some of the reproductions of classical Chinese paintings inside, including *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* and *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*. We also talked about different religious traditions, and about how, as someone without a fixed faith, I could still draw nourishment and wisdom from different religious texts.

She said she had studied some Chinese culture at university and had practised calligraphy before, so she tried the water calligraphy too. She asked where she could find good Chinese food, and I recommended Ping's Dynasty in Gozo.

Before leaving, she stood for a long time in front of the winter village painting. She said it reminded her of winter in her own homeland: the same tall leafless trees, bare ground, and small villages with red roofs. Our homes were so far apart, she said, yet somehow the feeling of home was much the same. I thought perhaps that feeling for home, and that connection to a culture left far behind, is something human beings share.

After she left, two friends came by carrying a large bouquet of beautiful flowers. Then two rather alternative-looking young men came in, followed by a couple who entered asking where the movie was. Clearly

they had wandered into the wrong place.

Another Chinese friend arrived, someone I could talk to very easily, so we sat together on the steps outside and talked about everything under the sun—Padmasambhava and the hidden realms of Tibet, funny things we had encountered in Malta. It was nearly five, but the air was still surprisingly warm. We drank hot tea and spoke Chinese, watching people come and go. For a while I almost forgot I was in Malta. It felt like being back in Shanghai's unhurried afternoons, that aimless, easy sense of city life.

Then a father and daughter came in. They had moved to Malta from Guangdong and had seen my post on RedNote, so they had come specially to see the exhibition.

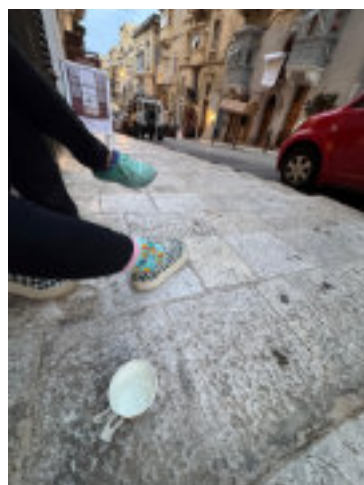
A man and a woman arrived, greeted me, and went inside. They told me they would have an exhibition here in September and had come to measure the space. Before leaving, they each very conscientiously took a piece of chocolate.

Just after five, a family of three came in. I did not talk with them, only said hello. Then came a family of five, then another family of three. People came and went. My friend and I stayed sitting at the entrance talking and did not try to receive them. We simply let everyone come and go as they pleased.

Then another young woman came in, wearing a short-sleeved top. She stayed inside for a long time and told me afterwards that she thought the exhibition was wonderful. The water calligraphy, she said, made the experience feel very immersive and interactive. She was from Iceland and loved visiting all kinds of exhibitions.

My friend left as it grew dark. A father and daughter came in, saw my teacup, and asked whether they could have some tea. So I poured each of them a cup of chrysanthemum tea. The father thanked me in French as he took it—and I actually understood him! Though my own French,





embarrassingly, could not produce a single sentence in reply.

At 6:10, the French father and daughter said goodbye, and the gallery became quiet again. I tidied the seal paste in the inner room. The guestbook was filled with the cutest little drawings; clearly everyone had been having fun. At last I could sit down, make a few notes, and use the final stretch of quiet to read.

A loud cheer came from next door. There seemed to be some kind of event going on. At 6:43, three visitors came in: a young Black woman in a wide-brimmed hat and two older people. They took a quick look around, read the introduction, then politely said goodbye.

Then a calm, quiet couple came in. They looked carefully, painting by painting. I did not greet them. Quiet people seem to carry a quiet quality of their own. They stayed for eight minutes and left just as quietly. By then the event next door had clearly ended. A whole crowd came downstairs, talking and laughing loudly and saying goodbye to one another. Suddenly there was noise everywhere.

I had reached Canto XXII of Purgatory, but it seemed not to connect with the previous canto at all. I had no idea where the angel singing of justice had suddenly come from. I wondered if Dante himself, writing this passage, had been interrupted by some sudden noise too and lost his bearings for a moment.

6:59.

It was far too noisy outside. People were talking loudly, completely absorbed in discussing whatever event had just finished. I could no longer concentrate on the book, so it was a good moment to close up and go home.

Thirty-six people today. I had spent most of the time talking with my friend, so in one sense the afternoon felt rather wasted. And yet, people who had never crossed paths in China had somehow met thousands of

miles away, in this tiny basement gallery in Malta.
Perhaps that, too, was a kind of miracle.

17–13

(Sunday, 25 January 2026)

I was still eating breakfast when M sent me the PDF of the weekend edition of *The Malta Independent*, so I got to read what the musician A. and the Italian architect I had never met had written... No, not written for me. They had written down what they themselves had felt, the resonance the space had stirred in them on the opening night. I was only the occasion for it.

The architect's words moved me deeply. He had never met me or spoken with me, so he could hardly have received any extra explanation about the cultural background or the ideas behind the work. Yet what he had felt went far beyond anything words could explain. It was something the images, the space, and the atmosphere itself had given him—more immediate and affecting than any theory or explanation.

I was deeply moved by this kind of chance encounter, as if brought about by fate, so I talked with Apollo about what fate actually is. Apollo said fate is only responsible for placing you somewhere—that part is not up to you—but how you choose to stand once you are there, that part is.

Over these short three weeks, some came, some went, some left words behind, some took away photographs and memories, some meant to come but never did, while others had never planned to come at all and simply wandered in by chance. I spoke with some people and not with others, sometimes missing people's comings and goings entirely because I was talking with someone else. But all these encounters, everything that happened in this small space, seemed far more wondrous than anything I could have planned in advance.

The streets of Valletta were still wet. It had clearly just rained heavily, and coloured umbrellas opened one after another along the streets. Tourists were everywhere, but the moment you crossed Independence Square, everything became quiet. Small, broken paving stones laid out the path ahead, with only the occasional figure passing through. MSA sits exactly at that point—quiet carved out of the noise.

I opened the gallery early, topped up the inkstone with fresh water, made a pot of chrysanthemum tea, and opened the copy of *The Malta Independent* I had just bought. The faded colour of the newspaper seemed naturally at home in the exhibition space.

At 1:10, a middle-aged couple came in quietly and asked whether they could take photographs. I said yes, then stepped outside again and left the space to them.

MSA was actually open today. I watched parents come out with little girls, the children in padded jackets with beautiful tulle skirts peeking out underneath. A young mother stood at the entrance with her child, looking around and saying, “What a beautiful place!” But the child was crying loudly. A taxi arrived, and they climbed in through the drizzle.

The gallery was empty again. There was still a fine rain outside, so I went back in and continued reading *The Divine Comedy*. Young parents with children kept coming out of MSA, chatting as they waited for taxis. It was a little chaotic. None of them came in.

2:12.

Several people passed by talking loudly in Maltese, breaking the quiet of my reading. I looked up and saw two silent figures in white raincoats pass the doorway. Because of the rain, I had not put the sandwich board outside, so there was less chance of passers-by being drawn in. The little basement door felt even more like the hidden entrance to some folded pocket of space floating within the ordinary world. I watched Dante climbing the mountain of Purgatory with Virgil and Statius, talking

about poetry as they searched for the way upwards.

The world is a maze.

I thought of the maze I had once painted. At the time, it had carried a feeling of being trapped, an anxious struggle against it. But now, when I thought of the word “maze”, I felt calm. If there is no fixed goal that must be reached, no exit that must be found, then a maze becomes the most natural kind of exploration—full of the unknown, of chance, and of endless space.

Perhaps that is one of the qualities of a maze: even the smallest path will occasionally be entered by someone, just like this tiny basement door. A quiet-looking middle-aged couple stepped inside. They certainly had not seen any advertisement. Perhaps some passing glance had simply led their feet towards the entrance.

They spent less than ten minutes looking around, then came out and thanked me. I asked whether they were here on holiday. They said yes, only for one day, but they were a little disappointed because everywhere they went seemed to be closed.

“It’s Sunday!” I laughed. Then I thought for a moment and said, “Go for a walk by the sea. You could also take the ferry to Birgu. The sea and the streets are always open.”

Everything became quiet again. I went into the inner room and wrote a few characters, then stepped outside to look at the sky. There was still a little rain drifting down. I did not feel like putting the sandwich board outside.

Let everything take its own course.

I talked with Apollo about all the encounters Dante had along the way through Hell and Purgatory. In form, they looked rather like my encounters here—random and brief. But there was a difference. Dante’s encounters had a destination and a path, judgement and emotion, and he was always moving on. Mine had no particular purpose. They were

looser and quieter. I had begun to step back a little—expecting less, resisting less—and the people I met seemed to slow down too.

Dante wanted to reach Paradise and find answers. I only wanted to let something I could not quite name slowly emerge through time.

At half past three, a sudden brightness caught my eye. The sun had come out without my noticing and was quietly creeping in beside the doorway. So I put down my book and carried the sandwich board outside, then went back to reading. For tourists, sunshine was still a much better reason to go and see the sea than to come into an exhibition.

3:45.

Two men walked past. For some reason I looked up and smiled, just as one of them turned his head to look back. Our eyes met. They walked on, then came back to the entrance.

“May I come in?”

“Of course.”

They went inside and looked around slowly, speaking a language I did not understand. Then two more people walked past, stopped and looked in. I smiled at them too, encouragingly, and they came inside. Two Asian faces. The moment we greeted each other, we realised we were all Chinese and laughed. I did not say much after that. They went in to see the exhibition on their own.

Then a young man came down the steps. He said a friend had recommended the exhibition to him.

“Is this about some kind of contemplation?” he asked.

“You can understand it that way too,” I said.

So he made a gesture of zipping his mouth shut and went in silently.

Two more visitors came in, a woman in a wide-brimmed hat and another woman. I did not speak with them because I was talking with





the Chinese father and son. They asked me about the art courses at MSA. I also talked with them about the importance of Malta's international environment when a child is moving between different education systems, and about what art might mean in everyday life. The boy was sixteen, delicate-featured and quiet. He never interrupted a single exchange between his father and me.

The man who had come on his friend's recommendation interrupted our conversation only to say goodbye. He told me he was very interested in Chinese culture and was watching a course on creative thinking by a Chinese professor on YouTube. He said he liked my paintings very much. He clearly wanted to talk with me, but did not want to interrupt the conversation I was already having.

Eventually everyone left. I went inside to see whether anything needed tidying. In the guestbook, a small line of green writing had appeared:

Time, quiet, memories, sadness.

No signature.

Zhu Xiao-Mei's piano was just reaching its final, slightly hesitant turn, followed by a faintly sorrowful trailing note. Together with the peach blossoms and the old city in the paintings, it faded into blankness.

A little after half past four, I heard someone outside reading the word "Jiangnan" aloud in Chinese. I looked up. Four young people from China were standing there, three men and one woman. They were travelling in Malta and were clearly astonished to stumble across an exhibition by a Chinese artist.

After looking at the paintings, they happily played with the water calligraphy inside, joking with one another. I could hear how happy they were from outside. Once they had had enough fun, they came out to say goodbye.

"This place is so cool," they said as they left.

I went back to reading. Dante had reached the Earthly Paradise at the summit of Mount Purgatory. Everything seemed to correspond, scene after scene, with the imagery in Revelation. Virgil disappeared. Beatrice appeared. I followed Dante through colour, music, visions, rivers and flowers, and completely lost track of time.

A cold gust of wind came in. I looked up, dazed. Outside, it was almost completely dark.

5:45.

I could hear the soft scrape of footsteps passing outside. No one had come in for quite a while.

Thank goodness no one came in.

I finished Purgatory in one stretch.

“I came back from that most holy water, remade, as new trees are renewed with new leaves, cleansed and ready to rise to the stars.”

I talked with Apollo about Purgatory, especially about desire, love and free will. I complained that Dante was trying too hard—too much like self-help, too prescriptive, too much like a textbook. He used enormous amounts of metaphor too, but to me he was nothing like Zhuangzi: Zhuangzi felt much calmer, looser, more effortless, less forceful.

Apollo said that Dante and Zhuangzi begin from completely different systems of value. Dante wants to rebuild order through faith. Zhuangzi wants to dissolve meaning within the world. Perhaps I could try bringing a little more of Zhuangzi into my own practice.

6:55.

After a long stretch with no visitors, two women in long black down coats came in. They walked quietly around the gallery for six minutes, then said goodbye. So I went inside, turned off the video, switched off the lights, and closed the door.

A quiet day of reading came to an end.

Seventeen visitors today. I did not talk much. I was absorbed in the book, and came away with some new understanding.

17–14

(Monday, 26 January 2026)

That morning I had just read the news about the ferry sinking in the Philippines. Then, while I was waiting for my own ferry, it started pouring. I could not help feeling a little rattled, but of course I made it to MSA safe and sound.

For some reason the street was unusually noisy today—cars going back and forth, two police officers in blue directing traffic, D and another staff member outside too, as though something important was happening. Was that important event they had mentioned actually happening tonight? I wondered about it, but decided just to keep to my own pace.

I had barely opened the door when a man and a woman came in. They looked carefully, perhaps because they had some professional connection to art. Right after them, two more people came in, apparently just out of MSA, and took one of the promotional postcards I had left at the front.

The weather outside was unsettled and the wind was picking up. Apparently Harry was back again. I put the sandwich board outside for the time being, then made a pot of chrysanthemum tea to warm my freezing hands.

The first two visitors stayed for quite a while. When they came out, they asked me some questions about technique and what part of China I had painted. “Shanghai and the surrounding area,” I told them. They were surprised. They had assumed Shanghai was all skyscrapers.

Then two more visitors came in, followed by a man on his own.

I had only been open for half an hour. Why was it so busy today?

I had wanted to start Paradiso.

The man who came alone stayed for a long time and told me he really loved the music I had chosen. It turned out that he was a friend of Y's and a musician. He played the piano, taught African drums, performed and taught, and also organised group activities centred around music.

Then he held out his hands for me to look at his fingers.

My God. I had always imagined pianists as having long, slender, angelic fingers. His were surprisingly short. I secretly thought they might even be shorter than mine. I had always assumed only long fingers could play the piano.

He said he could not play Chopin, but there was plenty of other wonderful music he could play. He showed me a video of himself at the piano, his fingers flying nimbly over the keys. He told me how he taught students who flatly refused to learn sheet music, and how he made flutes out of PVC pipe. For him, music seemed to be more than a profession. It was also play, and something to share.

We talked until 5:30.

At one point the rain outside became very heavy. Two thoroughly soaked young people came in. After seeing the exhibition, they said they were heading next door for the evening event.

People kept moving back and forth outside. Police lights were flashing, and there were all kinds of loud noises. It turned out that a car parked in front of MSA was being towed away by the police.

I was getting a little hungry, so I drank some hot tea and ate a piece of chocolate. Then I opened Facebook. The first thing that came up was MSA's photography award ceremony that evening. Apparently it was quite an important event.

But I really hated all the noise outside. It felt as though this small space was being disturbed. I almost wanted to shut the door, just so I could keep some warmth and quiet inside.

A little after six, things gradually calmed down outside. A neatly dressed middle-aged man came in, clearly from the event next door. He looked at the paintings with unusual care, lingering for a long time in front of some of them and moving slowly from one to the next. I could not help being moved by how seriously he looked.

After a while, an elegantly dressed woman came in too, probably his wife. When they had finished, they said a very courteous goodbye and left.

At 6:25, two young women came in. They looked carefully too.

I had just opened the third part of *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradiso*, and the beginning was extremely difficult to understand. I was in the middle of asking Apollo about Aristotle's idea of the correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm, so I had no time at all to talk with them.

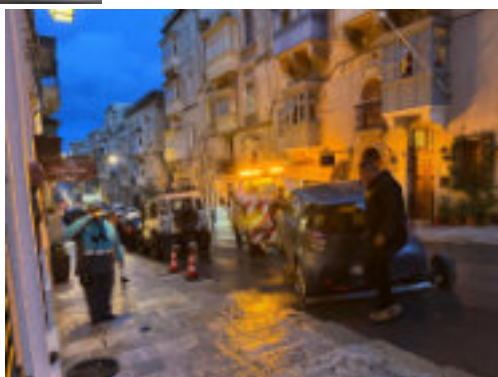
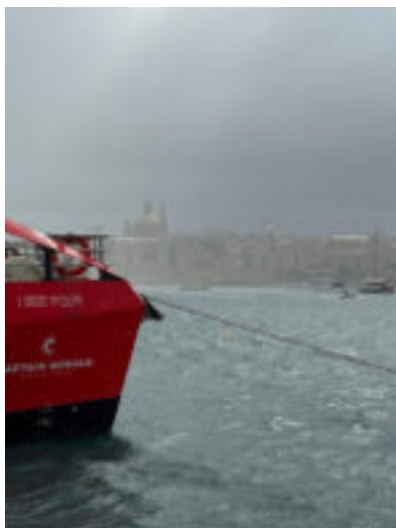
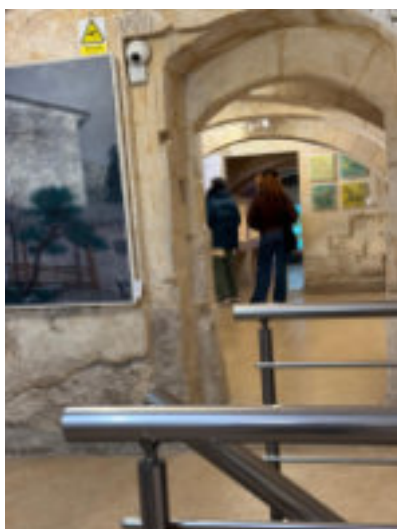
The two young women seemed to be having a wonderful time. I could hear their quiet laughter from inside. At 6:57, I went in to remind them that I was about to close.

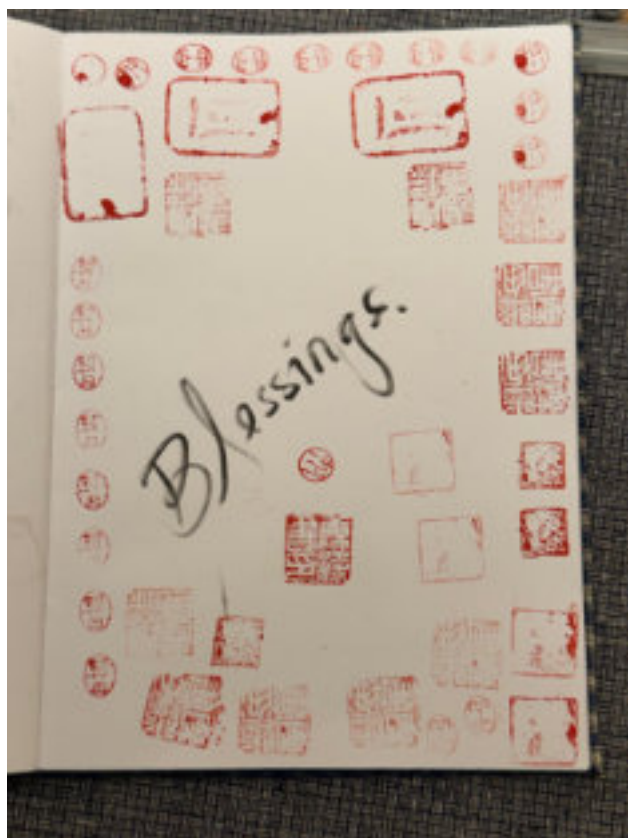
I found them crouched beside the last compartment, stamping the whole page full of seals. They looked slightly embarrassed when they saw me and asked whether I was closing.

"Yes."

I noticed that all their impressions were blurry, so I cleaned the seals, showed them how to make clearer impressions, and explained the names of several of them. They said they had looked at everything and had tried hard to work out what the Chinese characters said, but of course they could not recognise a single one.

One was from France, the other from Colombia.





We said goodnight.

They left carrying postcards covered in red stamps. I turned off the lights, locked the gallery, and went out into the strong wind to catch the bus home.

Fourteen visitors today. Not bad for three windy, rainy hours, though the noise outside from the event left me feeling a little unsettled.

(Postscript.)

When I got home, I looked up the MSA event and the work of the photographer who had won the award. I was deeply impressed. The award was completely deserved.

D had told me that the President would also be attending the ceremony that evening. But apart from there being more people around than usual, and a badly parked car being towed away, there did not seem to be any noticeably heavier security, let alone anyone clearing the area or closing roads.

I opened my gallery as usual. I read as usual. Pedestrians and tourists came and went as usual.

Apart from being annoyed that my quiet had been disturbed, I found myself admiring how understated power seemed to be in this country.

17–15

(Tuesday, 27 January 2026)

My alarm woke me at 6:30 to a message D had sent in the middle of the night. The interview scheduled to be filmed in the gallery at 8:15 that morning had been cancelled at the last minute because the presenter needed to cover the story of a twelve-year-old girl who had been swept away by the waves the previous evening.

I could not get back to sleep after that, so I went on Facebook and followed the updates. The girl had been travelling in Malta with her father and brother when a huge wave swept her into the sea near the ferry crossing. They had searched all night and still had not found her. I felt terribly sad, not only for her, but also for her father and brother, who had narrowly escaped themselves.

That morning I reread the Book of Job, then talked with Apollo about what the Book of Job and Ian McEwan's *Atonement* might mean in the real world.

D told me the interview would be postponed until the 6th, by which time my exhibition would already be over. She asked whether I would be willing to provide some photographs and do a short interview instead. She said that morning's original plan had been for a full twenty-five-minute interview. That terrified me. Secretly, I was rather relieved. My English would never have survived twenty-five minutes on air. I was not interested in personal exposure anyway. I only hoped it might encourage more people to come to MSA to see exhibitions, or more artists to apply to use this space.

At four, as usual, I opened the door, turned on the lights and started the

video, then sat down ready to eat my lunch apple.

A very friendly-looking couple came in and asked whether the paintings were of China or Japan. I said I had painted Shanghai, China. They thought the Red Gate looked very much like Malta's Serenity Garden. I told them that classical Chinese gardens tend to share the same basic elements—rockeries, water, architecture and plants.

They looked at the exhibition very carefully and stayed quite a long time in the final room. When they came out to say goodbye, they seemed genuinely happy. The woman said practising writing with the water brush had been so much fun because the characters disappeared. Knowing that they would disappear made her feel relaxed and free of pressure, so she could become completely absorbed in playing with it. I thought she was absolutely right.

Alright. Time to start *Paradiso* again from page one. I had not managed to get into it the night before, but in this quiet atmosphere, I thought perhaps today I could.

Two friends came by and brought me some babao fan—eight-treasure rice pudding—from Shanghai.

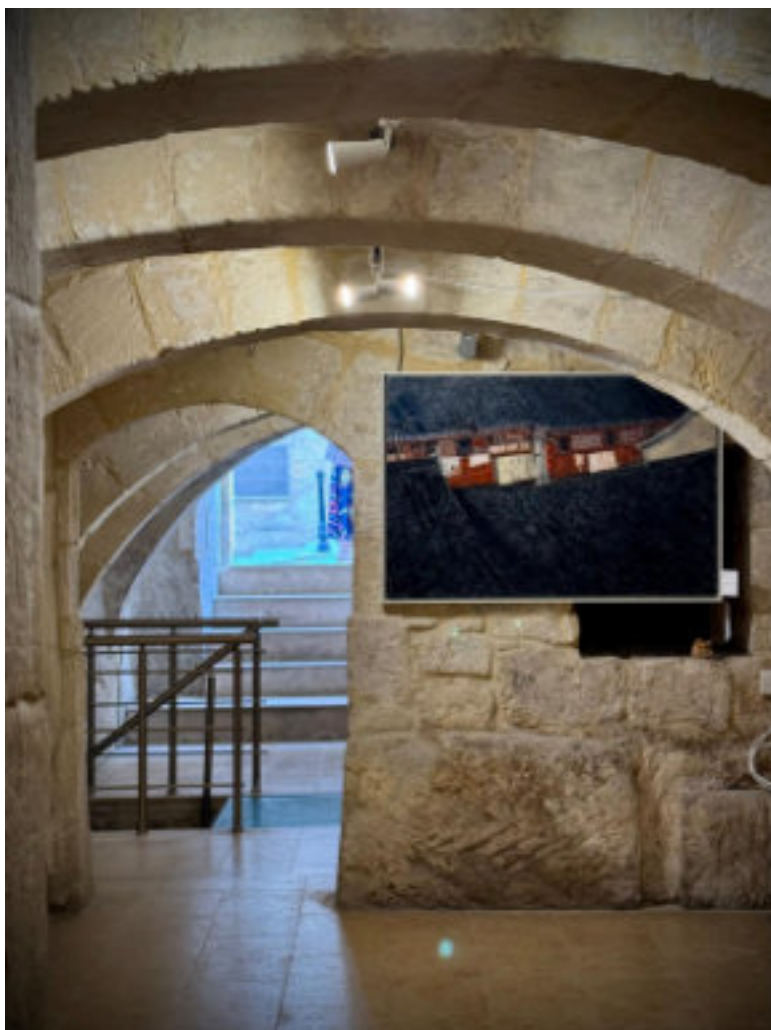
My volunteer colleague M passed by to say goodbye and asked how many people had come to see the exhibition over these days. I thought for a moment and said probably fewer than four hundred.

“That’s amazing!” she said.

I told her I had recorded almost every visitor I had encountered.

Then a man came in wearing shorts and a long-sleeved shirt. His wife did not want to come inside and waited for him outside, so he made a quick circuit of the exhibition on his own.

A woman stopped at the entrance and peered inside. I looked up at her and only then noticed that she had a little dog with her. The dog had



stopped right beside my sandwich board. I could not help wondering: was it going to pee on my sandwich board?

Apparently not.

The woman asked when the exhibition ended. "This Thursday," I said.

"I have to rush home and cook now, but I think I can come back before Thursday."

"You're very welcome," I said. "And the dog can come too."

I actually got properly into the book today!

At 5:40, a very warm, approachable woman came in with a small crossbody bag over her shoulder. I smiled at her. She looked around for about five minutes, smiled goodbye, and left. I was absorbed in my book and did not say much.

Then a tall man came in. He looked around on his own and thanked me on his way out.

At 6:10, Y and her whole family arrived. The first thing they asked was how many paintings I had sold.

"Apparently none," I said. "But everyone who comes seems to really enjoy themselves and leave happy."

Y and I went outside to stand by the street and talk for a while. I watched passers-by slowing down as they reached the gallery and looking towards the entrance, though most of them decided not to come in.

A family of three did go inside. Y asked whether I needed to go and greet them.

"No," I said. "They'll probably feel more at ease without me there."

At 6:37, a Chinese woman in red greeted me and went into the gallery. By the time I had said goodbye to my friends, she was still inside looking. I took a phone call outside and did not go in. I left the space to

her.

When the woman in red came out, she started talking with me. She began by asking how I had first learned to paint, then moved on to all kinds of questions about technique. It turned out that she loved painting too and had already made quite a lot of work. She showed me some paintings on her phone, most of them based on beautiful photographs.

I sighed inwardly. I felt very strongly that learning to appreciate art was probably even more important than learning how to paint. I was enormously grateful for the excellent teachers I had met while learning to paint. They had laid the firmest possible foundation for my own taste.

I told her about the masters I had copied, the books I had read, and my thoughts about making work. But she told me that she simply wanted a few pretty paintings to hang in her room. She thought my colours were too dark and too grey to look good on a wall.

Fair enough. Everyone has different aims. I did not think everyone needed to take art this seriously. If she could enjoy the process of learning, enjoy painting, and enjoy having paintings in her home, that was also a perfectly good way to enjoy art.

She insisted that I give her some advice. I told her she should look at more work by great artists and try painting from life instead of from photographs. She did not seem entirely convinced by either suggestion, but I felt that was about as much as I could do.

It was already 7:20. I finally had to interrupt her. I needed to catch the ferry or I would never make it home.

I sprinted down the steps, nearly fell, and made it onto the ferry at the very last moment before it left.

That was the end of the day.

While I had been talking with her, two young women had gone in to see the exhibition. They made a quick round, came out and said goodbye. I

did not have time to speak with them any further.

Eleven unfamiliar visitors today. My friends did not count.

17–16

(Wednesday, 28 January 2026)

Today was the second-to-last day. I posted something on Facebook about Taihu rocks, which almost none of the visitors to the exhibition seemed able to understand. The funny contrast is that the perforated limestone we call Taihu rock—so precious and so laden with meaning in Jiangnan—turns out to be lying around everywhere on Malta's shores. The cultural difference made me laugh and shake my head at the same time.

At 12:30, I went downstairs to meet M and bring her to the exhibition. After more than six weeks of writing back and forth, I finally met her in person for the first time. It was a strange feeling—meeting someone for the first time and yet feeling as though I had already known her for a long while. She was smaller and thinner than I had imagined, but her eyes were large, deep and remarkably bright. We talked all the way in the car. She spoke quickly, and I could not catch every single word, but that did not stop me from understanding her.

I had brought her a little bag I had made, embroidered with the words Love is Blind. For some reason, I thought it suited her perfectly. Why shouldn't an eighty-five-year-old woman have a bag covered in roses? She looked so full of life. I had also brought her a large deep-red notebook I had made from old fabric, and a postcard of the carob flower I had painted. She said she had never known until then what carob flowers looked like.

I was opening the basement door when I suddenly saw my dear embroidery teacher. She had not been well lately and had also been terribly busy. I had not expected that she would actually manage to

come.

I felt a little flustered. With my English, looking after even one guest properly was difficult enough, let alone two. I could only do my best with a few simple explanations about the works and their background. But neither of them seemed to need any special attention from me. They looked through the exhibition on their own and then came back to talk with me, clearly enjoying the feeling of meeting in this small underground space. As an exhibition space, everything here spoke for itself. It really did not need much explaining from me.

A young man came in carrying a camera and started taking photographs. M chatted with him with great interest. He said he was studying architecture, loved the basement, and really enjoyed the way the works were arranged in the space. I imagined an architecture student must understand spatial design far better than I did, and know what kind of space can create atmosphere and resonance.

My embroidery teacher had brought me bread, oranges from her garden, and a jar of homemade jam. M brought me some old photographic publications from *The Independent*, a book of watercolours of Guangxi by a British painter, and some old postcards. She really understood what I liked.

After my embroidery teacher left, M and I sat down and talked for a while. I showed her the whole guestbook. Of course, she could read Italian, French and Spanish, and understood far more of what people had written than I ever could. Then she asked me to step away and wrote me two long pages in the guestbook.

M left a little after three. She firmly refused Lao Cui's offer to drive her home and found herself a taxi instead. I respected her choice completely. She was such a strong and independent woman, and being able to manage the everyday things of life on her own terms is a matter of real dignity.

My friend C came with her husband. C teaches Chinese at a university, and her husband is German. She told me they were about to go back to China for the New Year and would be visiting Suzhou, so she had brought him here first to get a sense of what Jiangnan gardens and waterside towns were like. I had never imagined my exhibition might serve that kind of purpose too.

Talking with C's husband, I learned that his mother was also an artist and was currently writing a paper titled *What Is Art?*

Can you imagine?

A German artist asking exactly the same question my painter friends and I had been discussing for years.

The more we explored, thought about and practised art, the more often we found ourselves recognising what art was not, again and again, without ever arriving at what it actually was. I had thought perhaps this question only troubled people like us, still trying to understand art through practice. But Germany has such a mature artistic tradition—the birthplace of German Expressionism, the home of so many artists written into art history—and yet a mature German artist was still asking the same question.

I was intensely curious. I wondered whether I might one day have a chance to read his mother's paper.

C and I also talked about the records I had been keeping over these weeks, my attempt to reconstruct these three weeks through writing. To me, this was exactly how you push back against time—through these small, day-by-day records. Once the moment has passed and circumstances have changed, only words written down at the time can truly hold on to the details and feelings of that particular moment.

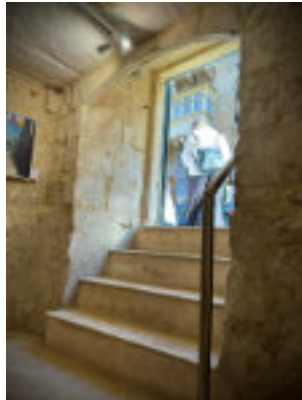
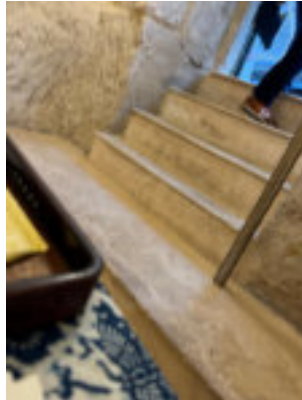
Several visitors came through during all this. Some were simply passing by, while others said they had come specially because they had seen that these were the final two days. But because I was talking with my friends, I could not record them one by one. I did not even remember what



So happy to
meet you to
share that you
design for
kindness it is
divine!!
God bless you!
more bene!!

24 June 2011
What a surprise to
enter the courtyard
and to discover a
beautiful garden
young trees & old
plants. She is truly
blessed with the help
of her husband who
is a true dedicated
gardeners. Her
plantings are truly
educative and more
so, her husband
delighted them as
delighted young to be
gardeners.





some of them looked like, what they were wearing, or exactly how many had come. A real shame.

At 3:45, three young Black visitors came in. They told me they had only been in Malta for four months and were studying nursing here. I was surprised. In China, care work of this kind is overwhelmingly done by women, and men are much less common. It is work that requires enormous patience and responsibility.

The shorter one told me he loved art and liked to paint too. They used the water-calligraphy paper to write lots of English letters. I loved that loose, playful way of using it. Who says you have to sit there solemnly copying traditional calligraphy?

Then two women came in, both classmates from my oil-painting course. After they had seen the exhibition, I went next door with them for class. Lao Cui stayed behind to look after the gallery, and I told him to make sure he kept proper records.

Here is Lao Cui's record.

16:46. Two young women came in together and stayed for more than ten minutes. Before they left, he asked where they were from. One was Japanese and the other Brazilian.

18:09. A Maltese woman came to see the exhibition after seeing it on Facebook. She was interested in the two Taihu rock paintings and said she might like to buy them. Lao Cui also explained some of the different techniques I had used in the paintings. (*My God, Lao Cui actually knows about technique?!*)

18:15. A Maltese family of three came in—a young couple with a toddler who had only just learned to walk, accompanied by a nanny. The child had great fun going up and down the glass staircase. They did not stay very long.

18:25. M's friend J came to see the exhibition. She was from Shanghai, had studied medicine in Britain, then settled in Malta, where she had

been working for more than thirty years.

By the time I came back from the oil-painting class, it was already 6:50. I passed a very elegant East Asian woman coming out of the gallery just as another couple were about to go in. So I followed them inside too, pretending to be a visitor myself, looking at the paintings alongside them all the way to the innermost room.

It was the first time I had watched from that vantage point, as a bystander. The two of them looked with real care, examining the objects in the compartments one by one. I stood off to one side pretending to watch the video while quietly listening to them talk. I heard the woman say that the water-calligraphy paper felt like magic. I heard her say how relaxed she felt in the space. And just before leaving, I heard her tell her husband, “I wish I could paint too.”

I never said a word to either of them. They had no idea that the person standing beside them watching the video was actually the artist behind the exhibition. But those few minutes, quietly taking in their calm and their ease, felt more real and more moving to me than any conversation could have been.

A little after seven, the last two visitors left. We turned off the video, switched off the lights, and locked the door. A light rain had started again. Lao Cui and I carried the gifts our friends had brought us towards the car park.

“Time really does fly,” Lao Cui said. “Over just like that. I haven’t even had my fill of sitting by the door greeting visitors yet.”

I counted.

It looked as though there had been twenty-four visitors today.

17–17

(2026-01-29, Thursday)

The final day began with a small mishap. MSA had decided to rebuild the lighting system themselves, based on the setup I had provided. That morning, while P was out buying materials, he had taken down one whole section of the lighting to use as a reference and failed to make it back before noon. It could easily have waited until tomorrow, after the exhibition was over. Why did it have to be today?

Watching old P high up on the ladder, I felt both exasperated and quietly amused. I asked whether he needed a hand. He said no, so I took a photograph instead: 1:22 in the afternoon, lights going back up. The final day, still in progress.

I went inside and readjusted the angles of the fixtures until the lighting was finally back to how it should be. For that half hour I did not invite a single passer-by in, and thankfully no one came anyway. I did not want anyone to experience the exhibition before it was at its best.

The wind had howled all night and was still force seven today, though it was not especially cold, around fourteen to sixteen degrees. Valletta had just had more rain, and everything was wet underfoot. A few tourists passed with backpacks, but hardly anyone stopped. The sun kept appearing and disappearing behind the clouds, the light changing so quickly it seemed to be racing. The basement shifted between glare and gloom along with it, making it difficult for my eyes to adjust.

The gallery had gone back to being my own time again. The last day. I found I was actually looking forward to spending it quietly.



I read a short passage and copied it into my WeChat Moments:

“Thus, like a bud, beneath the foot of one truth another question grows; truth and doubt nourish one another, and step by step nature carries us towards the summit.”

At 1:53, three women came in. Two wore headscarves and were probably Muslim, with thick brows, large eyes and a dignified bearing. The woman at the back looked especially carefully. I asked where they were from. Scotland, they said.

I went inside to clean the seal paste from the stamps and suddenly noticed that the neck of my old jade bird-head seal had snapped. The two pieces had been placed neatly back together, so at first it was almost impossible to tell. Clearly someone had dropped it, broken it, then quietly put it back without saying anything. I wrapped the pieces up and removed them from the exhibition so that no one coming later might feel unfairly suspected. Since I had chosen to make the exhibition interactive and let people touch and try things for themselves, this kind of loss was completely within what I was prepared to accept. It was no great matter.

At 2:40, it suddenly began to rain. Sometimes heavily, sometimes lightly, but it kept going. No one came in for quite a while. I continued reading the dense and difficult Paradiso, page after page of doctrine. I had passed from the sphere of the Moon through Mercury and had just entered Venus. No. I needed to stop and let Apollo walk me through what I had just read. I had read Roman history, Greek mythology and the Bible, but Dante's constant allusions and dense theological arguments were still far beyond me.

Suddenly the room brightened. I looked up. The rain had stopped, and little paws of sunlight were creeping back into the gallery. I thought that if I were by the sea right now, there would surely be a rainbow. Once we finished dismantling the exhibition tomorrow, I absolutely had to go hiking and look for the large orchids. I had hardly seen any rainbows at

all this year.

At 3:30, the world outside was bright with sunshine again. A young woman in a white shirt came in to see the exhibition. When she left, I looked up to say goodbye and noticed how her snow-white clothes shimmered in the sunlight, like an angel walking out into the world. I quickly raised my phone and managed to catch only her back as she disappeared through the doorway.

Then a middle-aged couple came in, probably tourists passing by. I simply looked up, smiled and said hello. They took their time inside while I went back to Dante. After listening to Apollo's explanation of the spheres of the Moon and Mercury, I decided to read in my own way from then on: take in what I could understand, and let the rest be.

At 4:15, a round-faced woman with short hair came in. She gave me a small smile, then began looking carefully at the paintings. I noticed her raising her phone to take photographs several times, so I lowered my head and kept reading, hoping not to make her feel watched or under any pressure.

Outside, two people were talking loudly. One was an old, hoarse male voice, the other a woman's. They were speaking Maltese, and I could not understand a single word. It sounded to me like a conversation drifting through the streets of the old city from some much older time. Though perhaps the language barrier was simply allowing me to romanticise the scene.

That reminded me of something M had asked me the day before: what did I like about Malta? I had said that almost everything still felt fresh and interesting. I had not exaggerated. Perhaps the most important reason was the natural protective layer created by the language barrier. My life here, including the social relationships I encountered, seemed to pass through a filter. I heard, saw and felt what I wanted to, while much of the unpleasant noise was screened out.

At 4:30, a ruddy-faced man with curly hair came in carrying a small bag. He looked around for about five minutes and left. Then another man came in, with a grey beard, a cap and a bottle of water in his hand, stepping aside to let the first man pass on his way out.

A woman with a large backpack came in next, dressed in exactly the sort of casual clothes I like. She made a quick circuit and left.

The man inside finally came out. I caught sight of him photographing the painting that had once been damaged by water, then standing for a long time in front of the Guyi Garden series. So I decided to talk to him. I had hardly spoken to anyone all day.

His first sentence won me over instantly. He was from London and was an artist himself. He thought the exhibition was absolutely wonderful because you had to slow down, walk slowly, in order to see it. These days, he said, hardly anyone was willing to slow down. Everyone wanted to finish something in a single rush.

We talked about art for a while. He asked which painting in the series was my favourite, which style I liked best, which works had been painted first and which last. I answered honestly: I did not have a favourite, and I did not have a fixed style either. I had simply designed the exhibition around the particular character of this space, looking for the curatorial form that best expressed what I wanted to say. These works had all been exercises from many years ago. I no longer painted this way.

No fixed style. No readable timeline. I suspect this drove him slightly mad.

He asked me to tell him more about the Taihu rock painting called Melt. Then I showed him the final work, Outside the Quiet Garden. He said he especially liked that one. It reminded him of how he himself often needed to leave London, go somewhere else, meet people, and let new encounters spark new ideas.

When he realised that this was the very last day of the exhibition, and that he had walked in completely by chance, he became quite excited.

He said I should invite more people inside and make the advertising much bigger. I was laughing and shaking my head when he was already standing at the entrance calling loudly to passers-by, "Come in and have a look! It's a really good exhibition! Today is the last day!"

I wanted to disappear on the spot.

And then, incredibly, two young couples really did come in because of him.

I told him, "I don't usually do this. I choose to sit quietly and let the encounters happen by themselves."

"No," he said. "Connection needs action. I choose connection."

He said goodbye cheerfully. I smiled at the two young couples he had invited in and said, "Take your time," then went back to my seat and left them alone. They each spent a few minutes inside and left with postcards covered in stamps.

I am not someone suited to selling things. I am not even particularly suited to actively presenting my own art. I am relatively quiet. I was very grateful to have met someone like him on the final day. He made the day much more interesting.

And he was British. He was nothing like the reserved, conservative Englishman I had always imagined.

At half past five, an elderly gentleman came in. He seemed to have injured his foot and had some difficulty walking. I almost went over to help him. He said he had come for a meeting next door but had time to see the exhibition first. He asked whether he could take photographs and said he really liked my style. I thought of the London artist and could not help laughing quietly to myself.

What is style? What is art?

I talked with Apollo about the British artist, and suddenly understood something about the design of the entire exhibition. This basement,

divided again and again by its ribbed arches, was rather like a Chinese handscroll being slowly unrolled. There was no single subject and no climax; it unfolded more like a walk, with the view changing step by step.

What you saw and what you felt did not depend on my guidance, but on the viewer's own pace.

At 5:30, two women came in, but they did not go to look at the exhibition. The woman in front walked straight over to me and said she had come to the opening. Since this was the last day, she had wanted to come and see me again. She said she had been reading my Facebook posts, watching how I had been doing the exhibition, and knew that I had been spending time reading here too. Then she asked how these three weeks had felt.

I said I had felt very good. There had not been huge numbers of visitors, but I had really enjoyed the time I spent sitting here. Sometimes I talked with visitors. Sometimes I was alone reading. I had also made a great many notes. I felt I had gained a great deal from the experience.

She congratulated me, then said, "*Look, your English has improved a lot too.*"

I found that observation very funny.

She said goodbye and walked straight out again with the other woman, who had been standing beside her the whole time. They were really not going to look at the exhibition again? I could not help grumbling a little to myself.

Then an even older gentleman came in. I almost had to support him as he walked. He made a circuit of the exhibition and even said a few words to me in Chinese. He too was on his way to the meeting next door.

Four young people came in, all smartly dressed, one of them carrying a camera. They stayed for about ten minutes. On the way out, one asked me some questions about texture and technique.

Then a middle-aged woman came in, also attending the meeting. She liked the paintings very much and hoped she might travel to China one day. She told me that the meeting next door was an annual conference for European tour guides.

A little before six, D passed the entrance on her way home and stopped to say goodbye. I went outside and hugged her, thanking her for all her support over these three weeks. She said this was the largest number of visitors she had seen for anything held in the basement since she started working at MSA. She had received a great deal of feedback and said she had really loved everything I had done.

The meeting next door was getting a little noisy. During that final hour, I felt oddly excited and could no longer concentrate on reading.

I stopped and took a few photographs inside the temporarily empty gallery, then went outside and photographed the entrance looking in. And suddenly I realised something. When passers-by walked past the basement entrance and looked inside, they could not actually see any of the paintings on the walls. What they saw was only some unidentified space, and me sitting at a table with my head lowered, quietly reading.

Of course, when it was not raining I would put the sandwich board outside. But for much of these three weeks the weather had been changeable—sometimes strong winds, sometimes heavy rain—so there were many times when people did not even know there was an exhibition inside. They had to lower their heads, step through the little doorway, walk down the stairs, and only then could they see what the space was really like, and the paintings on the walls.

I thought about all the people who had actually chosen to step inside during those three weeks. Each one of those encounters now felt extraordinarily unlikely. For someone as poor at conversation as I am, actually speaking with one of those visitors was another layer of chance on top of that.



When something reaches its final moment and you look back, things that once seemed entirely ordinary no longer seem inevitable at all. Thinking now of every person who had walked in, I felt full of gratitude. Perhaps, at the instant they decided to step inside, this “exhibit”—me—had already played a part. I was the first thing they saw, before any of the work.

Two more young women came in and stayed until half past six. One told me she had come the week before and had wanted to bring her friend back to see it. I said today was the last day. They felt incredibly lucky. They asked me about the books and the writing inside, so I explained some of the scrolls and objects to them, as well as traditional Chinese painting scrolls and the way they are gradually unrolled.

At 6:40, the gallery returned to quiet for the last time.

The final minute. Time to return to the real world.

I posted something on Facebook, then did what I had done every day: turned off the video, switched off the lights, brought the sandwich board back inside, and closed the door.

Home.

Twenty-five visitors on the final day.

I was free again.

(Postscript)

That evening, when I got home, I received an email from someone who signed it L.B. It read:

Dear Ms Tang,

Last weekend I happened to stop by the basement gallery at MSA and experience

the stillness of A Place of Return. It was a very pleasant experience for me.

Here, stillness is urgently needed—and evidently in Shanghai too.

Best wishes,

L.B.

I read through my Saturday and Sunday records twice and still had absolutely no idea which visitor this might have been. There had been several quiet couples who came into the exhibition without saying much. I had recognised that quality in them and quietly stepped away, leaving the space to them, so no conversation had been recorded.

It made me realise that although I had tried to record every person I encountered, some people left behind conversations, some wrote in the guestbook, and some remained only as a few words in my notes. Their quietness resisted description, definition and possession. We do not own one another's stories. We only share the fact that, for a moment, we met in the same time and space—and perhaps felt something similar.

I had written tens of thousands of words of notes.

But what I had failed to record must have been far more.

Deinstallation

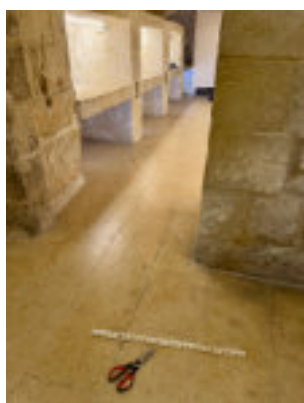
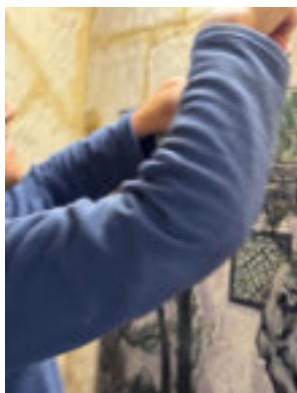
(2026-01-30, Friday)

Two hours.

We took down all the lights, cables, projector, paintings and display objects, along with the guestbook, my kettle, my books and all the other small things. Everything was packed into boxes and loaded into the car. As I had done at the end of every day, I turned off the lights and locked the door. Then I returned the key.

The basement fell back into silence. Empty.

Did these three weeks really exist?







Some Numbers

Excluding the opening night, a total of 379 visitors were recorded over 17 days (not counting repeat visitors).

Date	Visitors
2026-01-09	20
2026-01-10	33
2026-01-11	28
2026-01-12	14
2026-01-13	4
2026-01-16	25
2026-01-17	37
2026-01-18	48
2026-01-19	9
2026-01-22	13
2026-01-23	21
2026-01-24	36
2026-01-25	17
2026-01-26	14
2026-01-27	11
2026-01-28	24
2026-01-29	25
Total:	379

The exhibition was open for a total of 78 hours.

I chose Bach's Goldberg Variations as the soundtrack for the video, and it was played 1,170 times in total.



Three Weeks in the Basement

In January 2026, in a three-hundred-year-old limestone basement at the Malta Society of Arts, paintings of Jiangnan gardens and waterside towns made years earlier in China met thick stone walls and low vaulted ceilings in Malta. Two distant worlds came together, creating an unexpected sense of return across place and time.

Because the basement had no staff, the artist stayed in the gallery herself for three weeks. She read, watched, talked, waited and recorded, gradually becoming part of the exhibition too.

People came and went. Outside, there was wind, rain and winter sunlight. Inside, Bach's Goldberg Variations played on a loop.

The words carry the work; the images only bear witness.