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## The Consolations of Art or My Hovercraft is Full of Eels



*The Ephebe of Selinunte*  
c. 450 BC

*The Dancing Satyr of*  
*Mazara del Vallo, c. 450 BC*

*Star of Bellice,*  
*Pietro Consagra, c. 1968*

I am very attracted to the hybrid, the mestiza, the mutt and the mongrel, perhaps because I am one. Not really British, American, French or Italian (and yet of all of these cultures) I have never really known what I am. I have work in American museums which pin me down as American, and work in British museums that have me as British. I am both. Whilst as a child this was disturbing, as an adult I have found it liberating.

I think what attracts me the most about Sicily, a place I visit every year and which gives me endless material for painting, is the heterogeneity of the culture. An Italian will usually describe herself variously as a Romana, or a Fiorentina or a Napolitana (Garibaldi didn't really unite Italy after all) but a Siciliana is a creature with Phoenician, Byzantine, Greek, Aragonese, Norman, Arab, North African and countless other bloods running through her veins.

Sicily is an island where both the culture and the horizon are fluid - physically and metaphysically. The edge of the land and the sea blur in a purple haze like nowhere else, pace Jimi Hendrix. This is a liminal space. This is the purest beauty. And yet there is so much tragedy in the island's long and troubled history, where now the hungry, wet, exhausted and dispossessed wash up on its shores. There is a lot of guilt attached to being a tourist in Sicily.

But there is much consolation to be found in the kindness and stoicism of the island people, the food, and the art. Oh, the art. Yesterday I saw a masterpiece, a bronze Hellenic statue from 450 BC - the Ephebus or Kouros of Castelvetro - in a dusty, deserted town near Salemi where, in 1860, Garibaldi hubristically declared himself leader of Italy. The tiny Museo Civico hosts some of the treasures of nearby Selinunte, a splendid cluster of Hellenistic temples founded in 700 BC. The hieratic bronze is completely authoritative although its author is entirely unknown. And the kinetic ecstatic, dancing Satyr in nearby Mazara del Vallo is worth a trip to Sicily just for itself. I visit it every

year. There is something fairy-tale about these two very different bronzes fished out of the sea in pieces, not by archaeologists but by fishermen. A leg here and an arm there. A metaphor for the very creation of art itself.

But there are other tragedies. In nearby Gibellina, destroyed by an earthquake in 1968, you enter a world out of a de Chirico painting or a film by Fellini. A monumental steel sculpture 28 metres high by Pietro Consagra, stands in the middle of nowhere and 50 avant-garde sculptures are placed around the impoverished deserted streets in mad juxtapositions. And there is conceptual art here too. Alberto Burri has covered the ruins in a cracked blanket known as the *Cretto*. This is 50 years before Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth* at Tate Modern.

This is Surrealism embodied. Of the Sicilian kind.  
Not unlike my favourite phrase in my book of Sicilian dialect.  
*Lu me ariuscafu chinu di anciddi è.*

My hovercraft is full of eels.

Robin Richmond