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MARISA MERZ'S FACTORY OF DREAMS

A retrospective at the Met Breuer reveals the least-known and only female member of Arte Povera to also be among the best.

By Peter Schjeldahl

The Met Breuer is not yet a year old, but it has already distinguished itself as a site of beguiling and serious surprises: a huge survey of unfinished works by masters of Western art, a provocatively ingenious nstallation of Diane Arbus photographs, and a terrific retrospective (soon to close) of the African-American painter Kerry James Marshall. The latest is "Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space," the first major retrospective of the Italian artist in the United States. Merz is the least-known and, perhaps not incidentally, the only female member of Arte Povera, a movement shepherded into existence, in 1967, by the art critic Germano Celant, as Italy's ambitious riposte to American Pop and minimalism. About a dozen artists participated, creating large, often sprawling abstract sculptures in humble materials—dirt, rocks, tree branches, used clothes, rope, burlap, industrial detritus—putatively to counter the sterility of consumer culture, but also, more practically, to master the capacious exhibition spaces that were becoming an international norm.

"Living Sculpture" (1966) and "Untitled" (1976)

Marisa Merz was routinely identified as the wife and, since 2003, the widow of one of Arte Povera's leading figures, Mario Merz; for years her own work was exhibited sporadically and afforded only glancing consideration. But at the Met Breuer she emerges as the liveliest artist in a movement that was often marred by intellectual and poetic pretensions, and whose abstracted themes of nature and metaphysics rarely appealed to American sensibilities, and still don't very much. (Minimalism, which never took hold in Italy, had pretty well cauterized symbolic content for the art world here.) Merz is still at work, in her home town of Turin, at ninety. That's a late age for a début retrospective, but this show will be revelatory to many people, as it is to me. An occasion that might have seemed a revisionist historical footnote turns out to be more like the best saved for last.

It all started in her kitchen. The show opens with immense hanging sculptures of clustered ductlike forms in shiny aluminum sheeting, homemade with shears and staples. Cutout swaths loop and overlap, like snake-skin scales, to gorgeous, looming, somewhat sinister effect. The earliest piece dates from 1966, when Merz was spending most of her time at home, bringing up Beatrice, the daughter who was born to Marisa and Mario in 1960, the year they married. The pieces thronged the kitchen walls and extended into the living room and around the furniture, encasing the TV set. Beatrice, who is now the president of the Merz Foundation, which manages her father's estate and her mother's career, remembers being scared of the sculptures as a child. Here and there, the gleaming surfaces are faintly yellowed by cigarette smoke and the residue of cooking oil.

Merz has said that the series' English title, "Living Sculpture," paid homage to the Living Theatre, a New York troupe of Dionysian performers that was popular with young European artists. Soon after the first work's creation, it starred in "The Green Monster," an underground horror film made by some of Merz's friends, in which it was seen to digest writhing, naked actors. In 1967, it was briefly installed in Turin's Piper Pluri Club, one of a number of related performance-and-party venues around the country that were frequented by the Italian counterculturati.

The show proceeds with other sculptural works, many of them made of hand-knitted copper wire or nylon filament. Some are prepossessingly large. An untitled installation from 1976, spanning an entire wall, comprises irregularly spaced wire squares the size of pot holders, stretched at their corners by brass-head nails. Some bare nails suggest squares that are missing or invisible. A floor piece, dated 1990-2003, is composed of a low steel trough, into which melted candle wax was poured; there, the wax hardened around the bases of nine tiny sculptures, in unfired clay, of indistinct figures and faces that are reminiscent of the sorts of prehistoric totem that archeologists, in despair, assign to "ceremonial use." Other works are small, including scarpette ("little shoes"): dainty slippers that Merz made from copper wire or nylon thread, for herself and for Beatrice. The child's nickname, Bea, is spelled out on a wall in clumps of nylon mesh, bristling with the knitting needles that were used to create them.

From left to right: "Altalena (Swing)" (1968), "Untitled" (1979), and "Untitled" (1966).
Photograph by Frances F. Denny for The New Yorker

The show's title, "The Sky Is a Great Space," comes from a poem written by Merz. It relates to a conceptual caprice from 1970: a flight that she took in a small private plane, and documented, with a series of photographs, as a work of art. The mystique of the sky also figures in a 1975 photograph of Merz, taken from behind, as she sits in a chair, her *scarpette*-shod feet propped against a wall. She looks out of a window onto a city (Rome) immersed in a black

night pierced by a few scattered lights. It's a breathtaking picture, which presages Merz's gradual shift, starting in the nineteen-eighties, from sculptural installations to drawn and painted imagery. She has usually rendered faces, often of Renaissance-evocative Madonnas and angels, in a range of styles, from neo-Futurist tectonic to Edvard Munch-like Expressionist.

Merz's most striking pictorial technique involves layering combinations of graphite, wax, pastel, and paint that is brushed or sprayed, or sometimes both, onto paper, metal, board, or unstretched canvas. Colors shared by different mediums make it hard, at times, to know which material you see. In one work, from 2004, gold paint sprayed onto copper engulfs a sketchy apparition of a woman playing a flute. Networks of copper wire attached to it might represent rays of light or waves of sound. A copper shelf at the bottom sanctifies the piece as an altar. Merz's mixed methods draw you into the process of the work, as if your gaze were helping to generate it. First impressions of insouciantly woozy execution disintegrate in registrations of texture and touch. The pictures are like factories turning out dreams.

Merz was born in 1926 in Turin, where her father worked at the Fiat plant. She may have studied dance. At some point in the nineteen-forties, she modelled for the neoclassical painter Felice Casorati. I have now conveyed all that is publicly known of Merz's life before 1960, which the concerted efforts of the Met Breuer show's curators—Ian Alteveer, of the Met, and Connie Butler, of the Hammer Museum, in Los Angeles, where the show will travel in June—have been unable to supplement. (Even Merz's maiden name is unknown: searches for a birth certificate yielded none.)

Surely Mario knew more, and others in their circle, now mostly deceased, must have, too. The lacuna bespeaks incuriosity about the wife of the great man, which Merz was at no pains to correct. Did she take some compensatory pleasure in being mysterious? At any rate, it served her as a mask. Meanwhile, she had a continual and direct hand in Mario's art; Alteveer told me that she was regularly consulted on the installation of his exhibitions. Their relationship was notoriously stormy but resilient—and they were a sight to see. He was a large man. She stands about five feet tall. (I'm reminded of the colossal Diego Rivera and the petite Frida Kahlo. There, too, the wife's art eventually came to rate as at least equal in quality to the husband's.)

Merz's work, no less than that of her Arte Povera peers, advanced an avant-garde shibboleth of the era: proposing to close what Robert Rauschenberg had called "the gap" and which Germano Celant, with more starch, termed "the dichotomy" between art and life—as if art is ever meaningfully separate from life. The idea has always struck me as a fancy way of exalting a simple rejection of conventional display—frames, pedestals—and of working with found objects, defined spaces, and elements of performance. If there was a more political aspect to the Italians' works, it was ambiguous, assumed rather than expressed. The povera (impoverished) element counted less as activism than as a sentimental gesture of virtue on the biennial circuit and in the deluxe galleries where their careers unfolded.

But the art/life conceit acquires special pith in Merz's case, beginning with her marginal standing in the Arte Povera group and the way that she navigated it: by making it the keynote of a personal, untrammelled originality. Both the ferocious "Living Sculpture" and the more ingratiating pictures and little sculptures that followed it made positive content out of being consigned to domesticity. Merz refuses to call herself or her art feminist, to the extent that she banished the word from the title of one of several fine essays in the Met Breuer show's catalogue. I'm reminded of some strong-willed women artists I knew, in the early years of the women's movement, who also resisted having their solitary struggles described in ideological terms. But Merz's very independence makes her an ideal avatar for feminist analysis. She pushed against limits in ways that revealed what and where the limits were, and she turned the friction to shrewd and stirring account.

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