

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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## ‘The Sky Is a Great Space,’ and It’s the Limit for Marisa Merz

By ROBERTA SMITH JAN. 26, 2017



Two untitled sculptures and a 1984 painting by Marisa Merz on view at the Met Breuer in the exhibition “Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space.” Agaton Strom for The New York Times

The Met Breuer’s fascinating and tenacious survey of the Italian artist Marisa Merz reveals her at 90 to be the queen of Arte Povera, the postwar Italian movement that favored sculptures and installations fashioned from humble, often discarded materials.

And she’s nobody’s consort. “Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space” explores a 50-year career, belatedly lifting Ms. Merz from the edges of this all-male trend — whose advocates did not always include her in its first, reputation-building exhibitions in the late 1960s and early ’70s — to its throne.

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“Living Sculpture,” in aluminum sheeting, by Marisa Merz. Credit Agaton Strom for The New York Times

The assembled works suggest that Ms. Merz’s relationship to Arte Povera is similar to the American painter Lee Krasner’s connection to Abstract Expressionism. They were both marginalized for being women, a condition intensified by being married to one of the movement’s most prominent members. (Ms. Merz’s spouse, Mario Merz, who died in 2003, was especially competitive and demanding. She devoted a great deal of time to his career, and he did not reciprocate.)

The difference is that Ms. Merz’s work is actually better than her husband’s. Krasner, whose achievement includes some great paintings and certainly deserves more attention than it initially received, will always be in Jackson Pollock’s shadow, like most other Abstract Expressionists. This exhibition proposes that — with a few notable exceptions, including Jannis Kounellis and Alighiero Boetti — Arte Povera may turn out to dwell largely in Ms. Merz’s shadow.

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An untitled painting from "Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space." Credit Agaton Strom for The New York Times

Ms. Merz, who continues to work in her Turin studio, has remained truer to the movement's vow of poverty, opting for copper wire, paraffin, scraps of wood and cardboard throughout her career (although she does have a penchant for gold leaf). She seldom resorts to outside fabrication, with its aura of expense, except for the plain iron pedestals that hold many of her small heads of unfired clay. Otherwise, she prefers to keep her hand in, making everything herself. Another boon is her devotion to drawing, which wends through her habitual mixing of mediums, giving this exhibition a sense of fullness and intimacy that few in her cohort can muster.

The show looks great, the first completely confident effort in the Marcel Breuer landmark since the Met took it over from the Whitney Museum barely a year ago. On view are more than 100 works, including a few often-delicate installation pieces that represent the large sprawling ones (mostly lost) that dominated the early years of her career.

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“Testa (Head),” a sculpture by Ms. Merz, a leader in the Arte Povera movement. Credit Agaton Strom for The New York Times

The exhibition was initiated by Connie Butler and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, where she is chief curator, and organized jointly with the Met and Ian Alteveer, its curator in the department of modern and contemporary art. It reveals an artist unafraid of incorporating crafts into her work and unintimidated either by scale or personal emotion.

The show opens with a series of immense hanging sculptures made in 1966 in her Turin kitchen (soon to overtake the family’s apartment). They are fashioned from thin sheets of shiny aluminum that she more or less treats as fabric, cutting them into fringelike strips, arranging them in poufs, flounces or swags that can suggest fancy ball gowns hung up for the night, while also conjuring automobiles and assembly lines. Some are spray painted with green and red flowers that evoke Andy Warhol. The most impressive is a large piece hugging the ceiling like a heavy silver cloud, dangling immense blooms and stamen in a startling synthesis (to American eyes) of John Chamberlain, Lynda Benglis and Dale Chihuly.

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“Bea,” Ms. Merz’s daughter’s name, knitted, with needles included. Credit Agaton Strom for The New York Times

The domestic-industrial duality continues on a smaller scale in the exhibition’s largest gallery, where many pieces, dating from late 1960s and 1970s, incorporate little squares and triangles Ms. Merz knitted from copper wire. Delicate and gleaming, these are nailed to walls, evoking boxy little stars, or to found objects (an ancient door, a stool) forming quilt-like patterns and padding.

Small sculptures knitted from either wire or nylon thread resemble primitive slippers, bowls or toy boats that might have been excavated from an archaeological site. Ms. Merz also made “Bea,” knitting her daughter’s name in soft, cloudlike letters that have a touching vulnerability, their knitting needles still attached.

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Sculptures by Marisa Merz. Credit Agaton Strom for The New York Times

By the late 1970s, Ms. Merz was turning more and more to the female face in paintings, drawings and many of the small heads of unfired clay. But the wire is a continuing presence, an undercurrent of refinement but also protection. Sometimes it stretches across paintings like rays of light. And many of the smaller drawings have filigree patterns that almost seem knitted. Some sculpted heads, and even a few paintings, wear squares of knitted wire that could be a veil or armor befitting Joan of Arc, while others are often exquisitely blushed with layers of pastel, paint and paraffin. These faces often tilt upward as if seeking a higher spirit. Several grouped on a large plane of paraffin might almost be mourners at the base of the cross.

It is in the two-dimensional works that another of Ms. Merz's strengths emerges: She has no anxiety about showing her influences, and she is known for leaving many works undated, which indicates a striking indifference to the rankings and lineages of art history. She pillages but also suavely synthesizes art's eternal images of women from the Renaissance to Futurism and beyond: from Madonnas, angels and queens to warriors. In the case of several large, especially powerful drawings in graphite, faces seem to emerge from the arches and buttresses of complex Piranesian structures.

And there appear to be popular sources, too — fashion illustration and screen-goddess publicity shots — for the big dreamy eyes and full lips that compete with the scabrous surfaces. This is most powerfully apparent in a large, square pastel on paper of deep blue dotted with coins, pushpins and layered paraffin: A gorgeous face floats forward as if from a dream.

Ms. Merz's women are often beautiful, if not regal, but her mixes of materials and objects always look provisional; the works almost inevitably refuse to look finished. They evince an artist set on exacting what might be characterized as one woman's revenge on the male gaze while refusing to settle on what, physically, beauty in art should be. This

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tension leaves us with an unforgettable inspiration: Ms. Merz celebrating her gender with a restless, resolute fierceness.

Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space

Through May 7 at the Met Breuer; 212-751-1675; metmuseum.org. The show heads to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles on June 4.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/26/arts/design/the-sky-is-a-great-space-and-its-the-limit-for-marisa-merz.html>