

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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## The Renaissance of Marisa Merz, Carol Rama, and Carla Accardi: Three Italian Women Artists Having a Moment

by Arthur Lubow

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Merz, at home in Turin, with *Living Sculpture*, 1966.  
Paolo Pressano, courtesy of the artist and Fondazione Merz

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Long before she reached the advanced age of 90, the reclusive Italian artist Marisa Merz avoided interviews. So the chance that she would agree to my visit, which I had attempted to arrange for weeks, was remote. Still, on a brisk afternoon this past December, in the simple courtyard of her building in Turin, Italy, I stood by quietly as a mutual friend pressed the apartment buzzer. There was a long pause before Merz responded. “Not today,” she announced through the intercom. Even if I had been invited inside, Merz would have likely deflected my questions with her characteristic Delphic ambiguity. “Her psychology is strange,” her daughter, Beatrice, the director of the Fondazione Merz, told me. Merz, it seems, lives in a world that exists only in her imagination.

Though her name is little known in the United States, Merz was a pivotal figure in Arte Povera, the avant-garde Italian movement that galvanized the art scene in the mid-1960s with unconventional sculptures assembled from humble materials. Her husband, Mario Merz, who died in 2003, was one of Arte Povera’s leading practitioners and an outside force. Though Marisa held sway in their home, which became a favorite hangout for the Arte Povera artists of Turin, she preferred to cede the limelight to Mario. But now, however belatedly, she is moving center stage, with “The Sky Is a Great Space,” a full-scale retrospective at the Met Breuer annex of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York, running through May 7 before moving to the Hammer Museum, in Los Angeles. “There’s something about the isolation of her practice and the devotion to her vision that is very appealing on an emotional level,” says the Hammer’s Connie Butler, who co-curated the show.

This is indeed a bountiful season for Italian women artists. Another Turin resident of Merz’s generation, Carol Rama, who died a year ago at 97, is receiving her largest Stateside survey to date, at the [New Museum](#), in New York, opening May 3. A painter and collagist of disquieting images of female sexuality, Rama “imagined a completely different perception of the body and the experience of the body, and anticipated many ideas that are of concern now, including gender fluidity,” says [Massimiliano Gioni](#), the artistic director of the New Museum, who is co-curating the show. And coinciding with the Rama exhibition in New York, a third Italian artist, Carla Accardi, who lived in Rome and died at age 89 in 2014, will be prominently featured in a show on Italian culture of the 1970s, opening May 9 at the Fondazione Prada, in Milan. “The

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delicacy of her work, and at the same time her political commitment, represents a perfect balance,” says the artist [Francesco Vezzoli](#), who conceived the exhibition.

Asked to account for the flurry of attention, Gioni suggests that “sadly, part of it may speak to the state of Italian patriarchy that it has taken so long for these artists to be recognized. For men and women of my generation, women like Accardi, Merz, and Rama were exciting models, because they were not part of the more oppressive male society that Arte Povera had come to represent.” And it’s not only Italians. This wave of shows comes at a moment in the art world when many such pioneering female innovators are being spotlighted. In the past year alone, the Whitney Museum of American Art presented the first full-scale retrospective in New York in 20 years of the centenarian geometric - Abstractionist Carmen Herrera; Hauser Wirth & Schimmel gallery, in Los Angeles, mounted a superb show of women Abstract sculptors; and the Rubell Family Collection, in Miami, organized an exhibition featuring more than 100 contemporary women artists titled “No Man’s Land.”

For Merz, Rama, and Accardi, the trauma of World War II in Italy coincided with the birth pangs of their artistic careers. Before the war, Merz studied classical ballet and, as a sideline, modeled for Felice Casorati, then the most prominent artist in Turin. Beatrice believes that because the prospects in art seemed more exciting than those in dance, her mother took up painting. Yet it would also seem that Merz needed to assume the traditional roles of wife and mother before she felt free to become an artist in her own right.

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A wall in Marisa Merz's Turin studio, 2016.  
Renato Ghiazza, courtesy of the artist and Fondazione Merz

In the '90s, Merz sculpted a series of heads of unfired clay, small enough to fit in her hands and, in their pure simplicity, reminiscent of Cycladic art. According to the New Museum chief curator Richard Flood, they “are among the most beautiful votive objects in art.” She has placed these heads, along with some of her large paintings of angels, which she creates by standing on a ladder, in a room of her apartment dominated by a spiral glass table made by Mario. Sometimes she affixes to a painting a scrap of paper bearing lines from beloved poems. Her own works are purposefully intermingled with furniture and installations by Mario. “It’s definitely a spirit-keeping place,” Flood observes. Since Mario’s death, Marisa has returned to the Catholicism of her childhood and given up the alcohol that fueled passionate polemical discussions with her hard-drinking husband. “When Mario died, I couldn’t understand how she could survive,” Beatrice says. “But she is very strong. In her mind, she is not alone.”

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Unlike Merz, Accardi was a self-described feminist and achieved success at a young age. Born to an affluent family in Sicily, she moved to Rome after the war and joined a group of Marxists who were Abstract painters. Because the Communist Party at the time denounced Abstraction, reconciling the two was a “hard battle,” she said in a 2004 interview. It would be the first of many struggles. In the early '70s, along with her friend the art critic Carla Lonzi, she became a founding member of the neofeminist group Female Revolt. But when Lonzi decided that painting was itself a patriarchal activity, Accardi left. “I considered myself first and foremost an artist,” she would later declare. “And once the commitment to ideals of the early days had been transformed into an extremism...I no longer wished to be involved.”

Back then, Accardi was “the only female artist who very consistently said that she was a feminist,” Vezzoli notes. “But if you see Carla’s work without reading her interviews, you wouldn’t know it has a political content.” Accardi painted exuberant canvases of abstract symbols, sometimes in brilliant two-color patterns, at other times in black and white. The paintings resemble enlarged Egyptian hieroglyphics and can seem to anticipate the work of Keith Haring. In her use of industrial materials, Accardi bears a connection to the Arte Povera artists who succeeded her. She had a great enthusiasm for sicofoil, a clear plastic, with which in 1965 she constructed her first Tenda (Tent), a structure that predates the “igloos” of Mario Merz. But Accardi’s motivations were different from those of Merz, who made miniature dwellings. Accardi was thinking more optically. “She told me the purpose of the tende was not so much to make a habitat, as to liberate the painted mark from the canvas through the use of plastic,” says Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the director of Turin’s Galleria Civica d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea. Accardi also flipped canvases and placed sicofoil over their stretchers, so that the infrastructure remained visible under the enamel marks she made on the transparent surface. She declared in 1981 that “the canvas ceased to exist because I exposed the support.”

If Accardi freed paintings from their backing and Merz lifted the objects of everyday life into the realm of sorcery, Rama liberated the unconscious. As it happens, her apartment is barely a mile from the Merz residence, and yet the artists’ lives did not intersect. Rama lived on the top floor of a 1930s building near the Po River for 70 years and, like Merz, created a domestic environment that resembles what her nephew, Pier Giorgio Rama, calls “a big three-dimensional artwork.” She filled her studio, bedroom, and kitchen with

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collected objects that she arranged in poetically precise juxtapositions—African masks, stone angels, shoe molds, tribal necklaces, embroidered slippers, perfume bottles. Propped on a table is the gold pendant she habitually wore around her neck, in the shape of a double phallus—as much a personal trademark as the thick blonde braid that curled like a serpent around her forehead.

One of Rama's most vivid creations was her persona as an outspoken, acerbic, sexually transgressive woman. The actual Rama was bigger-hearted and, following an early romantic attachment, possibly celibate. Born to a prosperous Turin family whose fortune derived from her father's bicycle and auto-parts factory, Rama saw the idyll of her youth collapse when her father went bankrupt in the '20s. Her mother suffered a nervous breakdown and was institutionalized—apparently for only a few months, but the episode looms large in the artist's legend. Her father died in 1942; a suicide, according to Rama, who was then in her 20s, though as with much of her personal history, the fact cannot be corroborated. "Sometimes she borrowed stories from other people, and these stories became her stories," says Maria Cristina Mundici, an art historian who was Rama's friend.

Rama was self-taught and, apart from a brief allegiance to a school of geometric Abstractionists, fiercely independent. In the '60s, she became known in Turin for her "bricolages," in which she applied unconventional elements like rubber strips to canvas in texturally rich patterns. But only in 1979, when a local gallerist exhibited the watercolors that Rama had painted in the '30s and '40s, did the weirdness of her inner life become visible. With delicate brushwork, reminiscent of the erotic watercolors of Egon Schiele, she depicted women lying spread-eagle with snakes emerging from their vaginas, naked women being accosted by men sprouting multiple penises, women defecating towers of turds. There were also women with amputated limbs strapped to hospital beds (scenes inspired, Rama said, by visits to her mother in the psychiatric facility). "It's just a starting point," Mundici says. "She chose to work with those topics, like other painters choose to work with flowers and landscapes."

Even so, viewers who detect a white-hot anger bubbling close to the surface are not mistaken. "Rage has always been my life condition," Rama once declared. "Fury and violence are what drive me to paint." When she was awarded the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale in

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2003, she reacted rancorously, asking why she had to wait until she was so old to be recognized. It is a question that any of her female peers might have posed, and Rama was right to complain. The following year, in fact, Accardi, the politically committed feminist, proclaimed in an interview that her gender was irrelevant to her accomplishments as a painter. “Historically, we all know what sort of problems women have encountered, but none of that mattered to my art,” Accardi said. “I made sure I was called an artist, not a woman painter, and I worked without thinking about gender.” She understood that to be thought of as a “woman artist” would marginalize her position. And so, while the celebration of these three Italian icons is in itself a cause for celebration, the arrival of fame—in old age or, even worse, posthumously—can only partly erase the sting of long neglect.