

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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EXHIBITIONS

Artist to artist: Dara Birnbaum on Marisa Merz

The video artist takes us on a tour of Merz's Met Breuer retrospective and explains why her smaller work is best

by DARA BIRNBAUM | 3 March 2017



A large suspended piece by Marisa Merz, (Living Sculpture) (1966) (© Tate/Tate Images)

In early February, we asked the artist Dara Birnbaum to share her reactions to the exhibition Marisa Merz: the Sky is a Great Space, at the Met Breuer. The career survey, which closes in May (and travels to Los Angeles) includes more than 100 works made during Merz's 50-year career, from small drawings to large sculptures that hang from the ceiling. Here, Birnbaum reflects on Merz's place in the Arte Povera movement and explains how her art echoes through contemporary art.

One of the arguments curators make with this show is that Merz's abstract sculptures and constructions are directly related to her figurative work. What do you make of that?

The work seems to go in so many different and diverse directions. The fact that she didn't date many of her works is interesting, as if it wasn't important to her at the time—like she didn't want to give a birthdate to some things. So they start to feel like cast-offs, and that seems okay. I personally like it when artists try to engage and experiment with differing aspects of their work. I'd rather see some confusion than a pretence toward simply doing something over again.

In thinking of different angles, are there artists her work reminds you of?

I think there's a kind of Primitivism that I relate to Marlene Dumas or Huma Bhabha, which keeps coming to mind. It seems that artists like Dumas, Bhabha and Merz want to bring things down to an

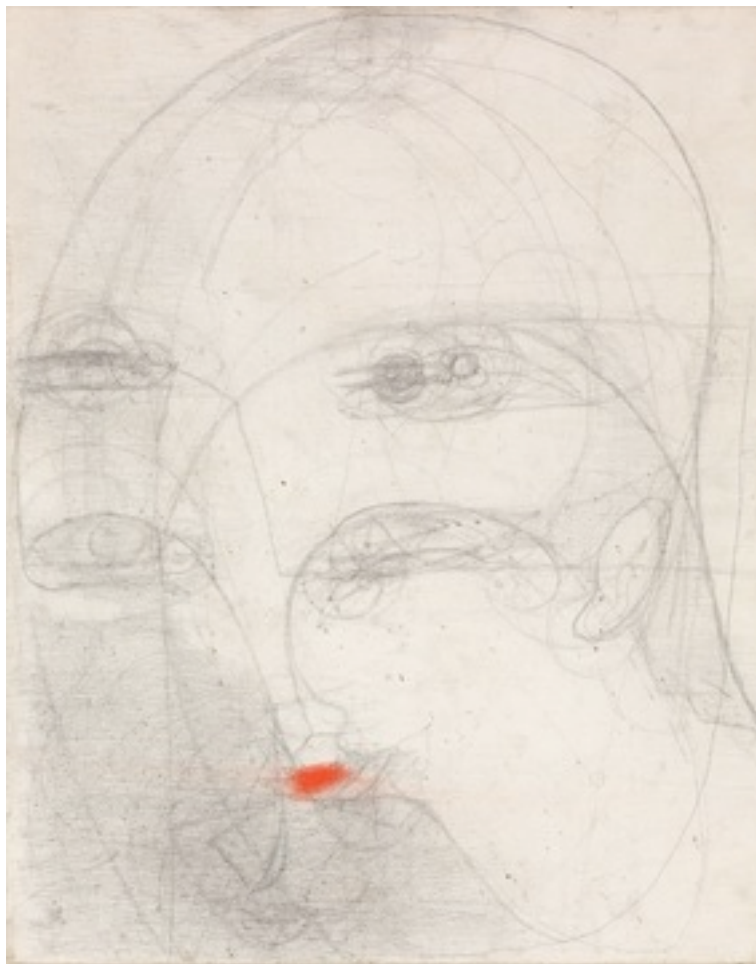
essence. Louise Bourgeois is another artist who comes to mind in a few of Merz's works. A bronze [by Merz] from

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1983 has some aspect of Bourgeois's psyche in it. An untitled work from 1989 looks a little like Isa Genzken. A lot of women artists, basically, come to mind, but some men too. In photographs, from an oblique distance, some of her hanging aluminium sheet sculptures resonate with Warhol's silver balloons, but they are so much heavier in posture and aspect. And some of the works are full of humour and an openness to play that reminds me of Franz West.

What about the domestic angle? We tend to associate Merz with the home, in part because she used to use her kitchen as her studio.

Some of the works in copper throw me back to the 1950s, when I was always finding copper mesh in my mother's kitchen. When I was growing up, it was used as a cleaning tool, similar to a Brillo pad. And they were similar in size to some of her smaller sculptures. And one of her works has knitting needles in it—which also can be a weapon.



Her drawings are usually small, too.

The drawings interest me. There is a full range of size but it is especially the more demure ones of women that impress me the most.

Those seem less full of Arte Povera's dominant characteristics. Do you feel especially drawn to the works that are outside the Arte Povera box?

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Yes, like with the wall sculptures made of copper. One of them is later, from 1993, and it's almost Minimalist, perhaps even post-Bauhaus inspired, taking off from the idea that less is more. It's got this grid of nails around which the copper is strung, but the grid isn't fulfilled. It's graceful. Or one work that's carved from alabaster—it's so simple, but it works exactly as it is.

What about the connections that curators draw between her work and earlier movements such as Futurism and the Italian Renaissance?

In an untitled painting from 2016 [of a woman], I don't see Futurism. Then, for example, in another untitled work from 2014 [that depicts a woman in an interior], I see Picasso. In another untitled work (2004) [that includes a lot of gold], I do see a purposeful exaggeration of the Renaissance. But for me, the pieces that really succeed are some of the sculpted clay heads, which can be quite good. There were a lot of male artists during the period of Arte Povera making very large gestures through their work. And when she makes big gestures, it's not unimpressive, but the more successful pieces seem to be where she doesn't make that attempt—when they're smaller, more "hand-able", or when the elements she uses look cast off. Then I feel closer to her and the work feels freer somehow.

Interview by Pac Pobric

• *Marisa Merz: the Sky is a Great Space, Met Breuer, New York, until 7 May; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 4 June-20 August*

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