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Marisa Merz's Inimitable Intersections at Hammer Museum LA



Installation view, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, June 4–August 20, 2017. Photo: Brian Forrest.

Marisa Merz is one of those artists who remains undercelebrated and underrecognised because of the circumstances and times in which she lived and worked. But that could be all about to change thanks to the Hammer Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art which together have partnered on a major retrospective of the Italian painter, sculptor, and installation artist.

“Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space” unites five decades of Merz’s work, including her early Arte Povera experiments with non-traditional materials and processes, her fantastical sculptures of heads and faces from the 1980s and 1990s, as well as examples of the large and eclectic yet wonderfully intricate installations of her mid- and late-career.

Merz emerged in the late 1960s as part of the circle of artists associated with Arte Povera. But according to Hammer Director Ann Philbin, as the only female member of the Arte Povera movement, her work has been overlooked for decades. “Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space” aims to redress this injustice and in doing so reveals the real importance of her contribution to the fabric of art history.

At the centre of Merz’s influence is the various modes of balance that characterize her oeuvre – a balance between art and life, intimacy and scale, the abstract and the figurative. What sets her apart is her talent for harmonizing seemingly disparate elements to create poetically organic works that can be at once immense in scale yet intimately intricate in feel.

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Working on the very cusp of profound creativity and everyday reality, Merz succeeds in eroding the boundary between art and life. Her uncompromising dedication to her artistic practice as a central part of her existence, combined with her natural affinity with the materials she used, give her works an incredible sense of narrative and humanness that helps foster a deep connection with the viewer.

“The work of Marisa Merz exists in the intersection of art and life that has become so central to contemporary practice,” said Hammer Chief Curator Connie Butler. “Her challenging and evocative body of work is deeply personal, as much a response to her own experience as to art history and the milieu of contemporary Turin and postwar Italy.”

Following its debut at The Met Breuer, the Hammer’s presentation of the exhibition includes drawings and two large floor installations that were not shown in New York. Organized by the Hammer Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space” is at the Hammer until August 20 and is accompanied by Merz’s first monograph to be published in English.

To find out more about the exhibition and publication, which were developed in close collaboration with Fondazione Merz, with major catalogue support by Gladstone Gallery, BLOUIN ARTINFO got in touch with Hammer chief curator, Connie Butler, and Marisa’s daughter, Beatrice Merz, and asked them a couple of questions.

What is the significance of Marisa Merz's contribution to the landscape of modern and contemporary art that makes her such an important figure in the history of art?

Connie Butler: Merz was one of the first artists to truly challenge the boundary between art and life, something that has since become an established practice on the part of many contemporary artists and one of the most important legacies of modern art more generally. Her poetic and nuanced ability to unite personal content with visual form in surprising and unexpected ways set an example for subsequent generations of artists.

Beatrice Merz: Marisa took part in regular dialogue among the other Arte Povera artists, and her associates considered her a central figure in the group. She made her artistic choices following her own nature and inclinations rather than reasoning. She successfully maintained her creative integrity as an artist by rejecting from the very beginning all sorts of commercialization of her works.

She appeared in the group’s collective shows and only accepted solo exhibitions on rare and selected occasions. To this day, this is also perhaps one of the reasons for her success: never wanting to compromise.

What does the exhibition reveal about the main themes, motifs, materials, concepts, and ideas that have motivated Merz's practice and have now come to define and characterize her body of work?

Connie Butler: The exhibition demonstrates just how varied and multivalent her practice really was. Though she has often been represented in group shows by the Living Sculpture, an admittedly monumental and very important early work, the installation demonstrates how her practice evolved to encompass a plethora of media and materials from copper and aluminum to graphite, pastel, metallic paint, and even found materials. She continues to explore the possibilities of line in all its guises through a career that has spanned more than 60 years.

Beatrice Merz: When it came to making art, Marisa always did what she wanted, and every work came from a spontaneous gesture or finding a particular object or material. An immense feeling of pleasure came purely from the act of making. She never forced herself to do anything, and this allowed her to be one of those artists in recent art history who are to a great extent free from conventions.

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