

4. Marisa Merz at Monica De Cardenas

MONICA DE CARDENAS

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Marisa Merz, born in Turin in 1931, has intentionally traveled along the sidelines of Italian art over the last fifty years, embracing the formal revolution of Arte Povera in her use of non-standard materials, yet rejecting its iconoclastic attack on the imagination and the figurative tradition. Her vocabulary of form should be looked at in connection with the post-minimalist work of artists such as Eva Hesse, in which a female sensibility transforms industrial materials into emotional sculpture. Like Hesse, Marisa Merz has always walked a creative tightline between matter and spirit, femininity and physicality, with the clash between materials sparking enticingly unexpected forms. Her complex, lyrical work challenges categories such as craft and fine art, developing a poetic language that is both intimist and conceptual. In the years that witnessed the explosion of Arte Povera (1968-1970), Marisa Merz seemed to voluntarily withdraw from the international art circuit, shutting herself up in her studio at home to knit. This manual occupation was traditionally female, yet physical and tiring, in that the artist chose to use industrial materials such as copper and nylon in place of wool. Her tireless needles crafted objects, letters, and simple geometric shapes that she arranged in large installations, both random and variable. Fine copper meshes attached to the wall with small nails, triangles hanging like sails in space with long threads trailing off from them, created seemingly infinite structures, cosmic spaces of pure emotion. The theme of disappearance has been central to her work since the '60s. In 1968, for *Arte Povera + Azioni Povere*, an exhibition that Germano Celant conceived at the invitation of Lia and Marcello Rumma for the arsenal in Amalfi, Marisa Merz decided to absent herself. She did not present any work in the exhibition space, choosing instead to photograph on the wet sand and then hide on the beach, wrapped in tape and copper, a series of knitted works linked to the childhood of her daughter Beatrice (*Scarpette*, 1966 and *Bea*, 1968, the three letters of her daughter's nickname). These same works turned up again in 1970 in her solo show at Sargentini's L'Attico, and then yet again in the form of the installation *Ad occhi chiusi gli occhi sono straordinariamente aperti*, presented at the 1972 Venice Biennale. This liberty with her own work grows out of an overlap between different time frames: the fluid one of memory, the historical one of the Western archetypes, and the physical one of the present. Her works remain open-ended, alive, and her exhibitions become a physical representation of her emotions and memories, portraying the complex ties between art and life. One of her most distinctive qualities is how she has always managed to turn public occasions of presenting her work into private moments of sharing a female universe, ceaselessly reappropriating her pieces and arranging them into site-specific installations. Marisa Merz's works are a constantly flowing continuum, becoming difficult to date; cropping up over a span of years, they transform themselves with a freedom and indifference for the unwritten laws of the art market that is utterly unique. The solo show by Marisa Merz at Monica de Cardenas in Zuoz, Switzerland is no exception. The exhibition unfolds through new pieces and past works like an open-ended, spiritual journey. The unique setting, a former farm building from about 1400 that originally housed a barn and hayloft, serves as a perfect counterpoint to the small sculptures and drawings of this great artist, who has made a lighthanded touch and minimal intervention a characteristic trait of her work. Transparent images of anonymous, genderless faces serve as the vehicle of an intimate, existential narrative, in which the small heads become fleeting apparitions, spirit faces turned to the sky in an attempt to capture the infinite. Wandering through the space, up and down the narrow wooden stairs, we encounter wax figurines, small heads made of clay and gold, and a vast number of drawings. Drawings that grow out of restive, delicate lines, arabesques on paper and wood, clouds of soot, hinted auras that seem to capture the mind and spirit of the viewer. The encounter between microcosm and macrocosm turns the precision of the

mark, the manual nature of the knitting, into a sort of secret map of the universe. Through these works, Marisa Merz has once again managed to fuse together categories normally thought of as contradictory, like abstraction, representation and conceptualism, to generate a lyrical, symbolic experience. *(Ilaria Bonacossa)*
