

Bruno Munari: My Futurist Past

The exhibition ***Bruno Munari: My Futurist Past***, on view at the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art from **19 September to 23 December 2012**, aims to investigate the activity of one of the most complex, creative and multi-faceted figures of Italian 20th century art. It will analyse Munari's aesthetic development from his initial Futurist phase (around 1927) to the post-war period (up to 1950) when, as one of the founders of the *Movimento Arte Concreta*, he became a point of reference for a new generation of Italian artists. It will also illustrate how his pioneering work exerted an influence that stretched far beyond the borders of his native country.

Bruno Munari was born in Milan in 1907, and lived and worked there until 1998, the year of his death. He began his career within the Futurist movement and was considered by F. T. Marinetti to be one of its most promising young exponents. From the very beginning, he was concerned with exploring the possibility of representing painting spatially through a continuous flow of forms rendered mutable through the incorporation of a temporal dimension, in accordance with the theories of Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero in their 1915 Manifesto 'Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe'. Munari described the roots of his work as his 'Futurist past', and the movement's ambitious scope certainly informed his kaleidoscopic career, leading him to work across a range of media and disciplines from painting to photomontage, sculpture, graphics, film and art theory. Indeed, his influences were extremely varied, also reflecting the aesthetics and sensibilities of movements such as Constructivism, Dada, and Surrealism.

In 1930 he began designing his *Useless Machines* – the first 'mobiles' in the history of Italian art – the aim of which was to liberate abstract painting from its static nature by employing the principle of causality introduced by the use of air as a force of movement for the suspended parts. The paradoxical name was intended to be a reflection on the usefulness of the useless (art) and the uselessness of the useful (machines), creating a distinction between his personal aesthetic and that of 'orthodox' Futurism, with its fascination with roaring machinery and its uncritical attitude towards progress.

In Paris in 1946, he created his first spatial environment entitled *Concave-convex*, based once again around a hanging object made of metallic mesh carefully moulded in such a way as to recall certain forms studied in topology, such as the Möbius strip. This was installed in semi-darkness and illuminated by spotlights thereby generating shadows and reflections, many of which recall the *moiré* patterns of certain kinetic paintings of the 1960s. Along with the spatial environments of Lucio Fontana, the *Concave-convex* represents one of the first installations in the history of modern European art.

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During the 1920s and '30s Munari acted as a consultant or art director for such important magazines as *L'Ala d'Italia*, *La rivista illustrata del Popolo d'Italia*, *Natura*, *La lettura*, *L'almanacco letterario Bompiani*, *Tempo* and *Domus*, and for the publicity projects of companies such as Campari, Snia Viscosa, Pirelli, Olivetti and Agip.

Towards the end of the 1940s, together with Atanasio Soldati, Gianni Monnet, Gillo Dorfles and others, Munari founded the M.A.C. (*Movimento Arte Concreta* or Concrete Art Movement) in Milan. This movement acted as a catalyst for Italian abstraction, giving rise to a 'synthesis of arts' capable of complementing traditional painting with new tools of communication and able to demonstrate the possibility of a convergence between art and technology, creativity and functionality, in an industrial context.

During the 1950s he created the series of *Negative-positives*, abstract compositions in which the classic dualism between the figure and the background vanishes due to a visual perception made unstable by the lack of an edge or boundaries within the composition. In 1950 he continued to explore the notion of painting with light, arriving at the process of dematerialising art through the use of projection slides in works known as *Direct Projections*. The artist created compositions with cheap materials or debris such as coloured and transparent plastic, organic elements and cotton threads, which were sandwiched between two glass surfaces. The compositions thus created were projected not only indoors but also outdoors, on the façades of buildings, giving them a feeling of monumentality.

In 1951 he created the series of *Arrhythmic Machines*, the irregular movements of which were generated through the use of springs. In 1953 he discovered, for the first time in history, how to break the light spectrum through a Polaroid lens in a continuum given by the rotating movement of a polarising filter applied to a slide projector. The *Polaroid Projects* were born as logical continuations of, and theoretical complements to, the research that led to the creation of his *Direct Projections*.

This exhibition takes as its starting point these pictorial and theoretical investigations and focuses on two aspects: an artistic one, in which the initial but conflicting relationship with Futurism is investigated; and a second one which, through sketches, graphic illustrations and advertisements, investigates Munari's independent work as a graphic designer for the leading magazines of the day, contributing greatly to the modernisation of Italian culture. It also presents for the first time in the UK the *Concave-convex* installation, both in the context of the great importance this work had for Munari's individual development, and its significance as a precursor of the many spatial experiments and installations created over the following years. The exhibition will also be accompanied by outdoor events involving examples of polarised projection on the façade of the museum.

Curated by Miroslava Hajek in collaboration with Luca Zaffarano and the Massimo & Sonia Cirulli Archive, this exhibition will reveal the full richness of Munari's playful, irreverent and endlessly creative career. The accompanying catalogue will include scholarly texts by Pierpaolo Antonello (University of Cambridge) and Jeffrey Schnapp (Harvard University) as well as a text by Alberto Munari (University of Padua).

For further information, and images, please contact:

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FACT SHEET

- Location:** Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, 39a Canonbury Square, London N1 2AN
Tel. +44 (0)20 7704 9522, www.estorickcollection.com
- Opening hours:** Wednesday to Saturday 11.00 to 18.00 hours. Sunday 12.00 to 17.00 hours
Late night opening the first Thursday of the month until 21.00 hours
Closed Mondays and Tuesdays
Shop: open gallery hours. Library: by appointment only
- Admission:** £5.00, concessions £3.50, includes permanent collection and temporary exhibitions
Free to under-16s and students on production of a valid NUS card
Library, by appointment only, £2.50 per visit
- Groups:** Groups of 10 or more may book gallery talks by curatorial staff on the current exhibition and the permanent collection. Talks last for approximately 50 minutes and there is an additional charge of £70 per group. Lunch can also be arranged.
- Catalogue:** The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully-illustrated catalogue.
- Permanent Collection:** The Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art is internationally renowned for its core of Futurist works including major paintings by the movement's main protagonists. It comprises some 120 paintings, drawings, watercolours, prints and sculptures by many of the most prominent Italian artists of the Modernist era. There are six galleries, two of which are used for temporary exhibitions, on three floors. The library of over 2,500 books, primarily on 20th century Italian art, is an unrivalled resource for students of important modernist movements. Since opening in 1998, the Collection has established a considerable reputation as an important venue for bringing Italian art to the British public and has achieved both public and critical acclaim for its artistic and educational programmes.
- Gallery talks:** The exhibition will be accompanied by a programme of talks on Saturday afternoons at 15.00. Free with an admission ticket.
- Café:** The licensed Italian caffè, with outdoor seating in the landscaped garden, offers delicious fresh Italian food as well as snacks and hot and cold drinks.
- How to get there:** Victoria Line, Overground and First Capital Connect to Highbury & Islington; First Capital Connect to Essex Road; buses: 271 to door; 4, 19, 30, and 43 to Upper Street/Canonbury Lane; 38, 56, 73 and 341 to Essex Road/Canonbury Road.
- Access:** Main entrance in Canonbury Road. Wheelchair access to galleries 1 to 4, café, shop and toilets. Limited car parking for blue badge holders (please telephone in advance). Induction loop in gallery 2.