



MILAN

Mario Merz

Pirelli HangarBicocca

HangarBicocca does things with an incredible monumentality, and under the stewardship of Vicente Todolí, the scale appears to have gone through the roof. Last year, the aircraft-hangar-size space hosted works by Mario Merz, which still appear as alien as they do innovative. As with a previous show of Lucio Fontana's environments, this installation of Merz's igloos resurrected the critical and cultural significance of what we thought was familiar. Todolí appears to relish such

reappraisals of works that have significantly altered our understanding of art.

Responding to postwar industrialization, Merz adopted an almost primitive approach to his practice. Rather than representing the world by abstract or figurative means, he turned hunter-gatherer, pressing sticks, stones, clay, and metal into the service of creation. Clamping roof slates and shards of glass to curved metal frames, he morphed his makeshift materials into the skin and bones of

urban igloos, which in retrospect appear entirely "of the moment." Merz would, by performative means, gather together earthy and unattractive materials in order to create inwardly outward-looking enclosed spaces that resemble the ice houses of the Inuit and Eskimos. As he explained, "The igloo is a home, a temporary shelter. Since I consider that ultimately today, we live in a very temporary era, for me the sense of the temporary coincides with this name: igloo." These "ugly" igloos

became his favored form of expression. He made more than 30 from the late 1960s until his death in 2003 in a personal attempt to understand space, as well as its influence on and involvement with our lives.

In a 1985 interview at the Kunsthaus Zürich with Harald Szeemann, Merz confessed to understanding the igloos as "wombs," explaining that "the idea that everything is inside but can then come out is one of the things that made me do what was necessary to become an



artist.” Under Szeemann’s influence, Merz moved away from his early idea of showing the igloos in isolation, one womb in a room, as in New York and Kassel in the early 1970s. His 1985 exhibition in Zürich featured 17 igloos of various sizes all together under one roof, an installation that Hangar-Bicocca topped with 30 to form a “once-in-a-lifetime experience.” Todolí was assisted by Merz’s original team, who were aware of the artist’s penchant for inventing and reinventing

his works at every opportunity. HangarBicocca’s ambitious undertaking transformed the immense space into a temporary tent city. Deliberately darkened, it alluded to a makeshift refugee camp, caught between a country forcing migrants out and one refusing them entry. With equal measures of allure and antipathy, Merz’s igloos offer both joy and pain.

As Todolí explains, the igloos represent utterly ungoverned attempts at constructing a series of three-dimensional enclosures, to which Merz was always adding additional materials and altering the outcome. Without modern machinery or the interference of architects and structural engineers, Merz could be the master of his own making. His self-made spaces draw on the elemental in a profound way, challenging our understanding of space and demonstrating how our lives are determined by the nature of being outside and inside at any given moment. These simplified structures seem to reduce the intellectual jargon of urban builders, planners, and developers to rubble.

Collecting clay and shards of glass, removing car doors and clamps from utilitarian settings and applying them to the shells of his igloos, Merz was, like Jannis Kounellis, clearly absorbed by the energy of materials. Passing them through his heavy hands, he could re-appropriate them as the flesh and bones of his womb works—as if touching, applying, and pressing one material to another was to

fundamentally feel something. Merz’s approach, like that of Kounellis, Giuseppe Penone, and Michelangelo Pistoletto, was to drag urban dirt and detritus into the studio, and into the gallery, in an instinctive challenge to the cold, clean character of capitalism. Merz was committed to the inclusion of everything, natural as well as mechanical. The result was a revised vision of the outside inside and a reworking of the boundaries between savage and civilized.

Igloo di Giap (1968), *Igloo di Marisa* (1972), and *Senza titolo (doppio igloo di Porto)* (1998) stand out for their elemental beauty. In *Igloo di Giap*, the first of Merz’s igloos, a semi-circle of unruly clay bricks conveys something of how the artist engendered the earth as an art object. To this he added, in white neon, a phrase from General Vo Nguyen Giap of North Vietnam about the perils of combat. Merz compared the commander to “Buddha for his perception of war and military life.” Reading the illuminated words now takes the work into another territory. “If the enemy masses his forces, he loses ground; if he scatters, he loses strength” conveys insights about the liberty and liability of space in terms of what is made available to a people and what is taken over. The political aspect of this rather cumbersome work has become more relevant over time, as conflict has become the currency of the modern age. And, more importantly, this monument to the sentiments and circumstances of war is not set in

stone, but held together by earth and ash.

Igloo di Marisa (1972) introduces another of Merz’s fundamental influences—the mathematician Leonardo Pisano (1175–1235), better known as Fibonacci. The Fibonacci sequence, which appears scrawled in neon within many of Merz’s igloos, illuminates our understanding of the growth processes in the organic world and forms a fantastic conceptual framework for these material mounds. *Igloo di Marisa*, like many of the igloos, had several incarnations, always adapting to its surroundings. The walkway of broken glass, slate, and neon in *Noi giriamo intorno alle case o le case girano intorno a noi?* (1977) attests to Merz’s ongoing interest in light, space, and material matter; its form recalls the revolutionary rationale of El Lissitzky’s Constructivist lithograph *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1919).

Senza titolo (1999), perhaps Merz’s most memorable installation, brings together neon, numbers, and animal kind, with a neon-branded stag crowning a massive metal frame that encircles a bonfire-style stack of tightly packed tree branches. Installed indoors, as opposed to outside (as it was originally at the Fundação de Serralves, Porto), this work, illuminated by a sea of natural light from the skylights, gave reason to everything that had gone before, as if the stag alone remains after all forms of human civilization have gone.

—RAJESH PUNJ

MARIO MERZ
Senza titolo,
1999.

Mixed media, view of installation at Fondazione Merz, Turin, 2010.