

Marisa and Mario Merz

Rome

by SHARON HECKER

THE EXHIBITION *Marisa and Mario Merz* at **Museo MACRO, Rome** (to 12th June), focuses on the collaborative nature of the relationship between the late Mario Merz (1925–2003) and his wife, Marisa (b. 1926). Inseparable and intellectually enmeshed during their marriage of nearly fifty years, both artists began working during the post-War period in Italy and became associated with the *Arte povera* movement in the late 1960s. Yet while Marisa and Mario lived in a constant flow of exchanged ideas and drew on similar cultural references, their art has rarely been described together, for the couple maintained distinct careers and followed diverse artistic paths. They also mostly exhibited separately except for sporadic participation in collective shows.

The forty-work exhibition at MACRO, shown in six galleries, articulates the Merzs' creative relationship, showing their mutual love for Rome and their history of making art in that city. Creating connections is no easy task, for their trajectories and ideas are different: the larger-than-life Mario exhibited frequently and garnered a robust press and market, while the diminutive Marisa made small works and has, by her own choice, rarely shown or discussed them. The couple can – and cannot – be described in terms of 'significant others' like Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock, where one dominated while the other remained in the shadows, for Mario and Marisa have each 'succeeded' on their own chosen terms. They are – and are not – a 'creative couple' like Bernd and Hilla Becher or Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, for the Merzs did not sign joint projects, yet clearly collaborated.

In some senses, the MACRO show reiterates what we know: Mario's imposing, iconic sculptures on 'big' universal themes, are placed together with Marisa's intimate, sometimes coy, often private works that claim that the relationship between personal life and art-making practices are inseparable. The show's subtitle was written by Marisa, and she positions herself contingently with respect to her late husband and his towering *œuvre*, personified in his spiral glass table: 'I am with that curve of that mountain that I see reflected in this lake of glass. At Mario's table'.

Visual imbalance frames the couple's art in the first exhibition room. Covering a huge wall is Mario's neon spiral form, *Un segno nel Foro di Cesare* (A sign in the Forum of Caesar), from which emerges his sequence of Fibonacci numbers. Mario had originally conceived this piece in 2003 for the Forum of Caesar in Rome but was not allowed to install it vertically. Counterbalancing Mario's spiral is Marisa's glistening rectangular pool made of fragile materials such as paraffin, raw clay and



84. Installation view of *Marisa and Mario Merz* showing *Un segno nel Foro di Cesare*, by Mario Merz. 2003. Neon, 1400 by 1800 cm.; and *Senza titolo*, by Marisa Merz. 1994. Paraffin, raw clay, wax and paper, with a copper support, 300 by 300 by 170 cm. (Both works courtesy Fondazione Merz, Turin; exh. Museo MACRO, Rome).



85. Installation view of *Marisa and Mario Merz* showing on the wall *Senza titolo*, by Marisa Merz. 1995. Copper wire, dimensions variable; and the table, *Senza titolo*, by Mario and Marisa Merz. 2002. Iron, glass, terracotta, 750 by 780 by 100 cm. (Courtesy Fondazione Merz, Turin; exh. Museo MACRO, Rome).

paper; in it stands a thin copper plinth topped by one of her amoeba-like wax heads (Fig.84). A similar juxtaposition is presented in the same room by a varied assortment of Marisa's votive heads perched at regular intervals upon a large spiral glass table designed by Mario (Fig.85).

Marisa's gossamer knitted copper threads, shaped into curving squares, set a more delicate mood on the wall that flanks the glass table. This subtle untitled work, first made in 1974 and continually reworked, plays eloquently on sculpture as a form of appearance and disappearance. Marisa further echoes and varies this theme in an untitled three-part

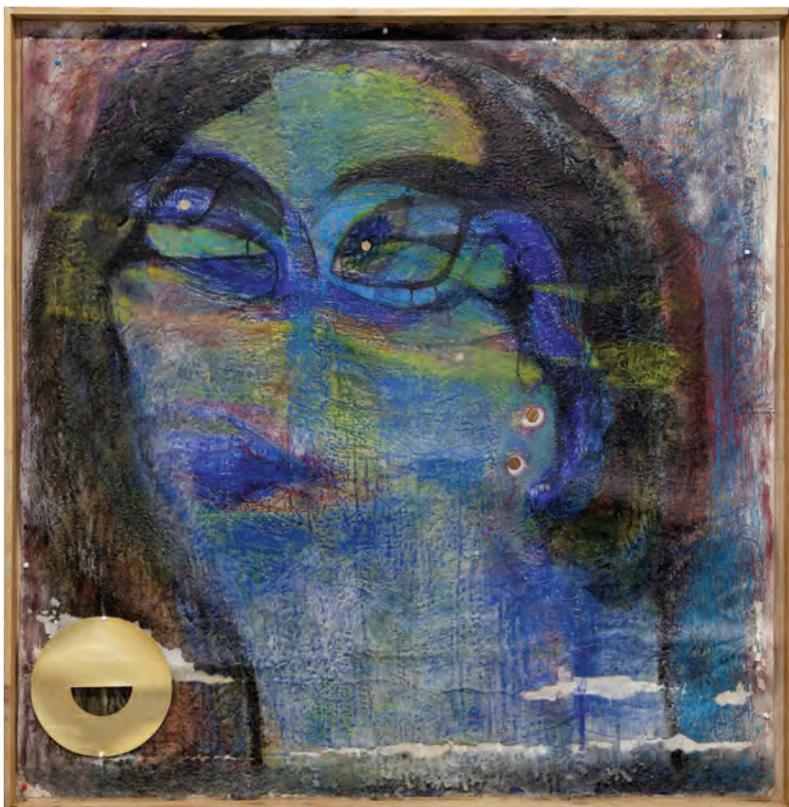
wooden screen with vertical, loosely attached copper threads. As the viewer passes from one 'frame' to the next, the copper wires shimmer, revert to dull wires, and shimmer again. With great economy of means, Marisa expresses the unstable relationships between sculpture, time, space and light. She admires the apparitional sculptures of Medardo Rosso, upon whose vocabulary these works elaborate.

Small rooms lie beyond the main exhibition hall. In one, the curators, Claudio Crescentini, Federico D'Orazio and Federica Pirani, have mounted Abate's black-and-white photographs that document the couple's collaborations.

86. Photograph of *Scarpette*, by Marisa Merz on Fregene beach, 1968. Nylon and copper wire, 4 by 20 by 6 cm. Photograph by Claudio Abate, 1970. Photographic print, 150 by 100 cm. (Courtesy Fondazione Merz, Turin; exh. Museo MACRO, Rome).



87. *Untitled*, by Marisa Merz. 1984. Mixed media on paper, 150 by 174 cm. (Private collection, courtesy Madre, Naples; exh. Museo MACRO, Rome).



We see, for example, Marisa helping Mario with one of his igloos or Mario standing by the ocean with Marisa's *Coperta* (*Blanket*) (1969) over his shoulder. More examples, along with the histories of the images, are presented in the lavish exhibition catalogue.¹

Marisa's delicate *Scarpette* (*Little Shoes*) (1968) occupy the centre of the third small room. The shoes are isolated in a plexiglas case on a pedestal, frozen and fetishistic. This installation is far removed from Mario's collaborative gesture of positioning Marisa's *scarpette* on a beach, first as part of the exhibition *Arte Povera Più Azioni Povere* (*Poor Art Plus Poor Actions*), 1968, organised by Marcello Rumma and curated by Germano Celant at the Arsenale in Amalfi that year and later re-enacted on other beaches (Fig.86). There, the ballerina-like slippers created a subtle tension between informality and precision; between their resemblance to natural sea-sponges and the fact that they were hand-made by Marisa out of synthetic nylon and copper wire to fit her feet; between their fairy-tale like quality that recalled Cinderella's glass slipper and the disturbing possibility that the shoes could be swept away forever by the sea. Whether on the beach or in a case, the *Scarpette*, fragile human traces, mark the absence of their owner's body; they allow us to imagine the person who wears them in a manner reminiscent of Vincent van Gogh's paintings of shoes.

Any hope of gaining deeper knowledge of Marisa's view of Mario is dashed in *Mario's portrait*, an undated work hanging behind *Scarpette*. The canvas at first seems blank, until we note the barely traced 'silhouette' that stands for – but voids out and refuses to articulate – 'her' image of 'him'. References to the couple's daughter, Beatrice, are evasive in other works by Marisa in the same room. Such works invite and deny conceptual comparisons to portraits made by Berthe Morisot of her daughter Julie. MACRO's selection of Marisa's multilayered 'paintings' of goddess-like and angelic female figures further echoes the idea of her art as haunting presences (Fig.87).

The last word in the show is Marisa's. Her *Fontana* (*Fountain*) (2015) is a small rectangular folded lead container equipped with a motor and flowing water. Into the fountain Marisa has placed a Rose of Jericho, a desert plant that does not absorb water in order to resist droughts. Instead, its leaves dry up, and it appears to be dead, but the plant miraculously regenerates in contact with water. Perhaps this show indicates that Marisa's thirst for creative connections with Mario was never marred by the self-sufficiency of her art.

¹ Catalogue: *Marisa e Mario Merz. Sto con quella curva di quella montagna che vedo riflessa in questo lago di vetro. Al tavolo di Mario*. By Costantino D'Orazio and Federica Pirani. 180 pp. incl. 50 col. ills. (Manfredi Editore, Cesena, 2016), €40. ISBN 978-88-99519-05-6. The exhibits are unnumbered.