

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Adrian Searle, "Marisa Merz at the Serpentine: the first lady of arte povera," *The Guardian*, September 26, 2013.

Marisa Merz at the Serpentine: the first lady of arte povera

From knitting metal to kneading tiny heads, the Italian sculptor is now in her 80s and still creating odd yet fascinating objects



Tremendous presence ... Marisa Merz's Untitled, Undated

The life-size mud elephant strains against the wall of the [Serpentine's new Sackler Gallery](#), housed in a former gunpowder store built during the Napoleonic wars. Argentinian artist [Adrian Villar Rojas's](#) sculptural installation fills the gallery with the heavy, sweet and slightly tart smell of mud and clay. Everything seems to have arisen from the earth, to which all his sculpted figures, animals and sea creatures, bones and pots will one day return. Villar Rojas's work appears about to crumble back into inchoate matter, even as he makes it.

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Back in the 1934 teahouse across the lake, which has accommodated the Serpentine Gallery since 1970, the light-filled spaces are full of delicate, strange and fragile things made by the Italian artist Marisa Merz. However different their works might be, she and Villar Rojas both deal in entropy and mutability. The idea of permanence is fleeting, and is in any case a kind of hubris. Now in her 80s, Merz was the only woman in the arte povera group of artists. This probably says as much about the sexual politics of the 1960s Italian art world, and the relative invisibility of female artists, as it does about the things other female artists might have been making at the time.

Merz, the widow of artist Mario Merz, who died in 2003, has spent much of her career out of the limelight. Her work is reserved and has an air of privacy about it. This year, along with 94-year-old Austrian painter Maria Lassnig (who showed at the Serpentine in 2008), Marisa won a Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale for her lifetime's achievement. Her Serpentine show brings together works from the 1960s to the present. Many are either untitled or undated, and she often reconfigures existing works when she shows them. In the same way, she floats between making abstract patterns on the wall with stretched fabric, doing things with rolled-up blankets, making coiled arrangements of heavy aluminium foil, knitting with copper wire or fashioning a pair of shoes from nylon thread. Merz made these shoes in 1968, and once photographed them on a beach, where they lay casually on the sand as if left there by a swimmer. They looked more like mermaid's purses or egg cases washed up by the tide. At the Serpentine, they hang from the wall, pointing into space.

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All the same, all different ... a detail from Marisa Merz's Untitled (2011-12)

The works I like best are Merz's little sculpted, fired clay heads, rarely bigger than a fist. You can imagine the way her hands clenched and squeezed their shapes, how she gave them eyes and noses and mouths then painted or gilded them, or partially wrapped them in thin sheets of lead, as though they were being coddled or offered to you like a piece of food wrapped in a leaf. Sometimes they seem to grow, arrayed on a big shallow pan of white wax at your feet. Others are on long-legged iron tripods, stand-ins for the body (made for Marisa by her husband). For such small objects, they have tremendous presence. You have to attend to them. Looking becomes more like listening. They feel like a passing breath on the back of my neck.

The heads sometimes seem frangible. Others are as mute as cabbages. Sometimes they look like they are sleeping, or gaze up towards the ceiling or the sky. Often they manage to be both male and female. They might remind us of fruit, or even more of the tip of a penis. There is definitely something phallic about many of them. Some are funny, others vulnerable, and even frightening. They take the forms the hand has given them. Some have the satisfying unformed quality of kneaded lumps of dough. Merz has a great feel for the lump and the clod, that most basic sculptural utterance.

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Like [Tacita Dean](#), who included some of them in a show she curated several years ago, I covet these little heads. They are unnamed. Get very close and their forms can remind us of a Modigliani or of [Medardo Rosso](#). I don't much like Modigliani, but Merz manages to describe an eyebrow curving into the keel-like nose and then the mouth in a way that both echoes him and becomes her own. Perhaps they come from the same prototype, the simplified forms of [Byzantine icons](#). This is even more clear in her drawings and paintings, which also recall Italian Futurism, Chagall and Picasso.

If there is one artist who has looked closely at Marisa Merz, and particularly at her clay heads, it is the [German sculptor Thomas Schütte](#), who showed at the Serpentine last year. He has even appropriated those tripod stands. Art is a conversation as much it is a series of ruptures and rejections. The important thing is to be able to take an idea somewhere it hasn't been before and make it your own. Originality can't be bought and nothing comes from nothing. The rest is myth.

Approaches to materials and images shift with the appetites of a period. But some things remain constant: the way a hand touches things, the way light falls and gravity keeps us grounded, our desire to draw and make images and objects. A human head is a human head. All the same, all different. Marisa Merz shows us this.