

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Fisher, Cora. "Marisa Merz." Brooklyn Rail. October 2, 2010, p. 35.

MARISA MERZ

GLADSTONE GALLERY | OCTOBER 7 – NOVEMBER 20, 2010

CORA FISHER

The upstairs gallery at Barbara Gladstone seems cramped for Marisa Merz's two pieces in layered sheet metal comprising "Untitled (Living Sculpture)" (1966)—a hulking "chandelier" and an armchair. Even if the title suggests a more intimate or domestic setting than a gallery to experience the work, in this small room the sculptures lack sufficient space to breathe.

Not the case in the main gallery downstairs, where the sculptures of Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long, and Mario Merz, Marisa's partner, have plenty of room. Both Merzes are signal artists of the Italian Arte Povera group, which was advanced by Italian critic Germano Celant in the late 1960s. Its collective formalism riffed on folk artisanship; it made use of "impoverished," organic, and found materials to call into question—if not subvert—the high-gloss finish of fine art and its deadness as an institutional commodity.

That radicalism is lost here in the glare of high-finish concrete floors and glowing white walls. Marisa's work, stuffed into the upstairs annex, also feels uncomfortably close to the social mores that preceded the advent of the 1960s counterculture, which obliged women to preside over the domestic space, if not confine them there. This gendered assumption may very well be Merz's field of play, and her work a proud resumption of feminine craft. But in this curatorial context we find her sensibility collapsed into an equally gendered real estate disparity. Her male artistic counterparts enjoy broad, street-level viewing, while her homely, arguably more decorative, sculptures occupy a secondary space, if not status. (I'm sure some market-driven explanation exists for this.)

Poignantly, Marisa Merz's work is often described as blurring the bounds between life and art, a fitting sense for "Living Sculpture." As for the knotted associations between the domestic and the feminine, Merz plays on the elision with thin folds of pliant aluminum, softening

brittle metal much in the same way that she's used woven metallic wire, upholding the bar of Penelope's loom.

The chair sitting in the corner undulates its sheet metal surfaces like filo dough in *sfogliatelle*. Occasional metal staples punch the folds, providing a prefab counterpoint to the chair's hand-wrought bends. Here is where I think the gendered idea of the feminine touch is meant to turn butch and come apart. I can't be sure, though; they are slight details. The chair invites me to test Merz's conviction that her objects were wrought by the meshing of art and life, but fear of snagging my skirt keeps me from sitting on it. I wonder how tacky or inappropriate it would be for me to sit on Marisa Merz's sculpture in the context of the Barbara Gladstone Gallery. (Or, for that matter, to walk on Richard Long's carpet of marble chips, "White Line," with crunching footfalls echoing across the room. Or to burrow inside Mario Merz's "Igloo Ticino" of C-clamped stone shards, or to perch on Carl Andre's butted-up blocks of wood, entitled "The Way North and East (Uncarved Blocks)").

Merz's two-part "chandelier" hangs opposite the chair, too close to the wall—you almost can't walk around it. Here the paper-thin aluminum strips have been formed into elbows, limbs, and torso-like forms, calling to mind rag dolls in skirts. They hang together as an uncomfortable whole. The metal has been spray painted to approximate a pattern, with spots of yellow, red and green making sometime flowers. Some might find its awkwardness engaging.

Arte Povera's philosophical yearnings are understood through the body, not by dangling theories overhead. That said—looking at Merz's armchair, I cannot determine whether it is avant-industrial design or a Platonic attempt at "chair." The integration of idea and form in many Arte Povera works, however, stands undiminished in purity: Giuseppe Penone's enormous tree core, carved free of its outer rings, Alighiero e Boetti's maps,



Marisa Merz. "Sedia" (1966). Wood and aluminum. 31 1/2 x 19 3/4 x 19 3/4 inches (80 x 50 x 50 cm). Copyright Marisa Merz. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York.

and countless others. Their collective body of work should stand as a counterpoint to today's glossy visual culture.

The white box of the gallery may aim for an unobtrusive visual backdrop, but the price tag for such an austere setting feels conceptually incompatible with this work. The white box can't be neutral, and what becomes clear in Marisa Merz's modest installation is how devitalized her "Living Sculptures" can become within it. 