

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Franca Toscano, "Taking Shelter with Mario Merz in Milan," *Blouin Art Info*, November 8, 2018

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Mario Merz, "Igloos", exhibition view at Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan, 2018.  
(Courtesy Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan Photo: Renato Ghiazza © Mario Merz, by SIAE 2018)

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HangarBicocca, the post-industrial art space operated by the tiremaker Pirelli in Milan, is not the coziest of venues, with exhibition areas more than three times the size of Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. Yet for the next four months, HangarBicocca has been turned into a friendly tent city, thanks to 31 yurt-shaped structures made of a mix of natural and manmade materials. These are the "Igloos" created by the late Italian Contemporary artist Mario Merz, a pioneer of the Arte Povera movement, produced over a period of nearly four decades (alongside his paintings and sculptures).

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“Igloo” is a label that the artist, who died in 2003, gave the structure eventually, not initially; at various points in his career, he also referred to it as a womb, a hut, a dome, or a cranium. “The igloo is a home, a temporary shelter,” he explained in a RAI television program broadcast in 1984. “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.”

Shaped like hemispheres, or upside-down bowls, the Igloos are a mysterious blend of architecture, sculpture, installation and outdoor shelter. Most are big enough for a grown-up to curl up inside (though visitors are not allowed to enter them). They are never forbidding, always inviting.

Some are hollow metal structures half-covered with broken glass panes or flat pieces of stone, symbolizing the fragile relationship between the natural and the manmade. Others are completely filled out and made of cracked clay, of foam-filled sacks of white fabric, or of superposed twigs. A couple of them — including one called “Tenda di Gheddafi,” dated 1981 and referring to the tent of the late Libyan leader Muammar Ghaddafi — are painted over with colorful cones; they are the least successful and least poetic of the Igloos on show.

Merz was born in Milan in 1925 and raised in Turin. He gave up his medical studies in 1945 to join an antifascist movement; for that he was rewarded with a year in prison. (In that respect, the Igloos could be seen as an expression of confinement.) While in jail, he killed time by drawing, and started producing works on paper, including spirals that he made by never taking the pencil off the page.

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After his release, he started drawing and painting, inspired by the wonders of nature. Soon, he resolved to break out of the two-dimensionality of the canvas and started merging painting and sculpture by perforating canvases with pyramids or neon tubes.

It was in the late 1960s — at a time when the famous Italian critic Germano Celant was including Merz in the posse of artists he bunched together under the label “Arte Povera” — that Merz made his first Igloo for a gallery in Rome. It’s one of the first ones at HangarBicocca: a structure made of cracked clay, with a war-related slogan from the North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap inscribed in neon letters in Italian all around it, forcing the visitor to circle the structure to get a proper read.

This is not the first exhibition of Merz’s Igloos: The reputed curator Harald Szeemann organized an earlier one in 1985 at the Kunsthaus in Zurich. By then, the series was already extensive and well-developed. What it lacked was the spectacular piece that is the apotheosis of the Milan show, and surely one of Merz’s most beautiful Igloos: “Senza titolo (doppio igloo di Porto),” created in 1998 for his solo show the following year at the Fundação de Serralves in Oporto, Portugal. It’s an Igloo with a steel structure, stacks of twigs arranged inside, and a stuffed stag perched on the top. At Hangar Bicocca, it stands alone in a cathedral-like space.

Hangar Bicocca’s previous extravaganza (which opened a year ago) was a show devoted to the Italian artist Lucio Fontana’s so-called “Environments” — enchanting temporary enclosures that Hangar Bicocca recreated according to archives and photographs. The show drew 250,000 visitors, a record for the Pirelli space. Merz’s Igloos are similarly experiential. What adds to their magic is that they were the very structures that the artist himself put together, handled and displayed; they are loans

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from his estate and from major museums such as Tate and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid. That's likely to make the Merz show an art-historical landmark.

*“Igloos,” work by Mario Merz, is on view at HangerBicocca in Milan through February 24, 2019. More information: [www.hangarbicocca.org](http://www.hangarbicocca.org).*