

BRUNO MUNARI

Estorick Collection, London

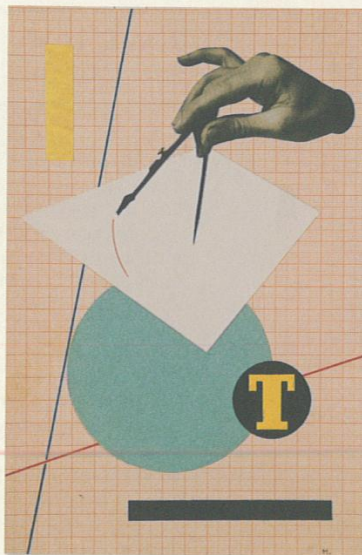
When Bruno Munari was commissioned to design an alphabet book, he came up with *ABC Dadà* (1944), a scrapbook-like abecedarium unlikely to fulfil any conventional lesson plan. It was only when he finished the piece – comprising 21 single-page layouts, each pasted with a golden letter, an alliterative verse and a cluster of found objects – that Munari realized he had made a work of art as opposed to a book, and set himself to making another more apropos to the brief.

This mutability was typical of the Italian artist and designer's way of working, as the Estorick Collection's vibrant retrospective so convincingly demonstrated. Throughout his 70-year career, Munari – who died in 1998 – produced everything from paintings and assemblages to designs for children's toys and the popular press. While most perspectives on his work have tended to siphon off elements of his *oeuvre* into one categorical framework or another, the Estorick's exhibition provided a welcome corrective, instead inviting a reappraisal of how his ideas were synthesized across disciplines.

Titled 'My Futurist Past', the exhibition filled three galleries with a scopious cross-section of Munari's work from the late 1920s to the '50s: the first room was given over to his artistic output, the next to his graphic works, while an upstairs gallery housed his 'spatial environment' *Concave-convex* (1947). The vocabulary of mechanical and geometric forms in his earliest works – such as the pocket-sized pastel sketch *Motorcyclist* (1927) – easily locates his work within the genealogy of Italian Futurism, as one of the movement's youngest exponents. But while these works seem to chime with the Futurists' driving fascination for dynamism and progress, there is something in the Dada-inflected irony of Munari's aesthetic that betrays a more probing and judicious approach to technology, and an equal affinity to Dada affiliates such as Francis Picabia.

Consider Munari's 1927 collage *rRrR* (*Sound of an Aeroplane*), for instance, which renders the machine clunky and perspectively askew, seeming to turn the Futurists' glorified vision of flight into something altogether puerile. The Dada-esque photo-montage ... *They have even invented this, the world has gone mad...* (1930s), an aeroplane-shaped cut-out of a man diving with arms outstretched, likewise strikes an ironic, if light-hearted, blow to the dogmatic ideals of Marinetti's circle. In his series of 'Arrhythmias' (1950s), we get a real sense of Munari as *bricoleur*: clock springs, gramophone parts, steel cables and wire are crafted into strangely zoomorphic, wind-up sculptures. Here, as elsewhere, the precise, purposeful and mechanized are redeployed as erratic, incidental and ultimately useless.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, Munari's complex and shifting relationship to Futurism could be traced along more formal lines. In his studies of dynamism and flux, his propensity towards simplification is



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1
Andrew Kötting
Klipperty Klöpp, 1984,
installation view

2
Benedict Drew
The Persuaders, 2011,
installation view

3
Bruno Munari
T (design for an advert
for the magazine *Campo
Grafico*), 1935,
mixed media on paper,
25 × 18 cm

clear. The hyperbolic thematization of movement typical of Futurist experiments such as Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913) is whittled down to more precise structures in the works on paper *Walking Man* (1931) and *At the Double* (1932). In *Man in Movement* (1931), which further reduces the human form into stylized geometric shapes, the only impression of speed and flux is that of movement frozen onto the page. If anything, here Munari's vocabulary seems more indebted to international movements of abstraction than to Futurism.

Indeed, Munari's varied projects from the mid-1930s highlight a range of influences from outside the Futurist sphere. His striking yet understated poster for the 1936 Berlin Olympics and his 1950 advertisement for Biro recall the experimental graphics of László Moholy-Nagy and the Bauhaus, while the geometric reductionism of his 'Negative-Positive' paintings from the 1950s evokes Malevich. It was also in the mid-'30s that Munari first conceived his 'Useless Machines': assembled from the simplest of materials – pieces of painted cardboard or wood suspended with bits of thread – these early mobiles are reminiscent of the forms of an El Lissitzky painting that have sprung free from the picture plane. Floating and fluttering with the slightest currents of air, Munari's machines could even be seen as extending Lissitzky's 'Prounen' experiments from the early 1920s into a fourth dimension. But whatever tropes and styles Munari borrowed, no matter how out of step with current trends they were, his works were always characterized by an inimitable flair and ludic simplicity.

What we can glean from the spectrum of material offered at the Estorick is a sense of someone for whom play was part of an ongoing process of discovery and experimentation. No matter what form of visual communication this took, Munari's output was never guided by preconceived aesthetic ends but by a compelling sense of curiosity, candidness and *joie de vivre* that makes his work so irresistibly likeable.

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