

REVIEWS

 

PRINT SUMMER 1987

[All Cities](#)[Berlin](#)[Cambridge](#)[Chicago](#)[Dallas](#)[Grenoble](#)[Houston](#)[London](#)[Los Angeles](#)[Madrid](#)[Milan](#)[Munich](#)[New York](#)[Philadelphia](#)[Richmond](#)[Rome](#)[San Francisco](#)[Seattle](#)[Stuttgart](#)[Tokyo](#)[Zurich](#)

Bruno Munari

PALAZZO REALE

Bruno Munari, with his constant experimentation with an enormous range of materials and in all fields of art, has always worked somewhat outside the mainstream of Italian cultural currents. He uses the tools of technology, adapting them to his particular brand of disorder and to the fresh use of natural materials, which he often treats as if they were archaeological finds. This Milanese artist began his exuberant career in the late '20s as part of the second period of Futurism, producing abstract paintings that focused on the relationship between

color and geometric outline. These were followed by his *Macchine inutili* (Useless machines, 1933), sculptures hung from the ceiling, composed of small mechanical parts that move as a result of their precarious equilibrium. In 1945 he designed the *Ora X* (X hour), an alarm clock that, instead of hands, has transparent half-disks, one red and one yellow, which mark the time by forming different combinations of colors on the face. A work from 1959, *Fossili del Duemila* (Fossils from the year 2000), was made by encasing tubes and fuses from small radios in transparent plexiglass parallelepipeds, “like insects in amber.”

With *Ora X*, which was subsequently produced as a multiple, Munari began his activity as a designer. The objects that he designs often display the same characteristics as his artworks: the materials are elementary, the forms are simplified, frequently based on a module, and the end result tends to be surprising, creative, and almost playful. His 1964 knitted lamp, made out of metal circles of various diameters, is just over 5 feet tall but, because of its collapsible construction, can be enclosed in a box less than an inch high. The 1971 *Abitacolo* (Cockpit), designed primarily as a child’s bed, also functions as a playhouse, table, and bookcase.

The installation throughout the many rooms of Palazzo Reale made it possible for one to follow, like Ariadne’s thread, those works of Munari based on the materials of nature. For *Da lontano era un’isola* (From a distance there was an island, ca. 1940), the artist assembled a superb collection of stones and painted them, exploiting the natural streaks of minerals to obtain basic figures and landscapes that bring to mind the Lascaux cave paintings. Then there are works that Munari made around 1960 from objects formed by the action of the sea’s waves—fanciful interweavings of ragged ropes and small clumps of dry algae entangled in the remains of nets washed up on some beach—as well as fragments of copper with surreal titles, and a series of bamboo vases carved out of large reeds, which take advantage of the plants’ color and texture. Unlike artists who since the ’60s have used the materials of nature in passionate and dramatic fashion, such as Pino Pascali or Mario Merz, Munari arranges his elements with a sense of light irony, attempting as an adult to imitate the playful rhythms of his many young students.

More recently, in a series of paintings from 1980, Munari experimented with different geometrically shaped stains, using various types of oils: linseed oil on linen, seal oil on gauze, teak oil on hemp, etc. For this show he has also designed a fountain, for water is one of the elements toward which he is predisposed. He constructed a round cement basin that rhythmically and noisily pours forth drops of water, which is recirculated continuously. The

sound, resonating within the enclosed space of the museum, became bewitching, for, in the words of the artist, “the water jumps, sprays, evaporates, moves mechanisms, thrusts up forms. . . . A statue watered by jets of water is not a fountain.”

—Barbara Maestri

Translated from the Italian by Meg Shore.

All rights reserved. artforum.com is a registered trademark of Artforum International Magazine, New York, NY.