

Morandi

Resonancia

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A key figure within 20th century Italian art, Giorgio Morandi (Bologna, 1890-1964) spanned the century as an artist who remained faithful to an absolutely personal approach and to a silent and immobile painting that records states of mind and the inexorable flow of time in the poetry of objects.

Unaffiliated with any pictorial trend and remote from the clamour of the avant-gardes as well as from any language associated with the complex political climate of the day, Morandi spent almost all his life isolated in his studio on Via Fondazza in Bologna. There, the objects that surrounded him - bottles, jugs, boxes and humble utensils - offered him the guiding thread to a coherent aesthetic; seemingly static and always resembling itself but in fact involving continuous variations. As Roberto Longhi wrote: "Starting from a single material motif, he was able to reinstate different emotional timbres and construct his severe, luminous elegy in a way that was always different."

Morandi's constant study of the compositions of objects which he carefully arranged in his studio and his meticulous analysis of the views and landscapes that recur in his work led him to affirm that "there is nothing more abstract than reality." In this sense his lessons have been fundamental for creative figures of subsequent generations who have acknowledged him as an artist's artist. The deep and long-lasting mark of Morandi's legacy is fully reflected in this exhibition through the dialogues established with leading figures in contemporary artistic investigation, such as Lawrence Carroll, Tony Cragg, Luigi Ontani, Tacita Dean and Alfredo Alcáin.

The exhibition encompasses all the phases within Morandi's artistic career, ranging from his early period associated with a reflection on Cézanne and Cubism, to his brief but important affiliation with Metaphysical painting and concluding with his formulation of a mature and profoundly original language that is documented in the section "Silent dialogues." In the still lifes that the artist painted throughout his career the purity of the forms and the compositional rigour transcribe "another" life of objects which, while rooted in reality and Morandi's everyday experience, move into a dimension of solitude, suspended in eternal time in which the silent nature of things is revealed. The importance of the choice of colours, the tonal variations and the relationships produced by the fall of light on surfaces are particularly represented in the section "The colours of white."

Together with still life, landscape was the other genre most extensively practised by Morandi due to his need to establish a direct relationship with reality. His principal sources of inspiration were two places that he especially loved: the village of Grizzana and his studio-home in Bologna.

The exhibition also includes a section devoted to Morandi's graphic output which is perhaps a less well known facet of his work but a fundamental one for an understanding of his study of forms, light and volumes, undertaken in an ongoing dialogue with his pictorial research.

Like his work, Morandi's life was devoid of "waste or confusion", in the words of the art historian Francesco Arcangeli. It was in this conjunction of art and life that one of the most lofty and significant artistic experiences of the last century was fulfilled.

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The early years

Despite his family's reservations, Giorgio Morandi trained at the Fine Arts Academy in Bologna between 1907 and 1913. While there he developed a preference for Impressionism and Post-impressionism which he carefully studied through Ardengo Soffici's articles for the magazine *La Voce* and from Vittorio Pica's book *Gli impressionisti francesi* published in 1908. Morandi also paid attention to the Cubism developed by Braque and Picasso and was briefly attracted by Futurist ideas, participating in some of the group's gatherings and exhibitions in Florence and Bologna in 1913 and 1914.

These influences are evident in his early work and can be seen in the two still lifes from 1914 on display in this gallery. In both of them the artist arranged some everyday objects on a tabletop, motifs which would become constants in his personal repertoire from this point onwards. The high viewpoint, slanting planes and reduction of the chromatic range refer to a Cubist approach while the influence of the Futurists is evident in the rapid, dense brushstrokes that produce the sensation of dynamism which that movement primarily aimed to achieve.

The debt to Picasso and Cézanne is also evident in Morandi's landscapes from this initial period. The two examples displayed here, from 1913 and 1914, look to the latter and are among the first studies from life that Morandi produced during his stays in Grizzana, the small village in the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines which he visited with his family from the summer of 1913 onwards.

Bathers of 1915 is another painting closely associated with Cézanne and is clearly inspired by that artist's *Five Bathers* (1885-87), at that date in a private collection in Florence and now in the Kunstmuseum, Basel. Together with *Self-portrait* of 1925 it is one of the few depictions of the human form in Morandi's work.

Metaphysical spells

Morandi was called up during World War I but a serious illness resulted in his discharge and he returned home. Following his recovery in 1917, he destroyed much of the work he had produced to date. During this period of creative crisis from 1918 to 1919 he worked for some months alongside Giorgio de Chirico and Carlo Carrà who had founded the tendency known as Metaphysical painting in Ferrara. This was characterised by compositions based on elements of reality which, when taken together and presented in static contexts, generate a sense of alienation as if the motifs represented were located beyond reality.

Morandi's works associated with that tendency are filled with its typical mannequins, spheres and geometrical elements. Unlike the work of his two colleagues, however, his paintings lack the narrative or mythical component characteristic of Metaphysical art. Their mystery is of a different kind; that of a painting whose strength lies in repetition and in its reiterated attempt to capture the "reality of things" which led Morandi to embark on his rigorous formal investigation. The enigma of Metaphysical painting arises in part from the combined arrangement of disparate objects devoid of any apparent logical connection. In contrast, and as Marco Valsecchi has noted, Morandi's motifs "do not venture beyond the limit of the logical: their rhythmical, tranquil presence is sufficient for poetry."

In this section a dialogue with Morandi is established by three artists who have found inspiration in his particular interpretation of Metaphysical painting. Working in three different media (photography, sculpture and painting), Joel Meyerowitz, Dis Berlin and Andrea Facco respectively reflect on the permanence of objects in the absence of the artist; on the hermetic and solipsistic nature of the creator; and on the enigma that underlies a Metaphysical work which disappeared without trace.

Endless landscapes

Together with still life, landscape was the other genre that Morandi most extensively practised given that they are the two which best lend themselves to a direct representation of reality and to repetitions and variations, all fundamental aspects of his aesthetic. As the artist said: "I think that expressing nature, by which I mean the visible world, is what most interests me."

Over the course of his career Morandi depicted two outdoor locations that he particularly loved. Firstly, the area around Grizzana, a village in the Apennines between Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna where he spent his summers from 1913 and where he took refuge from the war between 1940 and 1944. The second was the courtyard that he saw from the window of his studio on Via Fondazza in Bologna, which he first depicted in 1944 after he had almost completely moved away from landscape painting. Morandi's views of Grizzana follow Cézanne's compositions in his celebrated depictions of Mont Sainte-Victoire which were reproduced in various Italian art magazines in the 1920s and 1930s. One of the most important is *Landscape* of 1928 in the Giovanardi collection, in which the painter repeated a composition of the previous year with some variations.

Morandi approached landscape in a way comparable to his still lifes; using just a few strokes he suggests a path or road and indicates the forms of the trees, houses and hills as if he were constructing an eternal Italy suspended in silence.

Contemporary artists who have revived the genre of landscape as a space of research have turned to Morandi as a reference point in their commitment to painting as a medium that refuses to disappear. Alessandro Taiana and Juan José Aquerreta make direct reference to this dematerialisation of the forms present in the landscapes that Morandi produced during the war and in his watercolours. Riccardo Taiana focuses on a post-industrial reality which presents the viscera of a broken-down, polluted and poisoned Italy; the negative image of Morandi's eternal present.

Scentsless flowers

Flowers were a constant presence in Morandi's artistic project and he was equally fond of those in his garden, wild flowers and even the potted plants that his sisters carefully protected in winter, moving them to the stairwell of their house in Bologna. In works of this type, however, the artist often used dried or paper flowers as his models, which emphasises the static, artificial feel of some of these paintings.

Morandi looked to Renoir and approached his works of this type in a traditional manner. He normally depicted a vase of pronounced vertical form, counterbalanced by the horizontal of the supporting element in compositions that suggest a certain instability. Despite the simplicity of the scenes these vases, which normally contain tightly closed buds of roses, zinnias and marguerites, produce a type of disquiet in the viewer, possibly because the arrangements, which are associated with the transience of flowers and their inevitable withering, remain eternally and immutably represented in the painting, removed from the passing of time.

As a seemingly a-temporal genre, the subject of flowers has captivated contemporary artists such as the photographer Carlo Benvenuto who liberates them from the weight of their container in order to reinstate them in all their essence and purity, distilled and reduced to the minimum expression of vulnerability. In their polychrome ceramics the artist duo Giampaolo Bertozzi and Stefano dal Monte Casoni also reintroduce materiality into Morandi's models, giving them a degree of detail that is lost in painting while emphasising their fragility.

The independent voice of printmaking

For Morandi, printmaking was not a complement to his painted output but rather another mode of expression with its own personality and he considered that particular representational techniques corresponded to specific "images". Between 1930 and 1956 he taught this subject as senior professor of printmaking techniques at the Fine Arts Academy in Bologna, while over the course of his career he produced approximately 130 prints, all monochrome images. He learned the discipline slowly but after ten years of practice was able to transcribe the sensations of the colours into the black and white gradations of the printed image.

Over time Morandi made etching a technique through which he achieved tonalities, going beyond its use as a procedure to simply define the forms of objects. Chiaroscuro thus almost fills the entire image, while following his admired Cézanne in his watercolours he used the whites of the paper as an additional colour by leaving some parts of the plate unworked so that they appear as white in the final impression. As in his painting, Morandi's interest in volumes and light led him to create an atmosphere that seems to envelop the motifs. It is this atmosphere which generates the immediately recognisable feel of Morandi's aesthetic.

The colours of white

Over the years Morandi's painting moved towards sublimation, to a progressive reduction of the themes and to a technical refinement partly based on almost ineffable tonal gradations and on a type of soft brushwork that began to de-materialise around 1950. The artist's works of this period are simplified to the extreme and are increasingly broken down to the point where the motifs can no longer be clearly distinguished, becoming almost abstract. When asked about this in an interview of 1955 for *Voice of America*, Morandi replied: "I think there's nothing more surrealist, nothing more abstract than the real!"

In this sense white is fundamental within the artist's aesthetic and is the element that allows us to appreciate that the magic of the Morandian aesthetic lies in the infinitesimal space of minimal variations. Paradoxical as it may seem, in his compositions this "non-colour" acquires an extremely varied chromatic value with nuances of ochre, ivory, pink and grey. In both the watercolours and prints the white of the paper clearly functions as another colour, contrasting with the painted or etched areas. A comparison of some of the still lifes reveals that the differences between them are in some cases created through the tonal gradations of the whites, interrupted by different tones of blues and yellows, and also by the manner of establishing the compositions, some closer to the viewer than others. On occasions the objects are arranged to form a wall, lined up and slightly crowded together like the buds in the artist's flower paintings. They seem to be concealing something, even though all that lies behind them is an empty space which can once again be discerned through the tonal shift that Morandi applied to the backgrounds.

On display here are various works by artists who have focused on the role that aspects such as drawing, the use of the unworked white of the paper, transparency and shadow have played in Morandi's art, all of them employing a silent, pared-down aesthetic. These reflections are present in Edmund de Waal's ceramics, the almost abstract watercolours by Alexandre Hollan, Lawrence Carroll's Morandian drawings, Juan José Aquerreta's refined painting, Catherine Wagner's ghostly images, and the restrained theatricality of Luigi Ontani's object-based sculptures.

Silent dialogues

Remote from any fashionable trends and from the movements that emerged in Italian art in the early decades of the 20th century, Morandi's dedicated focus was the silence of the everyday domestic objects that he carefully arranged in his studio. He constantly aimed to achieve a perfect balance between the volumes, the voids and masses and the colours and tones through complex solutions of light, the location of which on the canvas does not seem to be determined by any external criterion and rather solely responds to the artist's compositional aims.

Morandi's bottles and boxes, either placed to form a compact barrier or a looser construction, always reflect a controlled arrangement which is only seemingly spontaneous: the "randomness" of the objects' location is no more than an apparent one as it is extremely carefully studied. Morandi was capable of painting a canvas in a couple of hours but he devoted much time to devising it in his mind and to its composition, which he first studied in detail in the studio before translating it onto the canvas. Within this process repetition is a form of perseverance, representing the consistency with which the artist applied himself to pictorial issues. As the art historian Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti observed, Morandi "draws, tries out the templates for his compositions, uses them to calculate how to fill the planes and volumes, measures the distances, moves the backgrounds and the sides, top and bottom closer in or further away in relation to the dimensions, considers the proportions and the correlations between the bodies, and creates the network of shadows and lights" in a profoundly architectural study of the composition.

In this section of the exhibition these silent dialogues are translated into the final contemporary counterpoints. Works of widely differing type converse with this group of still lifes by Morandi from different perspectives: the almost fetishistic reinstatement of the objectual quality from which his compositions arose becomes the particular focus of interest for Tony Cragg, Alfredo Alcain and Joel Meyerowitz; seriality and the notion of variations are the points of connection with Franco Vimercati; while an investigation of the constructive or architectural component that underlies all these still lifes is reflected in works by Ada Duker, Rachel Whiteread and Gerardo Rueda.