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Giorgio Morandi, bottle by bottle



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EVERYDAY: Morandi's repetitious use of common objects lent his paintings a poetic strength. "There is nothing more surreal, nothing more abstract than reality," he said. A survey of his works is being held in New York.

The artist made his mark with image after image of vases and the like. A survey of his works is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

By Leah Ollman

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Reporting from New York — Giorgio Morandi is a quiet giant in the world of art history. A painter and printmaker, he spent his entire life (1890-1964) in and around his native Bologna, Italy, traveling abroad only twice, briefly. After completing his studies at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Bologna, Morandi was drafted into the military in 1915 but became seriously ill and was dismissed as unfit for service. He returned to the family home he shared with his mother and three sisters, working there and in the surrounding countryside for the next 50 years.

He taught etching at the Bologna Academy for more than 25 years, but mostly he kept to his studio, making image after image of bottles, vases, pitchers and tin boxes arranged on a stark table against a blank wall. The objects huddle together, edge to edge, in tenderly choreographed studies of tone, balance, boundaries, presence and absence. Morandi composed his modestly scaled paintings in a palette of muted hues: putty, fog, dried clay, faded brick, sand, slate and dust, with the occasional brighter note of yellow, green, blue or red. His etched line is strong and luminous.

Casual viewers might dismiss the narrow scope and subdued quality of Morandi's work as tedious, but a broad, fervent following has embraced those limits as virtues. The repetition offers insight into process and serves as a vehicle for a meditative, introspective practice. Morandi's images are intimate and deeply felt; they carry a disarming philosophical heft.

Artists across media have been influenced by Morandi's insistent interiority, his infusion of ordinary objects with a sense of poetry, his gentle touch and unswerving attention to spatial and tonal relationships, his way of dematerializing material objects. He is often quoted for stating, toward the

end of his life, "There is nothing more surreal, nothing more abstract than reality."

Morandi's work has been exhibited internationally since the 1920s and earned multiple prizes at the Venice Biennale and the São Paulo Biennial during his lifetime. The first comprehensive survey of his paintings, prints and watercolors to appear in the U.S. opened recently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (through Dec. 14).

On the occasion of the show (which makes its only other stop in Bologna next year), we talked to four artists who count Morandi as a model and inspiration.

Robert Irwin

Irwin was a second-generation Abstract Expressionist painter when he joined L.A.'s groundbreaking Ferus Gallery in the late 1950s. Before long, his turbulent brush strokes gave way to minimal, monochromatic lines and plexiglass discs that appeared to dissolve into the supporting wall. Around 1970, Irwin gave up his studio and has since been an itinerant "respondent," creating installations using light, color and translucent scrim in response to the conditions of particular sites. From the early days of his career, Irwin, 80, was captivated by the way Morandi de-emphasized subject matter, shifting attention to form and the act of seeing. He spoke by telephone from his home in San Diego.

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"We put on a Morandi show at Ferus. We were trying to explain to some people what a so-called abstract painting was about, and what Abstract Expressionism was all about. The best example in the world was Giorgio Morandi. Morandi, in my opinion, was the only genuine European Abstract Expressionist.

"When you look at the work, you think he's painting bottles, little still-life paintings, but they weren't. Morandi came in the back door. It was almost a Zen activity. He painted the same bottles over and over and over, so it wasn't really about bottles anymore. If he was a still-life painter, he wouldn't have painted the same bottles over and over.

"They're about painting -- the figure-ground relationship, structure and organization. Morandi's were paintings in the purest sense of the word. They were like a mantra, repeated over and over until it was divorced from words and became pure sounds."

Vija Celmins

"We all wanted to be De Kooning or Pollock or Rothko," Celmins recalls of her student days in the late '50s and early '60s. Visiting New York at the time from her native Latvia, she came across a Morandi show and was taken aback by the strength of the painter's intimately scaled enterprise. As a result of the encounter, Celmins gave up "the grand gesture" and shifted her approach from big and expressive to small and introspective, from action to stillness. Her drawings, paintings and prints are based on close observation and repeated themes of the sea and sky. She spoke by telephone from her studio in New York.

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"I tried not to mimic him, but I did a series of paintings of objects then. He helped me drop the color I was into and helped me explore light. I think he was an influence in a broader way, saying let's just go back to looking and letting your hand make decisions. That's basically what I did. I went back to painting without trying to project so much, to express so many opinions, my ideas about what great painting was.

"[Morandi's is] not really humble work, either. It's really ambitious work. It's about painting a world. The thing that amazed me most in his studio was how big the bottles were, and they were painted. He painted the bottles in various shades of gray, which catches all the light. The paintings were about a world that came from his interior, and he painted the reality to go with what he was already looking for and feeling and wanting to see.

"Later, when I learned to look at painting in a more complex way, I began to see how strange and controlled the still lifes were, how strange the space was, how alive the paint was. There was this exquisite balance between the extreme stillness and the movement in his paintings. My work is quite restrained. Maybe I recognized that holding back in Morandi's work and it helped me. It gave me the courage to try, to go in that direction instead of trying to be someone else, someone more exciting maybe."

Dan McCleary

McCleary was an art student in San Francisco in the mid-'70s when he was introduced to Morandi's work. The Bay Area painters were "obsessed" with Morandi, he recalls. McCleary's own portraits, still lifes and interior tableaux are kin to the Italian artist's work: quiet, impeccably composed, focused on the familiar and ordinary, with acute attention to color relationships and the space surrounding subjects. When McCleary learned that Morandi painted the surfaces of the bottles and other containers he arranged in his still lifes, he began to do that also, to erase the objects' idiosyncratic textures and emphasize their essential formal qualities. McCleary, 56, spoke about his affinity with Morandi by telephone from his L.A. studio.

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"The first time I saw the paintings and the etchings, I couldn't believe them -- the stillness, the ability to create light with such a limited palette. The paintings looked very awkward and clumsy, like they were about to fall apart. They don't look bravura, but have a radiance and beauty.

"More than the paintings, the etchings have had a very direct influence on me. I have a book of Morandi etchings that's like my Bible. Wherever I go to do my printing, I bring the book with me. He believed that the line of the etching gave off light, because it's not like pen and ink, it's raised on the paper. It refracts light.

"The shyness and humbleness of his work is so attractive. He's so equivocal. He just stayed in his little world and made magnificent work. He turned his back on the world, the violence of the world. He was clearly influenced by Modernism, but [the works] feel outside of time. I find the monk-ness of him fascinating, the smallness of his life. I feel I aspire toward that.

"His work gives me license to repeat the same Styrofoam cup over and over, the same napkin holder. It's always challenging, never boring and never easy. There are times I look at Morandi's work and think, 'Another . . . bottle?' but when you get into it, they all have their own essence. Each operates in its own universe and has its own thing to say."

Uta Barth

Barth photographs the ordinary and overlooked: light falling across a wall or floor, the edge of a window, a sprig of flowers, a leafless branch, the seams and surfaces of a domestic interior. Born in Berlin in 1958 and raised in California, she subverts traditional expectations that a photograph should contain an overt subject, clearly described. Her images are intentionally emptied of focal points and narrative prompts. They are typically blurred. Like Morandi, she works primarily in her own house, in Los Angeles, returning again and again to the same everyday objects and spaces. Barth shared her thoughts on Morandi by e-mail.

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"The history of Western art teaches us to interpret images, to search out and decipher symbolism, to find the narrative of what is being told. Morandi gives us none of that. He gives us silence, observation and a deep love of vision itself, vision divorced from interpretation. He invites us to see, rather than read.

"This is not an easy task; I know all too well, since it is what I strive for in each body of work I have made throughout the years. I want my viewer to engage and submerge themselves in the act of looking and not in thoughts about what they are looking at. Repetition, redundancy are a path to this end. Look at one chipped and clumsy group of bottles and odd vases and one may think about what they mean; look at countless repetition of the same objects and it becomes clear that something else must be at play.

"Morandi's objects are clumsy and plain, yet the paintings are some of the most beautiful I have ever seen. They are a love affair with painting, with observation and vision; humble and silent, they invite us to see.

They are silent paintings stripped down to form, composition, light and color."

Ollman is a freelance writer.