



Back to the Futurists

This rare exhibition of Bruno Munari's work reveals an inventive artist who used wit and imagination to make his work accessible, says **Adrian Hamilton**

Objects to look at in the way you look at a drifting group of clouds having spent seven hours inside a factory full of useful machines," declared

Bruno Munari, introducing his *Useless Machines* in the 1930s. And there you have it: the credo of one of the most playful, inventive and influential Italian artists of the modern era.

Not that he was without purpose. Munari, the subject of a rare exhibition of his work, *Bruno Munari: My Futurist Past*, at the Estorick Collection in London, started out as a bright young thing in the second generation of Futurists, Italy's special contribution to modern art. Two early pastels from 1927 have him using repetitive forms and swirls to create the appearance of movement in exactly the same way as the Vorticists, also learning from the Futurists, were doing in Britain at the time. But in a few years he was doing very much his own thing.

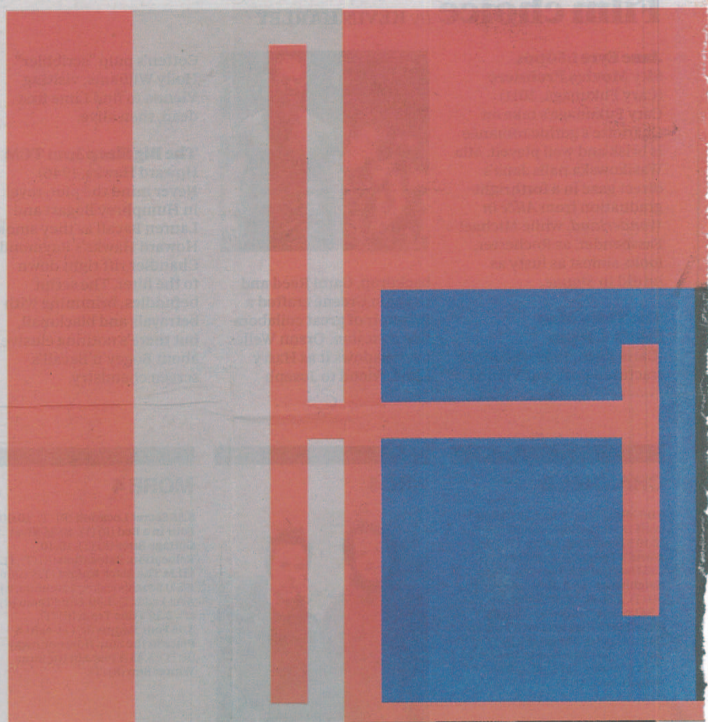
He was one of those very rare creatures in art: he was genuinely witty. To the abstraction of Futurism he added words and images, and a precise sense of space. *At the Double* is the title of a dynamic picture of a moving man of 1932, subverting the whole Futurist enthusiasm for movement and machinery. His series of flight collages from the 1930s include three girls leaping from mining machinery with the graphic of a sore foot and entitled *Moreover, nothing is absurd to those who fly*, while *Misunderstood Poet* from 1933 has the internal organs of a man dreaming of an aeroplane engine just as basically mechanical in its working. In *ABC DADA* he animates the letters of the alphabet

– a lifetime pursuit – with a name, a face and objects beginning with a letter. "B" is for "Bice" and is illustrated with real buttons, a "biggliettaio" and a bust represented by a corset ad.

It may seem childish and Munari, who later illustrated children's books, certainly wished the artist to be childlike, but it works. Seeing the caption "Useless machine" on the gallery wall above a fire extinguisher, your first thought is that it is for extinguisher rather than the standing sculpture nearby. He would have liked that. Critics at the time accused him of being too frivolous as an artist to be considered seriously – he has a splendid picture of the "Hypercrotic" in the show, all bewhiskered and Victorian with the figure of a devil bat above – but Munari, a fine theoretician as well as practitioner, passionately believed that the art of his time should be popular as well as involving.

The Estorick show concentrates on Munari's work from the pre-War years (born in 1907, he died in 1998), up until the 1950s when he became a leading light in the postwar Movimento Arte Concreta, which he helped found. The exhibition's title is taken from the artist's own later statement that he owed his art to his "Futurist past". It was a past he himself long ignored during the post-War years when the movement, with its passion for machines and action, was regarded as an art of fascism.

Munari was never political, but, as this exhibition makes clear, he owed a great deal to the Futurists and their philosophy of modernity. Many of the things he became notable for with the later Arte Concreta, although expressed in terms designed to distance itself from pre-War movements, can be traced back to his experiments with abstract art and



Art of the matter: (clockwise from above): 'Negative-positive'; 'Aeroplanes and Archers'; design for an advertisement in the journal 'Campo Grafico'; Bruno Munari in his studio; 'Useless Machine' NICOLETTA GRADELLA, MASSIMO & SONIA CIRULLI ARCHIVE, MIROSLAVA HAJEK





In the loop with Hollywood's next great leading man

Joseph Gordon-Levitt could be the new Leonardo DiCaprio, says Matt Mueller

Joseph Gordon-Levitt is having a terrific year, which seems strange to say when the past few have already seen him headline an adored indie romance (*500 Days of Summer*), lend bulk to a franchise tentpole (*GI Joe: The Rise of Cobra*) and bask in the glow of Christopher Nolan's *Inception*. Nonetheless, a second stint with Nolan in *The Dark Knight Rises* followed by this month's thriller double-bill, *Premium Rush* and *Looper*, and a year that will culminate in the release of Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*, is further burnishing Gordon-Levitt's claim as the boy most likely to become Hollywood's next great leading man.

God knows the industry needs someone like Gordon-Levitt to step up as his generation's DiCaprio, especially since no one else appears able. Entering a Toronto hotel room with a bottle of water in his hands and a gentle swagger in his step, he has the appearance of a man very comfortable with his place in the universe right now. "How you doin'?" draws the 31-year-old Los Angeleno, like he's suddenly been inhabited by the spirit of Joey Tribbiani. *Looper* opened the Toronto International Film Festival the night before and, before the onslaught of *Cloud Atlas*, *Argo* and *The Master*, he's getting the chance to be toast of the town. *Looper*, a funky time-travel thriller, reunites Gordon-Levitt with his *Brick* director Rian Johnson for what he describes as "a sci-fi movie that doesn't focus on shiny spaceships or lasers, but is ultimately more of a drama - much like *The Dark Knight Rises*."

Gordon-Levitt plays Joe, a mob assassin called a "looper" who targets agents zapped back from the future. Not a bad gig, until the mob decides to close your loop and dispatch your future self to be terminated. Unfortunately for Joe, the 30-years-older version of himself, played by Bruce Willis, escapes, forcing Joe to hunt him down and

(maybe) finish the job. In no one's eyes do Willis and Gordon-Levitt look like each other, and the older man's casting led to a face-full of prosthetics for the younger in order to bring their features closer in line. Distractingly for *Looper*, the glue-and-rubber job also makes Gordon-Levitt resemble a lost villain from Warren Beatty's *Dick Tracy*.

"It's a bizarre experience to look in the mirror and see a face other than my own," muses the actor, who insists that the hours in the make-up chair he endured each morning were necessary to achieve his performance. Even Emily Blunt tells us later that when she first encountered her co-star on set, no one told her he was caked in prosthetics. "I was just really confused why he looked so different," she says. "I thought, 'What's he done to his face?' I thought he'd had an allergic reaction to a bee sting or something." The actress hastily adds, "It's a credit to his talents that he was

"GORDON-LEVITT PLAYS JOE, A MOB ASSASSIN WHO TARGETS AGENTS SENT BACK FROM THE FUTURE"

able to embody Bruce Willis without cheaply impersonating him. They look nothing alike, but that's why you buy it - because of Joe."

The opportunity to work again with Johnson was Gordon-Levitt's chief motive for doing *Looper*. The film's essential theme is the cycle of violence and whether raising children in the right way can prevent them growing up to become fearsome psychopaths, as in the case of a dark-eyed child (played brilliantly by Pierce Gagnon).

"How a child is raised by their parents is, of course, going to have a profound effect on that child," he says. "Personally, I can vouch that my parents did an excellent job."

'Looper' is released in the UK on 28 September



In the driving seat: Gordon-Levitt (front) with Paul Dano in 'Looper' AP

multi-media sculpture in the 1930s.

He flourished in advertising and design in the 1930s and 1940s but never gave up on painting as a proper focus for creativity, for all his assertions that, in the words of his fellow painter Giacomo Balla in 1918: "Furs, travelling bags, china - these things are all a much more rewarding sight than the grimy little pictures nailed on the grey wall of the passeist painter's studio." His *Compositions* from the 1930s along with his *Geometric Compositions* and most of all his *Negative-positives* from the 1940s have extraordinary dynamic power in their use of colour and rhythm, even at their most mathematical. Paradox was applied to composition as much as titles.

What made Munari so individual and so different from his colleagues was not just his wit but also his sheer inventiveness. He was one of the first artists to create mobiles as part of his *Useless Machines* in the 1930s in an effort to add dynamics and spontaneous movement to sculpture. They still hang as modern and as graceful as an Alexander Calder, who started using mobiles at roughly the same time. The *Insects* and *Arrhythmia* of wire, fabric, clockworks and bits of metals from the 1940s and 1951 are installations before their time, but also astonishingly light and inspired. *Sensitive no 7* from 1946 is just made from curved wire and coloured wood but it is, as its title indicates, almost spiritual in its feeling.

Munari was never content with simply expressing his concepts but with taking them as far as possible in any work. His juxtapositions of imagery

"HE PASSIONATELY BELIEVED THAT ART SHOULD BE POPULAR AS WELL AS INVOLVING"

were there not just to entertain but to interact with the viewer. He wanted an art that was total but also involving. An early sculptural object from 1938 is a *Tactile Board* in which the fingers are urged to move from emery paper across wood and feather.

He was one of the earliest artists to think of using a work to create an environment, at first with his mobiles, then with objects that could cast shadows. Always fascinated by light, Munari experimented continuously with it refracted through sculptures and projected through slides and polaroids. The last work in this endlessly fascinating exhibition is a single object taking up a whole room. *Concave-convex* from 1947 is a folded wire mesh sheet, suspended from the ceiling and lit from above so that it casts intricate shadows on the surrounding wall, gently moving in the air conditioning. It is at once peaceful, intriguing and quite beautiful - an ordinary material filling space in an extraordinary way.

Munari is sometimes accused of spreading himself too thinly and widely to be a great artist. This three-room exhibition displays just how consistent he was, in his ambition and his imagination. A show to lift your spirits in these dispiriting times.

'Bruno Munari: My Futurist Past'
Estorick Collection, London N1
(www.estorickcollection.com) to
23 December

