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Bruno Munari's Design as Art

Coming of age during the second wave of Italian Futurism, the artist and designers' mind-boggling experiments in genre and classification

BY ARA H. MERJIAN

Best known on these shores for the English translation of his 1966 volume *Design as Art*, the Italian artist and designer Bruno Munari (1907–1998) eludes any definitive classification: graphic designer, *photomonteur*, sculptor, furniture designer, industrial designer, author, painter, xerographer, children's book author and aesthetic provocateur. Almost exactly contemporary with experiments by the American sculptor Alexander Calder, Munari is credited with the development

of his own version of the 'mobile' during the 1930s. Composed of hanging quadrilateral units, Munari called these pieces 'Useless Machines', a designation indicative of the wide-ranging artistic formation which shaped his work between the World Wars, and a prelude to his enduring and prolific output until his death late in the century. While nowhere near comprehensive (a feat nearly impossible given the dimensions of Munari's oeuvre), this rather uncommon exhibition at Andrew Kreps Gallery affords a fairly representative cross-section of his output.



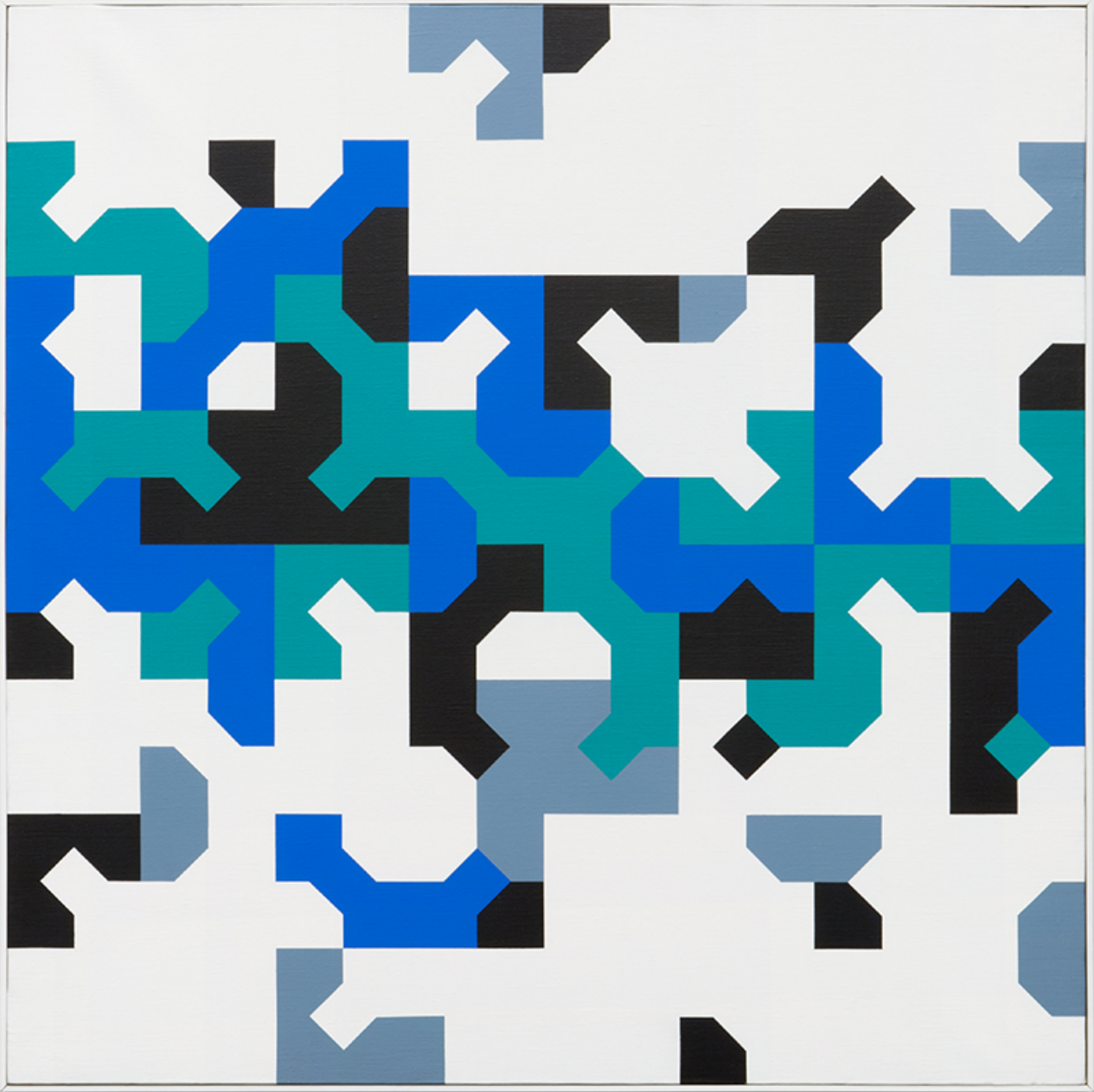
Bruno Munari, *Singer, sedia per visite brevissime, Zanotta, 1988*, walnut wood and anodized aluminium, 105 x 35 x 20 cm.
Courtesy: Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

Munari came of age during the second flowering of Italian Futurism, to which he adhered in its later, aggressively mechanical guise of the late 1920s and mid 1930s. The Futurists' preoccupation with 'aeropainting' – a celebration of flight, new aerial perspectives and their allegorical evocation of fascist modernity – left an enduring mark upon Munari, as witnessed here in his *Composition* (c.1930s), setting against the sky abstract geometries and near-abstract planes bedecked in the tricolour Italian flag. Even the mixed-media work on paper, *Blue Spiral* (1938), reveals an abiding Futurist affinity for the spiral as a trope of movement and dynamism. Yet for all his youthful Futurist exuberance, Munari evinced from early on in his career an astute awareness of international currents, despite fascism's strident nationalism and insistence upon cultural 'autarchy'. The playful antics of Dada and the oneiric distortions of Surrealism filtered into his work early on, resulting in a truly unique alchemy of aggressively modernist interest in new media and materials, and a fundamentally lyrical – often jocular – approach to form.



Bruno Munari, 'Works 1930–1996', 2018, installation view, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York. Courtesy: Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

Munari's *Chair for Brief Visits* (1988) perfectly encapsulates the persistence of these penchants to the far ends of his career. Featuring intricate decorations on its walnut frame, the chair is wrought at an impossibly precipitous angle; pitched almost flush to the wall, its seat invites – as its title would suggest – only the most fleeting of respites. A similar mix of constructive precision and impracticability informs Munari's *Useless Machines*, represented here in an example of varnished aluminium geometries – conceived in 1935 and reworked until 1994. Munari's contraptions have been exhibited alongside Jean Tinguely's sculptures, though their consistently geometric articulations align them more appositely to aspects of international Constructivism. The revival of those strains of modernism in the post- World War Two Concrete Art movement would indeed find Munari prominent among its Italian practitioners, as various pieces in this exhibition suggest, whether his *Negative-Positive* paintings of the early 1950s, or his experiments with polarized light boxes. Already in the 1930s, Munari's photocollages – featuring labourers of heavy industry – suggested the influence of Russian Constructivist principles, even upon the culture of its 'enemy twin', Fascist Italy.



Bruno Munari, *Curve di Peano P64.1*, 1974, oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm. Courtesy: Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

While Munari's precise level of ideological involvement with the regime remains a question of some controversy, his body of work far exceeds any facile reduction to propaganda, or even politics more broadly. Munari remained his own man, producing a mind-boggling range of experiments which straddle different media, discipline, genres and affects. His *Illegible Writings of an Unknown People* (1973) reveal a light-hearted meditation not only upon typeface design and legibility, but anthropological and linguistic mysteries (the latter evoked, too, in his famous 1958 *Talking Fork*). So, too, his *Theoretical Reconstruction of an Imaginary Object* (1971) combines the practical mechanics of engineering with an almost metaphysical play upon systems theory. Perhaps most

striking on view at Kreps – amidst a striking range of experiments – are two *Fossils from the Year 2000* (1959), which sandwich unrecognizable valves and mechanized parts between some transparent substance. Recalling Duchamp's *The Large Glass* (*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, 1915–23), the works conjure up a future where even the 'futuristic' apparatuses of modernity bear all the obviated mystery of some fossil frozen in amber.

Bruno Munari, 'Works 1930–1996' <<https://frieze.com/event/bruno-munari>> runs at Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York until 29 June.

Main image: Bruno Munari, 'Works 1930–1996', installation view. Courtesy: Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

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