

Bruno Gironcoli occupies a special place in contemporary sculpture, particularly because of his monumental works, resembling hybrid, even extraterrestrial, altars in which mechanical components are combined with organic motifs. His work constantly alternates between representation of abstract elements and physical realism, as if to avoid any thematic or iconographic interpretation.

Yet a closer look makes clear that Gironcoli's work had a classical focus — for he never ceased to study the human figure. From the early 1960s onwards he attempted to produce a contemporary image of the human body. He drew inspiration from the work of Alberto Giacometti, with its ability to resolve the conflict between how things appear and what they really are. His first works — drawings of models that at first focused on the face, and then on the various postures of the body — sought the essence of the human figure, and experimented with ways of conveying abstract themes in portraiture. This classic way of tackling the motif contrasted with his approach to sculpture: from the outset he abandoned such traditional materials as wood, marble or bronze in favour of what were then new materials such as plastic, and especially polyester, which was to play a key part in his work. He used this industrial material to create objects that had a very limited formal vocabulary and would be hard to grasp were it not for their titles, such as *Kopf* ('Head'). He began his work as a sculptor with a series of heads that looked more like 'specific objects' than busts, and seemed to underscore their relationship to the wall and the perception of the object in space. At the same time, these works enabled Gironcoli to explore the formal potential of polyester and test what the poor-quality material could actually convey. He also painted his prototypes bronze, silver and gold. This metallic coating suggested cast iron, but rather than lend the objects a specific quality it seemed to poke fun at them and emphasise their artificial, almost kitschy appearance. The artist's use of this low-quality, factory-made material may have been influenced by American pop art or by Viennese Actionism, which Gironcoli kept in close touch with. What probably caught his attention was the Actionists' wish to integrate the real world into artists' work and to test the limits of art. Unlike the Actionists, however, he did not seek to destroy artistic genres, and he never gave up sculpture. On the other hand, he clung to the notion of ritual and sacrifice, a way of blending the sacred and the prosaic that was most fully expressed in his work *Gelbe Madonna* ('Yellow Madonna', 1975-1977). This work, involving an object that was clearly isolated by being on a pedestal, also marked the end of his research into installations. For the first time the sculpture was presented as an altar, both a place of ritual and an object of obsession.

This notion of a stage or scenery with actors seeming to move within the space of the sculpture was most clearly reflected in the drawings that Gironcoli produced alongside his sculptural work. His drawings approached the human figure in a more head-on fashion, displaying a wounded, tortured, assaulted body that seemed to be part of some ceremony or choreography. But they were also a way

of treating space as an actual stage for a happening or a performance. They were never illustrations of existing or future works. It was rather as if Gironcoli wanted to show the places where his sculptures, his stage fantasies or their future settings were produced. At the same time, in the late 1970s, he built up a repertoire of small-scale forms that he exhibited in display cases. These sculptures soon became modules that would recur in large-scale compositions. Babies, larvae, bunches of grapes, ears of corn, even phallic or vaginal figures thus became a formal vocabulary that would be expressed in monumental form in assemblies that revealed an ever-changing process of intuition.

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