Alighiero Boetti | Decoding His Universe: Works on Paper (1968-91)

PRESS RELEASE
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Alighiero Boetti | Decoding His Universe: Works on Paper (1968-91)
1 October 2019 - 8 January 2020, Tornabuoni Art London
Private View: Monday 30th September, 6pm-8pm

VIP Frieze Breakfast: exhibition tour Boetti's Universe - from Doodle to Drawing.
Tuesday 1st October, 10:30am -12pm, in the presence of Agata Boetti, the artist’s daughter.

“There is always a secret heart to Boetti’s work”. Norman O. Brown

LONDON - Alighiero Boetti’s works on paper provide illuminating glimpses into the secret world of the artist. From the playful to the provocative, doodle to drawing, Boetti’s graphic work takes the viewer to the heart of the artist’s obsession with creating codes, games and rules. For him, art was a game for everyone to play and the role of the artist was to set the rules. The first Post-War Italian artist to be given a solo show at Tate Modern, London (“Game Plan” in 2012, which travelled to MoMA New York), Boetti’s playful conceptualism, humour and wordplay resonates with London audiences.

Paper is the constant thread that ties much of Boetti’s work together, from his sketches to his museum-quality pieces. ‘Alighiero Boetti | Decoding His Universe’, at Tornabuoni Art London, presents over 30 works on paper by the artist that span his entire career and range in scale from origami airplanes to monumental murals. These works are rarely seen in such quantity and depth, so this show provides a unique opportunity to delve into the mind of the artist whose work is so intensely cerebral.
The show will include some of his first conceptual works, such as the Bollini (Stickers) series from the late 1960s. After his daughter was born in 1972, Boetti began inventing numerical and word-based games to play with her, that were eventually developed into fully-fledged series of now iconic works. These include the Ricami works, the letter-embroideries which, when read from top to bottom and left to right, reveal poetic and sometimes playful phrases and the Biro works, which invite the reader to match commas with letters to decipher hidden messages in a vast sea of ink drawn from ball point pens. The monumental biro piece Mettere al mondo il mondo (Bringing the World to the World) from 1975, 160 x 347 cm, will be on view as a prime example of this practice.

Just as his work ranges from the monumental to the minute, the cyphers with which we can decode his art vary from the complex algebraic equation behind his Storia Naturale della Moltiplicazione (Natural History of Multiplication), 1974-75, to the fact that Boetti used to take polaroids and organise his infant daughter’s animal stencils by species before using them to create the frieze-like works (Fregio) that were shown at the Venice Biennale of 1990. In his Copertine (Magazine Covers) works on paper, which were mounted onto canvas, the rule was simple: to visually summarise the passing of an entire year by selecting and then tracing over 12 magazine covers of the time, one for each month. His Lavori Postali (Postal Works), consisted of empty envelopes, stamped using a finite and predetermined combination of colourful postage stamps, sent across the world to made-up addresses, or to long-dead recipients. Only if all the envelopes were successfully returned to the sender could Boetti complete the game, and therefore the work.

This intimate show provides a counterpoint to the gallery’s recent Art Basel stand devoted to Boetti’s iconic Maps in June 2019, as well as its showing of a celebrated Map at Frieze Masters this October. It also follows recent gallery surveys of Boetti at Tornabuoni Art Paris and London and the major exhibition ‘Alighiero Boetti: Minimum/Maximum’ at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice in 2017. Such shows exemplify Tornabuoni’s tradition of exploring an artist’s entire creative universe in depth.

NOTES TO EDITORS

ABOUT ALIGHIERO BOETTI

Alighiero Boetti – or Alighiero e Boetti as he liked to sign his works from 1971 – was born on 16 December 1940 in Turin, Italy. The son of lawyer Corrado Boetti and violinist Adelina Marchisio, he began his career as a self-taught artist, after having briefly studied Business and Economics at the University of Turin.

In 1967, the Christian Stein gallery in Turin offered Boetti his first solo show, within a context marked by the recent birth of Arte Povera. The young artist was subsequently invited to take part in all group exhibitions around this theme, that paved the way for total freedom of artistic expression, and in shows on Conceptual Art such as ‘When Attitudes Become Form’ at the Kunsthalle Basel in 1969. The latter marked Boetti’s detachment from Arte Povera in favour of conceptual experimentation through duplication, symmetry and multiplication.
His works then focused on codes of classification and communication, working with numbers, maps and alphabets, playing with a variety of materials and techniques, reminiscent of ancient Asian craftsmanship.

Boetti’s passion for Afghanistan began in the early 1970s with a few trips that later turned into long stays, and in 1971 he opened the One Hotel in Kabul. During this time he began working on the his famous tapestries, called Mappe (Maps), entrusting their realisation to Afghan female embroiderers. Kabul inspired another famous series entitled Frasi messe al quadrato (Squared Sentences). After the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979, he started working with Afghan refugees in Peshawar, Pakistan (as from 1986).

A great traveller, Boetti spent long periods in different continents. Countries like Ethiopia, Guatemala and Japan inspired him to create his Lavon postali (Postal Works) with local stamps. Evoking the passing of time, these pieces were based on the mathematical mutation of the stamps and on the unpredictable adventure of the world’s postal services.

The revolutionary aspect of Boetti’s work was the creation of a paradigm within which to act for the people involved in the creative process, thus radically questioning the role of the artist and the impact of chance, sequence, repetition and authorship in the creation of a work of art. His work and attitude have strongly influenced the next generation of artists in Italy and around the world. Alighiero Boetti died in Rome, in 1994.

ABOUT TORNABUONI ART


Tornabuoni also has a permanent collection of significant works by major Italian artists of the Novecento, such as de Chirico, Morandi, Balla and Severini, as well as international 20th-century avant-garde masters, such as Picasso, Mirò, Kandinsky, Hartung, Poliakoff, Dubuffet, Lam, Matta, Christo, Wesselmet, Warhol and Basquiat. Complementing its focus on Italian art, the Tornabuoni collection also features the work of young contemporary artists such as the Italian artist Francesca Pasquali and the Italy-based Armenian artist Mikayel Ohanjanyan, who won the Golden Lion at the 2015 Venice Biennale and whose work is on show at Yorkshire Sculpture Park since 2017.

Tornabuoni participates in major international art fairs such as the FIAC in Paris, TEFAF in Maastricht, Art Basel, Art Basel Miami Beach, Art Basel Hong Kong, Artefiera in Bologna, Miart in Milan, Frieze Masters in London, Arpenè in Geneva and Artmonaco in Monaco.

The gallery also works closely with museums and institutions. With its experience and knowledge of the work of the artists it represents, the gallery has also established itself as an advisor for both private and public collections.

Press contact
Sarah Greenberg
Director, Evergreen Arts
+44 (0)7866543242
sgreenberg@evergreen-arts.com
www.evergreen-arts.com

Images:
Mettere al mondo il mondo, 1975, blue ballpoint pen on paper laid on canvas, 160 x 347 cm. Courtesy Tornabuoni Art
Alighiero Boetti rolling out Estate ’70 in his studio, 1974 (detail). Photo Antonia Mulas © Antonia Mulas Heirs. All rights reserved
Copertine (Anno 1984), 1984, pencil on paper laid on canvas, 300 x 600 cm (12 elements, each 100 x 150 cm). Courtesy Tornabuoni Art