

“At a time like the present when we are witnessing the explosion of a threat that denies any form of humour, Baj’s great body of work, including *Funeral of the Anarchist Pinelli*, constitutes a firm exhortation to tackle humanity’s mistakes and defects.”
(Gillo Dorfles, *Corriere della Sera*, 30 October 2001)

Enrico Baj

“Art is freedom”

Opening: 7 November at 18.00

Exhibition dates: 8 November 2017 - 27 January 2018

To conclude its 2017 exhibition programme, the Marconi Foundation presents an exhibition dedicated to Enrico Baj, a prominent figure in the contemporary artistic perspective.

Heir to the Surrealist-Dadaist spirit and an experimenter in original techniques and styles, in 1951 he promoted the Nuclear Movement together with Sergio Dangelo. In 1953 he met Asger Jorn, with whom he founded the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, opposing the forced rationalisation and geometrisation of art.

From the 1950s on, he was a figure on the international scene and exhibited regularly, especially in Paris. His debut in the United States came with an exhibition in 1960. In 1967 he began to work with Studio Marconi. André Breton in France invited him to exhibit with the Surrealists and in 1963 wrote an essay about him, published in Rosamond and George Bernier’s magazine *L’oeil*.

Brilliant at collage, which for him had literary origins, Baj applied it in the way of Alfred Jarry, who in his writing “introduced fragments of other texts, using them in contexts that differed from the one they had been written for.”

A distinguishing hallmark of Baj’s work are the *Ladies* and the *Generals*: imaginary characters he created in order to make a barely concealed political critique, later unmistakably evident when he began to create his *Rallies* and *Military Parades*.

A frequent presence at Studio Marconi, Enrico Baj was one of the most represented and beloved artists of his friend and gallerist Giorgio Marconi.

This year’s exhibition of Baj’s work at the Fondazione Marconi, organised in collaboration with the Baj Archive in Vergiate, has a decisively political thrust and emphasises the Milanese artist’s social denouncement of any form of power and oppression.

The show’s itinerary follows a more thematic than chronological order. The first *Meccano* works from the 1960s are followed by a selection of the famous *Generals* and the *Parade of 6* (1964), while the last room on the ground floor hosts the monumental work entitled *Funeral of the Anarchist Pinelli* (1972).

The twelve-metre-long installation was the result of three years’ work, inspired by the death of anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli, who fell from a window at the Milan Police Headquarters, where he was being held under suspicion of having taken part in the massacre at Piazza Fontana. The widely-reported event, which took place in Milan on 15 December 1969, still reverberates in the nation’s memory and remains one of the many unresolved puzzles of that tormented period.

“So, I was asked an image, and an image I have made, so that there will be a lasting testimony to the event, to him, to the violence he suffered, to Licia’s grief, and to Claudia and Silvia.” (Enrico Baj, 1972)

Speaking of the work in his *Automitobiografia*, Baj wrote “More than about his funeral, it was about the man himself, the anarchist who fell to the ground on a hypothetical pavement, in front of a not so hypothetical police headquarters. In the background of the work, a group of anarchists are on the left and a group of police on the right confront each other: the police are wielding coshes and rifles and suppressing the anarchists’ march...”

Partly inspired by Carrà’s *Funeral of the Anarchist Galli*, and partly by Picasso’s *Guernica*, from which Baj took certain figures, revisiting these real characters in a grotesque style, the installation was and still is an emblematic work of courageous civil condemnation at a time where artists were for the most part choosing less compromising themes.

The work was to have been exhibited in the Great Hall of Caryatids, Palazzo Reale, in May 1972, but on the very day of the inauguration, Police Commissioner Luigi Calabresi was assassinated and the exhibition was postponed. Fifty years passed before it was exhibited again in Milan, in the same venue. Obviously, this is not merely a private drama. Baj is portraying a Milan, indeed an entire country, marked by disillusionment after the post-war reconstruction and by the acts of violence that were perpetrated in Italy in those years.

On the first floor, a number of canvases from the cycle *Apocalypse* create a continuity with *Funeral of the Anarchist Pinelli* that is not visual alone. Conceived by Baj as a composite work, almost like a puzzle open to a variable structure, the cycle contains many references and cultural links to Picasso, Arp, Pollock, Seurat and others. Created after Baj's experience with Nuclear painting, it takes its theme from *Civilized Man's Eight Deadly Sins* by Konrad Lorenz and is the mirror of a world in decay, "the revelation of the ethical and aesthetic evil of our society" (Gillo Dorfles 2001).

The exhibition ends on the second floor with a selection of works from the Nuclear period (including *Two Night-time Characters* and *Little Child with his Toys* from 1952), a theme particularly dear to Baj from the outset, because "you cannot remain indifferent to the atomic bomb, perceived as a monstrosity and passed off as a future source of energy."

From nuclear danger to that of militarism, from the abuse of power to the many evils of modern world, all the major fears of our time pass before us in the works on show, some of them sadly all too real at the present time. Moreover, the word "baj", as the artist liked to recall, means "balladeer" in Polish.

It is not by chance that the exhibition opens with *Screaming Personage* (1964), recently exhibited at the Cobra Museum in Amstelveen (Netherlands). Baj's entire oeuvre, in fact, narrates and demonstrates why ultimately, as he used to put it: "Painting is a road – a road I chose – to freedom. It's the practice of freedom."

As usual, the exhibition continues at **Studio Marconi '65** with a selection of graphic works.

Biographical notes

Enrico Baj was born in Milan in 1924. After studying at the Brera Academy, he became one of the leading figures of the Italian avant-garde. Following his first solo exhibition at Galleria San Fedele in Milan in 1951, he founded the Nuclear Painting Movement with Sergio Dangelo.

An heir of the Surrealist-Dadaist spirit and an experimenter of original styles and techniques, Baj created collages and multi-material assemblages using the most diverse materials, among them textiles, haberdashery and upholstery items, mattress covers, medals and metallic fragments, mirrors and coloured glass.

He debuted in New York in 1960 as part of the *Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanters' Domain*, organised by Marcel Duchamp and André Breton at the D'Arcy Galleries.

The following year, his works were included in the historic exhibition *Art of Assemblage* (1961) at the MoMa in New York, curated by William Seitz. In 1964 he was assigned a room at the 22nd Venice Biennale.

From 1967 on, he regularly exhibited at Studio Marconi, and in the 1970s held his first important retrospectives (Palazzo Reale, Milan; Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels).

In 1971, three important exhibitions were held at Palazzo Grassi, Venice; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and the Musée de l'Athénée, Geneva.

Following the artist's death on 16 June 2003, a major retrospective was held involving a number of Milanese galleries: Spazio Oberdan, Brera Academy of Fine Arts, Giò Marconi Gallery and Mudima Foundation.

Some of the most recent exhibitions were held at the following venues: the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome (2001-2002); the Marconi Foundation, Milan (2008, 2009, 2013); Palazzo Reale, Milan (2012); the 55th Venice Biennale and the Arnaldo Pomodoro Foundation, Milan (2013); Giò Marconi Gallery, Milan (2015); the Regional Archaeological Museum, Aosta and the Luxembourg & Dayan Gallery, New York, (2016); the Cobra Museum, Amstelveen, Netherlands (2017).

Works by Enrico Baj have been part of prestigious collective exhibitions: *Italia Pop. Art During the Boom Years*, Fondazione Magnani Rocca, Mamiano di Traversetolo, Parma; *Artists and Stars: The Story of Art During the Boom Years*, Museo del Novecento, Milan; *Cobra: A Great European Vanguard (1948-1951)*, Fondazione Roma, Palazzo Cipolla, Rome (2016); *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965*, Haus der Kunst, Munich (2016-2017).

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