

UMBERTO BIGNARDI

DI NUOVO A ROMA

curated by Lorenzo Madaro



organized in collaboration with the Archivio Umberto Bignardi, Milan

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Galleria Valentina Bonomo, Rome

Umberto Bignardi (Bologna, 1935 – Milan, 2022) spent the key years of his artistic life in Rome. He moved to the city in 1954 to study at the Accademia di Belle Arti, where he met and forged friendships with other young artists of his generation, including Jannis Kounellis and Pino Pascali, and he lived in the capital until the end of the 1960s, before moving to Milan, where he would spend the rest of his life.

A remarkably stimulating artist, both in his work associated with Informalism and in his probing of images and their metamorphoses, the most significant chapter in his oeuvre was connected with Pop art, in the form of drawings and pioneering multimedia pieces.

The first monographic exhibition of his work to be held in a Roman gallery since the 1960s, and the first Roman retrospective since the 1994 exhibition curated by Maurizio Calvesi and Laura Cherubini at the Sapienza University, *Di nuovo a Roma* (Back in Rome) brings Bignardi's work back to the Eternal City with a focus on precisely those crucial years.

Dating from the 1950s and 1960s, the works on show at the Galleria Valentina Bonomo – drawings and large canvases, together with a rare selection of documents – represent an increasingly precious record of the artistic scene in Rome at a time when the city was a fulcrum for the exchange of ideas at an international level, and very much at the cutting edge in comparison with its counterparts.

A pioneer in visual experimentation from the very early sixties onwards, from the end of the 1950s until almost the end of the 1960s Umberto Bignardi was in fact one of the protagonists in what would prove to be a remarkable period for Rome. In 1957, a key encounter took place, when, thanks to Toti Scialoja – his maestro at the academy –, Bignardi was introduced to Cy Twombly, who encouraged him to embrace gesture and signs in his painting, where words and names also began to appear, in what could almost be described as a new alphabet of forms and signs.

In Rome, Bignardi became one of the mainstays of Fabio Sargentini's gallery L'Attico, and was among the artists featured in a now-legendary exhibition mounted by the gallery, *Fuoco, Immagine, Acqua, Terra* (Fire, Image, Water, Earth), along with Mario Schifano, Pino Pascali, Jannis Kounellis and others. On that occasion he presented *Rotor*, which, with a nod to Eadweard Muybridge, involves what would nowadays be called a video-installation, with bodies (Bignardi himself, and friends, some of them nude) that seem to be moving and animated in the exhibition space, triggering audience involvement on a sensory level, but wrapped in silence.

This marked the beginning of a complex artistic project, which over the following years would evolve and extend into all the multimedia work he produced for Olivetti and IBM in his role as art director for major exhibitions, conventions and other events.

A few months after the exhibition at L'Attico, *Rotor* featured in another legendary exhibition, *Arte Povera e Im-Spazio*, at the Galleria Bertesca in Genoa. Presenting *Rotor* on this occasion, Germano Celant described Bignardi as being, like Jannis Kounellis, a "methodical guerrilla".

The exhibition at Galleria Valentina Bonomo is accompanied by a text written by the exhibition's curator, Lorenzo Madaro, a lecturer in the History of Contemporary Art at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera (Milan).

Biographical note

Umberto Bignardi was born in Bologna in 1935. In 1954 he enrolled at the city's Academy of Fine Arts to study Set Design. The following year, he transferred to the academy in Rome, where he continued studying the same subject on a course taught by Toti Scialoja. By the end of the 1950s, his focus was entirely on painting, and in 1959 he exhibited for the first time, in a group show, *Giovane pittura a Roma* (Young Painting in Rome), at Plinio De Martiis's gallery, La Tartaruga. He spent 1960 working on a cycle in mixed media on paper, and in 1961 had his first solo exhibition – again at La Tartaruga – together with Giosetta Fioroni.

Over the course of 1962 he made a series of large collages on canvas, in which areas of paint are combined with photographic images taken from magazines of various kinds. These works were shown in March 1963, in a solo exhibition at La Tartaruga's new premises in Piazza del Popolo.

In 1964 he participated in important group shows at La Tartaruga: one, on 5th March, together with Franco Angeli, Tano Festa, Giosetta Fioroni, Jannis Kounellis, Sergio Lombardo and Renato Mambor; and another in October – the Premio “La Tartaruga” (La Tartaruga prize), together with Angeli, Gianfranco Barruchello, Festa, Fioroni, Lombardo, Kounellis, Mambor, Fabio Mauri, Mimmo Rotella, Pasquale Santoro, Mario Schifano, Cesare Tacchi, Piero Dorazio, Achille Perilli, Antonio Sanfilippo, Peter Saul and Cy Twombly. In 1964 he had his first solo exhibition in Bologna, inaugurated on 27th May at the Galleria De' Foscherari.

1965 was the year in which he began to experiment with graphic/pictorial transpositions of the chronophotographs pioneered by Eadweard Muybridge, and photo-finish images. In 1966 he had his first solo exhibition at Fabio Sargentini's L'Attico gallery in Rome, where, in addition to the results of the previous year's research into images and movement, he also exhibited his “media trovati modificati” (modified found media), namely, a mirror/screen entitled *Fantavisore*, and his *Prismobile*. In 1966 he also exhibited at the 37th edition of the Venice Biennale.

Again in 1966, thanks to his friendship with Alfredo Leonardi, he started to develop an interest in independent film making, and began collaborating with various exponents of the Teatro-Immagine movement. Inspired by these experiences, in 1967 he created *Rotor*, in which a rotating cylindrical screen on which reflective and light-absorbing surfaces alternate is combined with the screening of the film *Motion Vision*, the two elements forming a single work. *Rotor* featured in two important group shows: *Fuoco, Immagine, Acqua, Terra*, once again at the L'Attico gallery in Rome; and *Arte Povera, Im-Spazio*, curated by Germano Celant, at the La Bertesca gallery in Genoa.

In 1967 he designed the stage set and produced the films to be projected for Nanni Balestrini's play *Illuminazione*, in a production directed by Mario Ricci, and he also had two important solo exhibitions: one at Lucio Amelio's Neapolitan gallery, Modern Art Agency, and the other at the Galleria del Deposito in Genoa. 1969 was a pivotal year for Umberto Bignardi: his combined experiences with movement, multimedia art and expanded cinema led to the beginning of a long and fruitful collaboration with the cutting-edge electronics industry. His best-known work from this period is the audiovisual installation *Implicor* (1969-70), a large environment featuring mirrored screens, shown at MoMA in New York in 1972 as part of the exhibition *Italy, The New Domestic Landscape*, and at the Milan Triennale the following year.

As the 1990s got underway, Umberto Bignardi evidently felt a need to reconnect with the world of painting that he had never truly left behind. In 1994 he had an exhibition in Rome's EUR district, and a retrospective of his work, curated by Maurizio Calvesi and Laura Cherubini, was presented at the Museo Laboratorio d'Arte Contemporanea at the Sapienza University in Rome – an exhibition that can be credited with having launched the process of historicising the artist's work. In 1995 he participated in the exhibition *La sindrome di Leonardo, Arte Design in Italia 1940-1975* at the Palazzina di Caccia di Stupinigi, Turin. 1995 also saw the presentation of *Transepocale* at the Neon gallery in Bologna, a performance featuring expanded video, live music and mixed media on paper. In 2015 Bignardi's *Motion Vision* (1966-67) was on show at the Tate Modern in London, and the film was also presented in May 2016 at the Teatro di Palazzo Grassi in Venice, in connection with the exhibition *Imagine. Nuove immagini nell'arte italiana 1960-1969* at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice.

In 2016 Umberto Bignardi was invited to show works in two major retrospective surveys: *Roma Pop City anni'60* at the MACRO in Rome, and *Italia Pop* at the Fondazione Magnani Rocca in Parma. He also had a solo exhibition, *Umberto Bignardi: una stagione Pop 1959-1968*, at the Galleria Bianconi in Milan. Again at the Galleria Bianconi, 2020 saw the exhibition *Umberto Bignardi. Sperimentazioni visuali a Roma 1964-1967*. He died in Milan in 2022.