

"ART & ARTISTS " Londra , febbraio 1968

Technological a



Gallery view of the Gilardi Exhibition held recently at Galerie Ilona Sonnabend, Paris

cadia

HENRY MARTIN

PHOTOGRAPHS OF PIERO Gilardi's work have appeared on several occasions in magazines dedicated to architecture and interior decoration, and on every one of these occasions he has subsequently received letters from department stores and wholesalers wanting information – not having realised that these are works of art – about manufacturer's specifications, norms for gross purchases, sizes of possible shipments, the range of subject matters, and the dimensions in which each might be made available. When people have not been warned beforehand, these objects very easily appear to have been made not for contemplation but for some other kind of use. And the name which Gilardi has given them – he calls them 'nature-carpet' – was created, it would seem, to facilitate such a misunderstanding; it surely does nothing to discourage it. The possibility of this misunderstanding is, in fact, one of the things that these works are about; it is a part of the way in which they function. This name that they bear is but one small part of a whole structure of ambiguities.

The ways in which we ordinarily use a thing are determined by a perception of the category to which it belongs. This is one of the things that Richard Wollheim means when he tells us that all seeing is 'seeing-as'. His statement might well be modified to read that all understanding is 'understanding-as', a principle of which every good industrial designer is highly aware. The difference between good design and bad design is a matter of the quality of the information that an object transmits, about precisely how it is to be understood. A well designed object usually contains whole networks of indications about the character of its proper use. But this is not so with Gilardi; indications about what we should do with his nature-carpet are something that he very carefully avoids. In the sense that no part of his work creates a context that defines it, it is quite entirely abstract. In a catalogue note that Gilardi wrote for his last show at the Galleria Sperone in Milan, he advised the viewers to do with

his work whatever they might happen to desire. 'Cut them into squares, put them onto stands of polished marble, and display them under glass! Have your tailor turn them into cocktail frocks! Take them into the country for ant-free picnics! We can do what we want with these objects since we don't know what they are in the first place. They are not paintings since they are perfectly at home when lying on the floor; they are not sculptures since they are equally at home when hanging flat against a wall. And then again, they are made of synthetic foam rubber, a material that has hardly any associations with fine art at all.

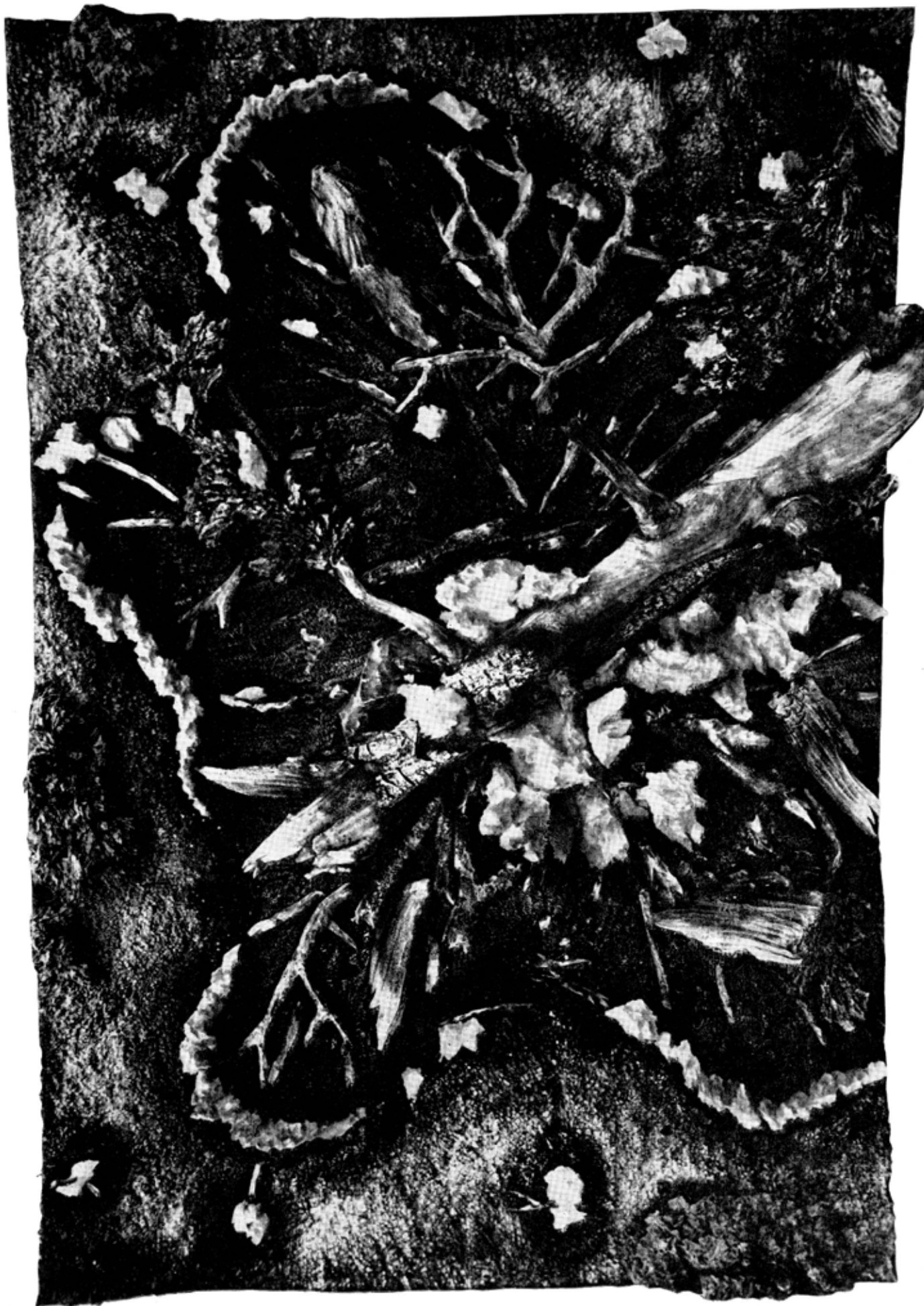
The fact that Gilardi uses this material is of course secondary to the way in which he uses it. Chamberlain too employs foam rubber, and there is no question about his works being sculptures. Among the many artists who now use materials that have no art history, Gilardi is perhaps unique in that he does so without any of the rhetoric of transformation. Gilardi would give the impression of wanting to make a statement *with* materials and not *about* materials. He seems to work with foam rubber in the way that Rembrandt worked with paint. As far as meets the eye, his awareness of his medium is technical rather than metaphorical. Foam rubber belongs to window dressers, to decorators of model-train layouts, and to Cinecittà. Gilardi does nothing to take it away from them. He makes a product with foam rubber that is not at all alien to our notions of what a product in foam rubber ought to be. He simply presents us with this foam rubber world and asks us if we like it. Buyers for department stores naturally say 'yes'.

As we have gone busily about the task of reassessing the world, extending consciousness and preparing the way for a technological fulfilment of the Book of Revelations, Nature has become the great forgotten subject. Romanticism possessed itself of Nature so thoroughly that the baby seemed almost to have become the bathwater.

Nature now belongs to the people who are worried about 'highway beautification' – expensive and profitable projects for lining Route 66 with petunias and weeping-willow trees. When Frank Lloyd Wright began to talk about the possibility of linking business centres to rural living areas in which every house would nestle privately within its own little acre, both the 'good' guys and the 'bad' guys began to call him senile. Progress, no matter who is defining it, has all become a matter of asphalt and steel, stress-resistant plastics and electronic communication. In an attempt to avoid a reactionary involvement with Nature, we have come to prefer no involvement at all. We allow it to be destroyed, both within our cities and within our minds, by the very instruments that we have chosen for our own salvation. The cure is uncannily similar to the illness.

But surely McLuhan should have learned from Jung that the entire history of the race is preserved within the minds of all the individuals who make it up. And Claude Levi-Strauss deftly demonstrates that concepts which cease to be active in a language may still continue to manifest themselves through the changes that their very passage from the language may effect upon the language's structure. The task then is not to change but to re-form consciousness, not to give up the typographic past but rather to incorporate it into the electronic future. Electronic man, if he is to be successful, will carry typographic man around inside him. If electronic man is alienated from typographic man, he will be alienated from himself.

Precisely where Gilardi stands in relationship to all of this is something that his work will not allow us to say. Has he rehabilitated Nature for the rehabilitated man, or is he showing us Nature unredeemed for mankind unredeemed? Is he showing us man's relationship to Nature as it is, or as it will be, as it should be or as it shouldn't be? Is his work naturalism or romance, lyricism or satire? Since it cannot be all



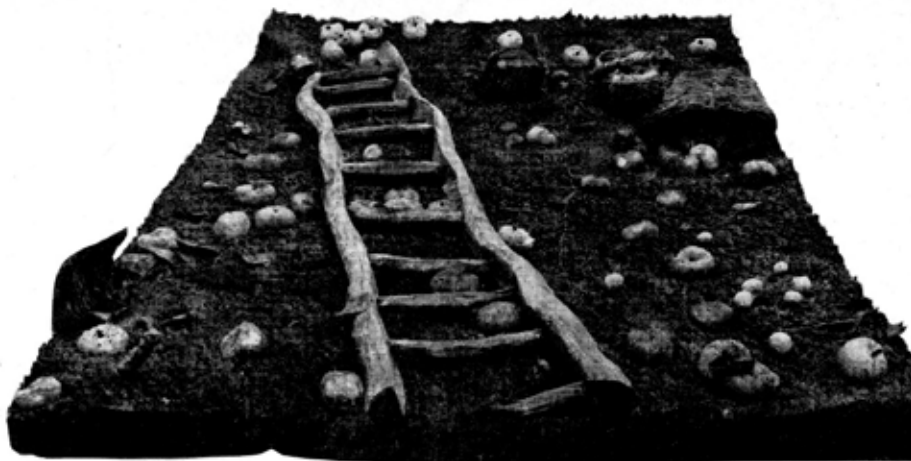
Feu de Forêt 1966 *Foam rubber* 80" x 120"

of these things, perhaps it is none of them. Gilardi has not chosen to solve our problems for us, but simply to show us where some of them are. Part of the power of his work comes from the way in which its meaning and its valence seem continuously to shift – from the way in which it so delicately hangs between the hallucinatory and the real.

The sheer size of Gilardi's work is also important. Since he has always worked on natural scale and without any principles of formal or spatial composition within the individual pieces, there is no logical limit to the proportions that they can assume. Every piece implies the possibility of whole meadows of foam rubber grass dotted with tons of autumn-ripe foam rubber apples; whole mountainsides of foam rubber snow laced with foam rubber snowballs; endless miles of dry stony foam rubber stream-bed flecked with fallen foam rubber leaves. The new pieces, which measure up to five or six metres long, are limited only by the exigencies of the rooms in which they are displayed. Gilardi seems to be saying that our ideas about Nature can be as big as, if not bigger than, we want them to be. The size of the works becomes the emblem of the enormity of his problem's implications.

To exhibit these pieces, Gilardi has struck up the device of coiling them up on large stands made of plexiglass and tubular aluminium. The tail ends of the pieces hang off the stands and sprawl across the floor like yardage unwound from a bolt of cloth. These stands do more, though, than simply facilitate the exhibition of works of a particular dimension; in their own way, they give the works still another dimension. When the nature-carpets are wound upon their stands, more or less rolled up as occasion demands, they have become as large as the imagination will allow. We cannot see where they finish, and if we like we can assume that they do not finish at all. Moreover, the stands, cold and efficient looking, like the trappings of hardware stores, seem to be the last link in a chain of endless factory production, factory production on the scale of the paint company that advertises its desire and its capability to cover the world. Gilardi has discovered that the non-ironic use of a medium can, in itself, be one of the finest of ironies. □

An exhibition of Gilardi's work was recently held at the Galleria Sperone, Milan, and at the Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, Paris. Photographs courtesy of the latter.



Pommes Tombées avec Echelle 1966 Foam rubber 80" x 136"



Bord de la Mer 1966 Foam rubber 80" x 120"