

## GILARDI: TAPPETO- NATURA

Curated by Elena Re  
May 7, 2022 - January 9, 2023

MAGAZZINO  
ITALIAN ART



COLD SPRING, NEW YORK

## Piero Gilardi

MAGAZZINO ITALIAN ART

The playfulness of Piero Gilardi's "Tappeti-Natura" (Nature-Carpets), 1965–, belies the conceptual work and technical skill that went into making them, as well as the complexity of the postwar moment in which the Italian artist's project first emerged. In this first collective showing of the Nature-Carpets in the United States, a dreamlike setting draws viewers into a space in which they move from one disconnected environment to another, traversing sculpted and painted polyurethane streambeds, fields, and seascapes. Several large examples are laid horizontally on the floor, the illusion of their topography subtly broken by a side view of the unpainted material base. Others hang from the walls like paintings, tapestries, or dioramas in a natural-history museum. A verdant spring meadow, *Terreno di montagna* (Mountain Terrain), 1966, tumbles to the floor from a wall-mounted roll, like those from which these deceptively industrial-looking sculptures were once shown and sold by the yard.

After World War II, Italy became an industrial powerhouse; this was especially true of Turin, where Gilardi still lives and works. By the mid-1960s, a handful of emerging artists were experimenting with readily available, nontraditional materials. Gilardi and several colleagues would go on to exhibit together under the curatorial concept *Arte Povera*, owing to the way their artworks rejected "rich" representation in favor of the open-ended, the experiential, and the inhabitable. They gathered at local galleries and regularly at the Piper Club, which Pietro Derossi designed as a sort of theater of possibility in 1966. Gilardi, like Marisa Merz and Michelangelo Pistoletto, debuted new ideas at the short-lived but storied nightspot. There, among brightly colored fiberglass seats, steel-pipe catwalks, and swirling colored lights, several of Gilardi's Nature-Carpets hung on the walls, visually transporting patrons to the sea, a riverbank, or a fecund vegetable patch, if only for the night. Works such as *Mare* (Sea), 1967, replete with whitecaps and seagulls, provided a backdrop to poetry readings, happenings, performances, and, of course, dancing.



Gilardi's sculptures were not just intended for the disco, however. Rather, they were designed to spur reconnection with nature in the home. One example on view here, a subtly colored streambed of smooth gray stones and fallen branches, graced the living room of important Turin gallerist Margherita Stein. The artist had no illusions about the accessibility of high art and design, however, and he worked with manufacturers to create mass-produced furnishings that translated the Nature-Carpets' ludic qualities for middle-class consumers. One can no longer walk, sit, or lie on these original works, but exam-



Piero Gilardi,  
*primavera*  
(nest), 2020,  
polyurethane  
foam,  
5 3/4 x 5 1/2".

shifts adorned with fruit and a pair of enormous Savoy cabbage "earrings" (all deceptively sculpted of polyurethane foam). Gilardi and his colleagues were exploring new ways of living through what they made, and no opportunity or material was left untested.

In 1967, when rolls of Nature-Carpet were first shown in New York, Gilardi was an important connector between international artistic scenes, reporting back on recognized kinship or offering introductions between artists and curators. Perhaps the Nature-Carpets represented a respite from the sociopolitical turmoil of those years. Despite his growing success, the artist stopped making objects around 1968, dedicating himself instead to direct actions aligned with the causes of students and workers, and pursuing utopian artistic projects. More than a dozen works from the mid-1960s, before the temporary caesura of his practice, are shown here together with over twenty visually vibrant recent examples, which demonstrate the continued relevance of the Nature-Carpets. From today's perspective, contemporary pieces such as *Nido di primavera* (Spring Nest), 2020, are at once joyful and elegiac: Four speckled eggs sit in a wispy nest, while one has fallen out onto a bed of young leaves, mushrooms, and acorns. With its juxtaposition of nature and artifice, the work reminds us that such seasonal regeneration may be fleeting in a time of ecological crisis.

—Elizabeth Mangini