

The art of Giorgio Morandi

Games of perception

An artist of still lifes, including his own

A SINGLE twisted sea shell; a tall vase tightly crammed with roses; a bunch of weeds: each was the subject of a still life by Giorgio Morandi, an Italian artist who died in 1964, aged 73. He was also drawn to bleached-out houses in scraggly landscapes and, occasionally, to portraiture. Yet he is known almost exclusively for his luminous, pale paintings of bottles, bowls and jugs. He transformed these seemingly banal, utilitarian objects into works of art.

Morandi created more than a thousand paintings. He also drew and learned how to etch, which he then taught at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Bologna, his hometown. Now 75 of these etchings—more than half of his output—are at the centre of “Lines of Poetry”, an exhibition at the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art in London. The show is timed to celebrate the 15th anniversary of this intimate museum.

The etchings fill two spacious ground-floor galleries. A cosy room upstairs is hung with ten of Morandi’s delicate drawings, all from the Estorick’s collection. White-washed walls and stripped pine floors provide the calm setting for this lovely and instructive show.

The display is chronological. The first work is a 1912 view over a bridge in Bologna; a mass of darkly inked straight lines. Within a decade Morandi became a master of the medium, although not every etching is a masterpiece. The only two portraits in the show, from 1925-26, are tight, even crude. The subjects, a man and woman, manage to be less animated than the shells and flowers of his still lifes.

The many images of bottles and jugs, in rows or huddled in groups, seem like a world unto themselves. Created between 1915 and 1961, they are poetic, amusing and occasionally ominous. “Still Life of Vases on a Table” from 1931 is particularly arresting. At first it looks like a single line of vessels separated by unetched, white spaces. Another look reveals that these are not gaps but another row of vessels. Pleasure replaces perplexity as the viewer joins Morandi in a game of perceptual hide and seek. The exhibition concludes with four watercolours; two created in the last years of his life. Each one has only a few swift, bright strokes of colour, like Technicolour telegrams. But their message is not “less is more”. It is “less is everything”.

Morandi’s spare, dreamlike works helped reinforce the myth that the artist was something of a Zen monk, living at a remove from worldly demands and temptations. Certain facts of his life would seem to support this view. From the age of 19 until his death, he lived in the same Bologna flat, often with his three sisters. He did not go abroad until he was in his 60s, and then not far. He and his friends encouraged the belief that the artist shunned society, abhorred fame and had nothing to do with politics. Like some of Morandi’s etchings, this was a game; one that had the benefit of boosting sales.

Posthumous accounts of his life based on previously unknown material exploded this myth. Morandi—a handsome if shy man with a winning smile, a quick wit and a towering stature—was formidably well connected with Italy’s cultural leaders before, during and after the fascist decades. He first exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1928, and Mussolini was a proud owner of several of his etchings. Later, as ever more intellectuals and the artsy rich wanted his work, from Federico Fellini to Sophia Loren, Morandi would pick and choose who could own one and which work they could have.

Giorgio Morandi was not a simple soul and he did not make simple art. He altered the colours of bottles, bowls and vases before arranging his still lifes. He played with shadows, scale and light. In a 1955 radio interview he explained: “I want to communicate those images and feelings that the natural world awakens in us.” This he achieved, often brilliantly. Doubts may remain about the facts of his life, but these etchings, like his paintings, are proof of his artistic success. ■

New fiction

The self stripped

How Should a Person Be? By Sheila Heti. Henry Holt; 306 pages; \$25. Harvill Secker; £16.99

THE confessional tale of depravity redeemed goes back at least to St Augustine. Sheila Heti, a Canadian writer, plays with this legacy in “How Should a Person Be?” out now in Britain following a rapturous reception in America. A novel masquerading as memoir, it is a sharp and unsentimental chronicle of what it is like to be 20-something now.

The story spans a year in the life of Sheila, a blocked playwright in Toronto. She is recently divorced and unable to finish a commissioned play. Convinced that other people “do not feel like they were raised by wolves”, Sheila sets out to probe the “ugliness” she feels inside. She feels she should seek fame, yet she finds relief shampooing clients in a hair salon. “It was work I could believe in: making people look and feel their best.” The flat tone is at once sincere and disingenuous: Ms Heti’s deadpan, naked voice is what makes Sheila’s journey so engaging.

Ms Heti also captures the malaise of young, creative types. Again and again Sheila asks if making art is merely narcissistic. But just as self-absorption threatens to swamp the tale, a crisis causes her to look squarely at her own sexual and debased life. Her friendship with Margaux, a painter, provides redemption of a kind. Throughout, the reader is beguiled by blunt, sly observations: “Smiling only encourages men to bore you and waste your time.” “The world is full to brimming with its own shit. A little more from me won’t even make a difference.”

Written sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, this novel can make for uncomfortable reading. Yet Ms Heti’s mordant take on modernity encourages introspection. It is easy to see why a book on the anxiety of celebrity has turned the author into one herself.



Still yet vital