

Virtues of restraint

The apparent simplicity of Giorgio Morandi's work resonates in austere times. By Jackie Wullschlager

Utter bore, or lyricist of everyday rapture? Mundane or sublime? Repressed or visionary? There are no half-way responses to Giorgio Morandi, the 20th-century painter who spent a lifetime depicting arrangements of bottles on a shelf in subdued hues, never left Italy, and shunned fame in favour of a reclusive existence with his three unmarried sisters in Bologna.

Morandi, nicknamed "The Monk" at home, is one of a handful of contemplative, severe, late modernists, working in seclusion, who have garnered sudden interest, including record prices and a flurry of international museum shows, in the 21st century. American abstract minimalist Agnes Martin and Swiss sculptor Hans

Josephsohn are further examples. One reason must be that, in times of austerity, their stillness, restraint and apparent simplicity resound against the sensory overload and hype of the current art world. In Morandi's case, another is the heroic efforts of the Estorick Collection which, since its launch in 1998, has championed the artist with four exhibitions.

The most original of them, *Giorgio Morandi: Lines of Poetry*, opened this week to celebrate the Estorick's 15th anniversary, and focuses on etchings and watercolours. The first surprise is that these represent landscapes as well as the more familiar still lifes. The second is that the master of painterly understatement demonstrates more variety and experimentation in black and white than in colour.

Morandi taught himself etching by studying Rembrandt. At times he achieves dusky, velvety effects – "Still Life with Drapery", where dark objects set on a tumbling white/grey cloth fight for equilibrium; "Garden at Via Fondazza", with its striking olive tree and neat row of flower pots, more sensuous than anything in his painting. He can be stark and spare, or dynamic: a jagged white streak delineates a rushing river by its densely cross-hatched banks, in the compelling "Savona Landscape". And the vessels in "Still Life of Vases on a Table" are simply whitened-out reverse-silhouettes, offset by the intersecting meshes of fine grey lines, at precisely graduated thicknesses, which form their shadows.

"Nothing is more abstract than reality," Morandi declared. The restrictions of monochrome suited him: in the relationships between objects, and between objects and light, he studied not only beauty in small things but the basic structure of the world. "It takes me weeks to make up my mind which group of bottles will go well with a particular coloured tablecloth. Then weeks thinking about the bottles themselves, and yet often, I still go wrong with the spaces. Perhaps I work too fast," he explained.

The results here are subtle chiaroscuro dramas that force a slowing down of perception. In each intensely considered composition light impregnates, suffuses and radiates out of

objects that seem to vibrate from within. Their aura and essence is defined by light but, positioned against featureless backdrops, they are made to seem oddly unreal by it. Morandi was only briefly connected with the *pittura metafisica* of his compatriot Giorgio de Chirico but the etchings pronounce him a metaphysician through and through.

Like de Chirico, and his other direct contemporaries, futurists Umberto Boccioni and Gino Severini, Morandi was in long, Oedipal debate with the classicism that weighed down cultural tradition in early 20th-century Italy. The mood of oppression and claustrophobia in de Chirico and Morandi, and the futurists' expressions of destructive energy and furious movement, are each responses; both developed formally from the late 19th-century experiments of Cézanne and the *École de Paris* in the 1900s.

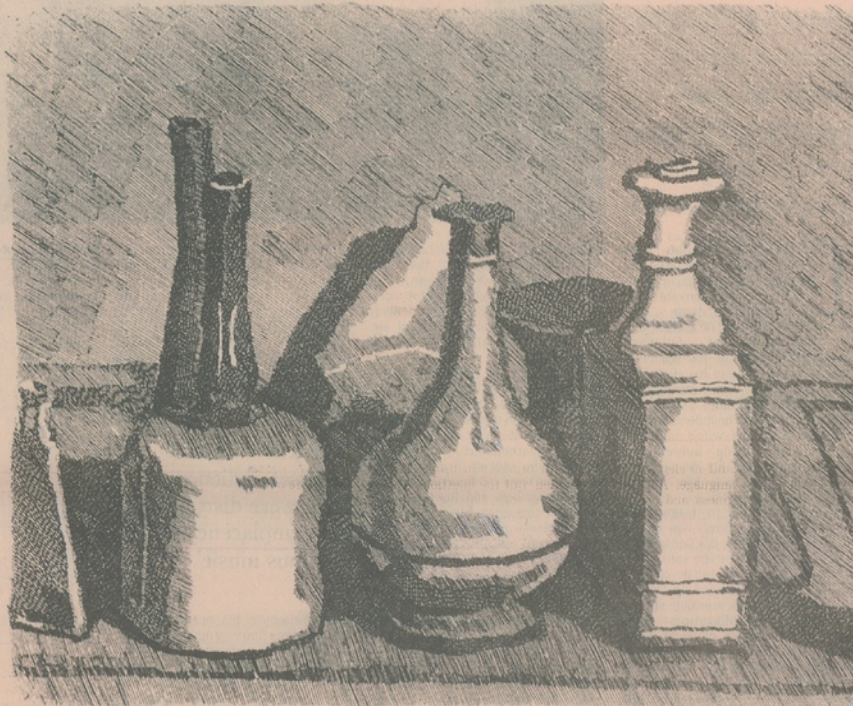
Most Morandi shows are too big; this well-edited, chronological exhibition perfectly distils the story of the

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artist's development, beginning with his devotion to Cézanne. In the initial etchings from 1912-13 such as "The Bridge over the Savena in Bologna", featuring white paths criss-crossing the barren hills bordering Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany beneath an empty sky, Cézanne's build-up of forms is clearly the model.

A cubist phase follows in "Still Life with Bottles and Pitcher" (1915), but by 1921 three key yet diverse works establish Morandi's distinctive compressed compositions, with objects forced into cramped spaces, and vertical motifs always evoking the classical column.

"Tennis Court at the Giardini Margherita" features poplars lined up behind a delicate filigree veil, suggestive of the nets of the game. Contrasting zones of pure white with thickly etched lines, "Landscape (The Chimneys of the Arsenal on the Outskirts of Bologna)" is an industrial vista whose horizon is broken up by factory stacks surging over suburban roofs. In the exquisite "Still Life with Basket of Bread" a wide bottle, squat vase and



Two still lifes by Giorgio Morandi: an etching from 1963 (top) and a watercolour from 1962

open tin crowd against the basket in a harmony of greys, each object endowed almost with human personality – simple, mysterious, stoic – but blended in a diaphanous atmosphere.

The next decade saw the silvery-toned masterpieces "Grizzana Landscape, the Lane" (1931), "Budding Roses in a Vase" (1931) and "Large Still Life with Coffee Pot" (1933). Subsequent wartime pieces are as sombre as Picasso's 1940s grisaille still lifes: regimented pitchers and bottles, often cropped, huddle together within the magic circle of their own world that, nevertheless, inescapably reflects the privations, cold, fear, of life during the second world war.

It is moving to see the return of Cézanne's influence in the final etchings here from the 1950s, still lifes in which objects are reduced to near-abstract rendering of cylinder, cone, sphere. Like the Aix painter, Morandi favoured in old age the pared-down yet spontaneous medium of watercolour. A highlight here is a group of rarely displayed watercolours – fragile outlines bathed in shadow and light, just discernible as landscapes in the interweaving of woody green masses and a chimney in "Landscape (Levico)", and abstract blocks shot through with white in "Landscape (House in Ruins)" from 1957-8, and as ghostly, luminous remnants of images of vases and vessels, dashed with soft colour, in the 1960s still lifes.

Verging on depictions of nothingness, these suggest the detachment of old age but also Morandi's continuing engagement with metaphysical enquiry: a marvellous conclusion to a revelatory show.

'Giorgio Morandi: Lines of Poetry', Estorick Collection, London, to April 7
www.estorickcollection.com