Down to Earth: Piero Gilardi at Magazzino Italian Art

By Louis Bury
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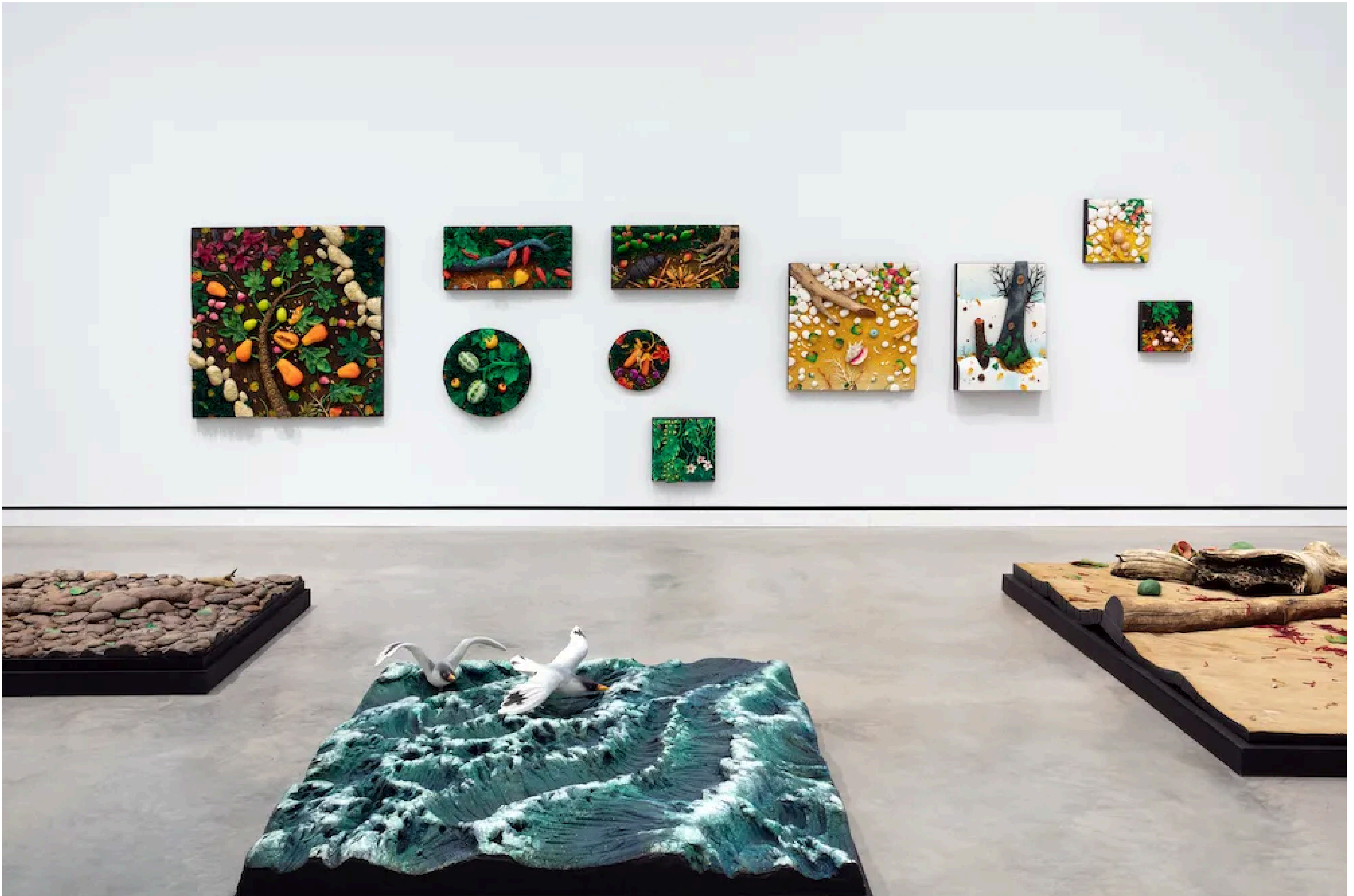
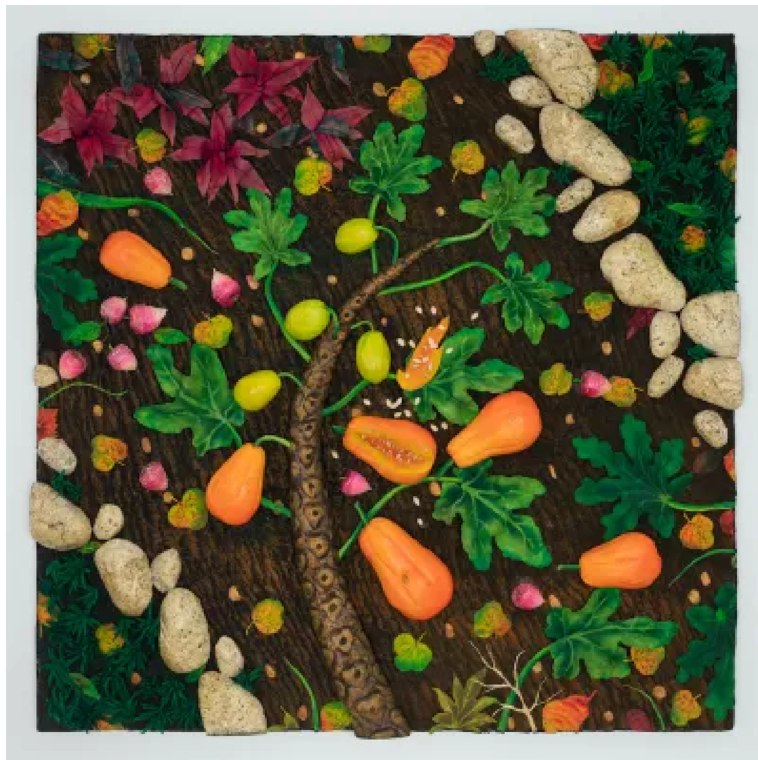


View of Piero Gilardi's exhibition "Tappeto-Natura" at Magazzino Italian Art, 2022.
Photo Marco Anelli/Tommaso Sacconi

Piero Gilardi (https://www.artnews.com/t/piero-gilardi/)'s signature "nature carpets" don't appear credibly natural or carpet-like, which is part of their quirky charm. The artworks are sizable rectangles of polyurethane foam, into which the artist has carved intricate, earthy tableaux before saturating them with synthetic pigments, and sometimes appending other, smaller foam sculptures. The works

depict contoured segments of land or, in a few cases, sea: a beach strewn with driftwood and lily pads; a mossy forest trail marked by felled tree branches; roiling ocean water with seagulls flying close to the surface. In "Tappeto-Natura" at **Magazzino Italian Art (https://www.artnews.com/t/magazzino-italian-art/)**, the artist's first museum exhibition in the United States, curated by Elena Re, the twenty-five selections turn the gallery floor and walls into a cornucopia of tiled terrain.

Take *Sassi* (Rocks, 1967), an approximately five-foot-square nature carpet whose bumpy surface was sculpted to appear as though covered in stones. Each of its hundreds of stones is rendered in realistic detail, with pocked and craggy textures, and blotchy coloration. Yet the piece as a whole creates the impression of artifice, given the abrupt contrast between its borders and the surrounding floor. It's as though the artwork were an excerpt or quote from nature, a peculiar cross between a fabric swatch at a furniture store and a diorama at a natural history museum.



Piero Gilardi, *Papaya e pitaja*, 2018, polyurethane foam, 59 by 59 by 5⅞ inches.

Photo Marco Anelli

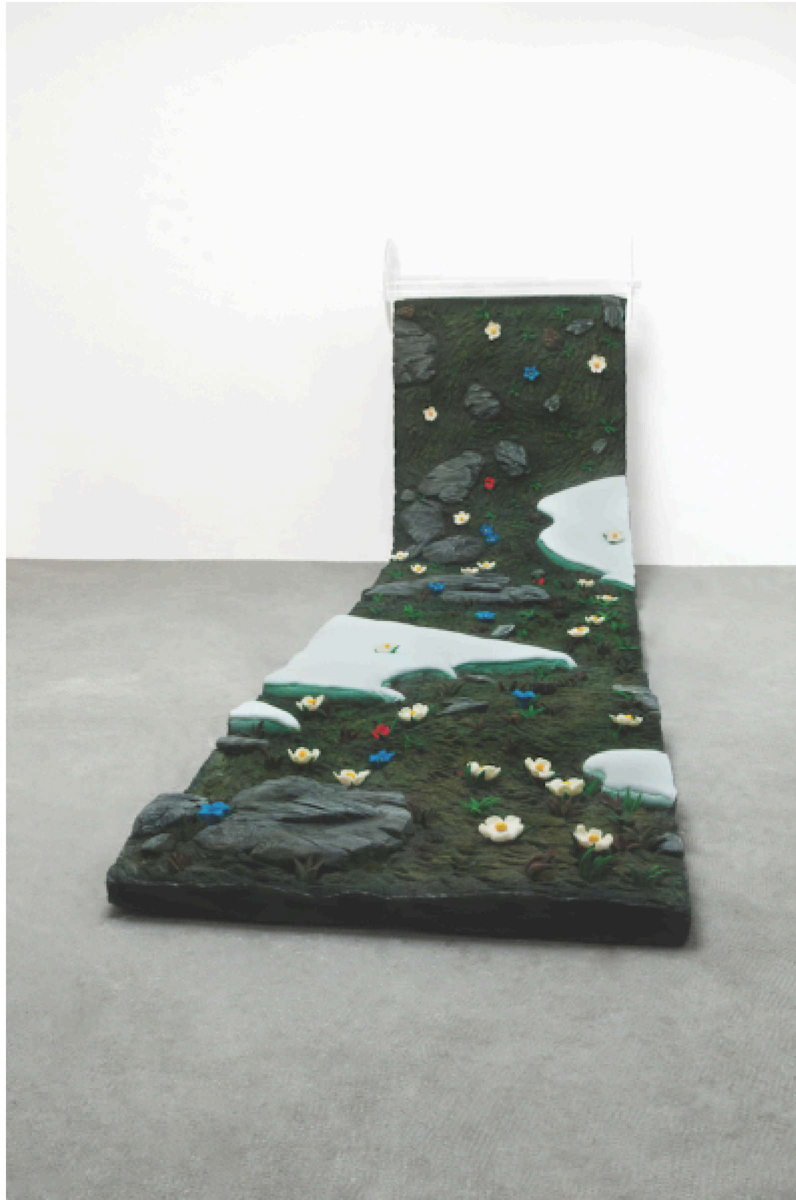
Piero Gilardi, *Mais*, 1966, polyurethane foam, 59 by 59 inches.

Biasutti & Biasutti, Archivio Piero Gilardi, Turin

Whereas *Sassi*'s fake stones appear credible, most of Gilardi's nature carpets contain fanciful touches. *Mais* (Corn, 1966) depicts dozens of cartoonishly angular corn cobs, all in carrot orange, alongside a crude wooden rake. *Papaya e pitaja* (Papaya and Pitaya, 2018) centers around a papaya tree whose shrunken proportions, splayed fruit growth, and spread across the floor (rather than upright) are unnatural. The composition, warped to fit the nature carpet format, eschews the pretense of verisimilitude. This tendency is most pronounced in the nature carpets fabricated between 2018 and 2020, which are grouped together on one wall at Magazzino and whose bright, tropical environs celebrate their own artifice more than their predecessors. The decision to display these works on the wall may seem strange but isn't new: not long after Gilardi began to make nature carpets in the 1960s, they became collector's items too precious to subject to the wear and tear of an actual carpet.

Gilardi intended the nature carpets to be usable interior design pieces that he believed could break down barriers between art and life. This gesture can be understood as a precursor to immersive and relational aesthetics, influenced by the artist's ties to the incipient Arte Povera movement. Gilardi's decision to work with

polyurethane—a synthetic that became commercially available in the 1950s, and used in such things as sofas and car seats—likewise embraces the movement's preoccupation with quotidian materials that complicate the nature-culture binary. Many of the nature carpets were originally rolled up on large spools and sold by the yard, like industrial goods: one example, *Terreno di montagna* (Mountain Terrain, 1966), stretches across Magazzino's floor like a stuck-out tongue.



Piero Gilardi, *Terreno di montagna* 1967, polyurethane foam, 39⅜ by 157½ by 5⅞ inches; at Magazzino Italian Art.

Photo Leo Gilardi, Fondazione Centro Studi Piero Gilardi, Turin

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Though the nature carpets garnered considerable, immediate recognition, Gilardi's aesthetic and political concerns with anti-capitalist collectivity led him to

withdraw from mainstream art-making by the early 1970s. During the next decade, he directed his energies toward writing and a wide range of artistically inflected civic activism, from street theater to art therapy for psychiatric patients to factory demonstrations and nuclear protests in Italy to community outreach programs in Africa and the Americas. When Gilardi resumed more institutionally recognizable art practices in the early 1980s, he pursued interactive new media initiatives such as the unrealized Ixiana Project, a plan for an immersive artistic-technological environment in Paris's Parc de la Villette. In the 2000s, these efforts culminated in Turin's Parco Arte Vivente, or Living Art Park, a collaborative open-air exhibition site initiated by Gilardi, whose grassy central knoll—a compound containing a museum and laboratory focused on bio art—looks like an earthwork nestled in an urban neighborhood.

One question the exhibition might prompt is why Gilardi intermittently resumed making new nature carpets throughout his career, given his environmentalist leanings. The reprises feel aesthetically redundant and materially wasteful. Yet in interviews, Gilardi has been refreshingly honest about how periodically producing new nature carpets has enabled him to finance the more idealistic aspects of his practice. The shifts in the carpets' appearance and usage—from low-key to over-the-top artifice; from utilitarian to decorative objects—make the most sense when understood in the context of the artist's career.

With the benefit of hindsight, it's easy to see that the nature carpets were Gilardi's probing first steps toward a more expansive vision of what art can be and do. The paradox is that, in a career dedicated to moving beyond visual art's conventional values and uses, the carpets bear the closest resemblance to traditional artistic output, and thus more readily lend themselves to museum display than the less object-focused aspects of his practice. This makes the exhibition an effective, if necessarily partial, introduction to an underappreciated artist: an incitement for visitors to see and learn more about an oeuvre whose ambitions are starry-eyed even as its politics remain down-to-earth.

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