

Mario Merz

(Milan, 1925 – 2003)

Mario Merz's work moves freely between the fields of culture and nature, which the artist considered indistinguishable.

The formal rules that provide the basis for his sculptures, environmental works, paintings, and a vast production of drawings possess the same laws of natural growth as those of the plant and animal kingdoms, but they are associated with a reverberation of images and forms from our cultural origins.

The igloo, the hemispherical form that Merz began working with beginning in 1967, is a primary example of these images. The artist wrote, significantly in upper case letters, IGLOO – CASA (igloo – house), thus summarizing the archetypical nature of his chosen form. The hemisphere, whose measurements are derived from those of a seated man, is the elementary shelter for a body, isolated from the outside like an atom autonomously dislocated in space, but it is also a living nucleus of cosmic perception.

Igloo con albero (Igloo with Tree), 1968-69, still has the anthropomorphic proportions of Merz's early igloos and an axis made from a tree branch, imbued to its core with the idea of concentric growth. But the branch is also the source of propagational thrust that moves upward and outward toward the surrounding space, as if it might contain within itself an echo of the terrestrial axis.

The igloo and snail are both images of propagation, living forms of the law of development from which the Fibonacci number series is obtained. This connection seems clear, for the form of the igloo, in *Fibonacci Unit*, 1970, and, for the snail, in a video dating from the same year, shot with Gerry Schum for the *Identifications* project.

The animal element of the snail will continue to appear in an original bestiary, compiled halfway between an imaginary and a natural universe. As the artist emphasized, these are not everyday animals, found on the street, or domestic animals. Merz paints them isolated, suspended in the white space of the canvas, like heraldic animals that often stand out on flags and coats of arms. Some of these animals appeared among typical specimens in cabinets of curiosities. Merz's crocodile seems to have descended from the vault of a Gothic cathedral, where it used to be hung when churches were still museums of wonders and troves of information. *Animale terribile (Terrifying Animal)*, 1981, represents something similar to many rhinoceroses that Merz has painted, another species of fauna considered an object of wonder in centuries past. (EV)