
Joan Rom

E . R . T .

English



Joan Rom. Monument a peixos morts, 1986
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Born in 1954, Joan Rom studied fine art at the University of Barcelona. His artistic training and early work coincided with an intense period of cultural blossoming throughout Spain, mainly as a result of the end of Franco's dictatorship and the newly found political and social freedoms. The country opened up to what was happening in the rest of Europe and in the United States, where creative energy sparked far-reaching artistic movements.

At first he worked with paint but later focused on sculpture and pictorial forms made using materials he picked up, such as bones, pieces of glass, rubber and wool, all of which he saw as "less showy than other materials". Joan Rom's objects are made without any predetermined method and it is often the objects themselves that shape the creative process and the final form the piece takes.

This exhibition shows some fifty pieces, including sculptures, installations, collages, drawings and photographs, made between 1986 and 1996. Joan Rom's creative process sprouts from the artist's wanderings and he finds many of the materials he uses as he walks

through rural and industrial areas near Mont-roig del Camp, where he used to have a studio. Roaming freely, he strolls without heading anywhere in particular, an approach which gives his work a certain degree of freedom and flexibility. Chance plays a major role in the way he creates his work and collects his materials, which include brass, glass, plastic, leather, lead, aluminium, copper, rubber and fertiliser bags. The improvisation that comes with the random nature of this process, combined with the artist's visual memory, leads to a process that transforms everything that Joan Rom looks for, finds, selects and puts together.

The wall installations clearly show a game between spontaneity and premeditation. These assemblages of different materials are put together arbitrarily and apparently without much input from the artist. The point, however, lies in the rereading of the resulting objects and the range of veiled realities that become possibilities by harmonising art, nature and civilisation.

Most of his pieces are made with bits of materials that once had a different use from the one the artist has poetically given them – they are usually abandoned objects thrown away as waste. Following an industrial logic, these natural materials had been turned partially or wholly into useful products for consumption. Rom dissects these once everyday objects (now waste) and alters them so that each spectator can make their own reading.

Joan Rom's work doesn't seem to have a precise interpretation, but rather hovers somewhere between what we see and what we think, the visible and the invisible, the concrete and the abstract. In other words, its meaning lies in a blurred space that differs from both the form of the piece and the spectator's gaze, full of external influences. The answer can be found on the edges the artist talks of: "The possibility of creating meaning is often found not in the centre of what is laid out before us, but on the rough edges, on the line between the object and the world, in the place where the visual sinks down to the depths."

Joan Rom's works are self-referential, a characteristic that became popular in Minimal art, which emerged in the United States in the 1960s. This movement eschewed the representational function that art had had previously, and which was evident in traditional figurative art, and it avoided giving pieces an ideological content by using volumes, materials and structures that were free from any preconceived association. It characteristically reduced works to the bare essentials by making sparse use of languages and using elementary geometries. This movement kept a critical distance from American Abstract Expressionism, which was led by artists keen to express their subjectivity, their feelings and their subconscious.

In Minimal art, the artist's personal stamp fades in the face of the artistic object itself (the material it is made of, its dimensions and its colour) and its relationship with both the space it finds itself in – as in the case of land art – and the spectator. In this regard, Joan Rom avoids showy colours and shapes and creates his pieces subtly, letting them climb infinitely up the walls or rest on the floor like a flock of docile living beings.

Another movement emerged alongside Minimal art: Arte Povera, which also proposed that art was to be found in objects and behaviour, as in the case of the performances its followers carried out, rooted in the presence of an audience and seeking interaction with them. Here, however, artists distanced themselves from the industrial world, both in the kinds of material they used and in the way they used them, shunning the cold minimalist world.

The Arte Povera movement started in Italy in the late 1960s. The term was coined by Germano Celant in 1967 and its leading practitioners included Alighiero Boetti, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis, Emilio Prini and Pino Pascali, among others. These artists used natural or manufactured found objects such as paper, string, clothes, stones and earth, eager to break the dichotomy between art and life.

We also find a connection between Joan Rom and some contemporary British sculptors such as Bill Woodrow, Eduardo Paolozzi, Michael Craig-Martin and Tony Cragg, who used waste materials and found objects in the 1970s and 1980s. These artists worked with stereotypical images and objects that were familiar to spectators and

thus helped forge ties with the consumer-centred, materialist world of the time. Theirs was mostly a critique of the values of contemporary society, supposedly linked to the welfare state, but clearly looking somewhat ragged. Their method involved scouring the city for industrially produced objects and arranging them to set out a new vision of the urban and cultural landscape.

Finally, we should stress that Rom's work has a dual relationship with the temporary nature of time. The fact that the artist uses bits of materials that were once useful leads us to the specific moment in time when the object was used, and which spectators might recall, such as the wool that was used to stuff mattresses. This contrasts with a timelessness arising from the fact that the material has been abandoned, altered and reused by the artist and has ultimately taken on a fresh independence. However, the ephemeral aspect of some of the materials that decompose over time, such as leather and wool, contrasts paradoxically with the durability of the pieces themselves.

Joan Rom. E.R.T.

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Opening Hours

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