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In Paris, Art That Traverses Dimensions

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Mario Ceroli's 1992 piece "La Vague."

Tomabuoni Art

For lovers of contemporary art a must-see show of the Italian Arte Povera sculptor Mario Ceroli is on view at the Tornabuoni Gallery on the upscale Avenue Matignon.

"Mario Ceroli: The Pope of Arte Povera," which follows museum-quality major retrospectives of Lucio Fontana and Alighiero Boetti at the gallery (16, Avenue Matignon; 33-1-53-53-51-51; tornabuoniart.fr), runs through Dec. 8.

The idiosyncratic Mr. Ceroli is one of the least known but most influential artists of the Italian post-war scene. The 60 pieces in this retrospective overview of his work, dating from the 1960s to today, show why.

His signature style creates strikingly monumental images that begin as two-dimensional silhouettes, but go beyond even three dimensions: the fourth dimension — time — is represented by painstakingly built-up layers, which act like a still representation of sequenced movie frames.

At the entrance to the gallery an inscrutable burka-clad figure, composed of sliced strips of white painted wood, stands guard, watching the visitor through hidden eyes. The piece, part of the artist's "Taliban" series, breathes mystery. Mr. Ceroli is a virtuoso craftsman but not always a welcoming artist.

Yet once you get inside, he opens up. A nine-foot-long wave unfolds in a dynamic swirl of movement while a layered silhouette, "The Diver," plunges gracefully into infinity.

The materials of choice are usually Russian pinewood, sometimes burnt, and glass and lead. But the medium isn't what matters. "It's not about the exaltation of the material — the material isn't important, it is a convention," said Enrico Crispolti, the curator of the exhibition, "it's the image that is most important."

In that sense, Mr. Ceroli lies outside the Arte Povera movement — a radical and intellectual philosophy focused on using basic and unconventional materials to challenge and deconstruct conceptions of space and matter. Mr. Ceroli has a different story to tell, Mr. Crispolti said. He is an anti-materialist but not a deconstructionist.

"He subverts the classical idea of sculpture and constructs a different kind of four-dimensionality through the idea of a superimposition of sliced silhouettes," Mr. Crispolti said.