Morandi's Subtle Spectacle

By LANCE ESPLUND | September 18, 2008

The Italian artist Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964), the subject of a long-awaited and absolutely out-of-this-world retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is a painter who, especially in his small flower paintings and still lifes — façade-like clusters of crockery, tins, bowls, bottles, boxes, and vases — synthesized an array of disparate approaches, creating pictures mysterious, unique, and wholly modern.

Metropolitan Museum of Art

Giorgio Morandi, 'Paesaggio' (1935).

Morandi was influenced by the rich, close range of browns, creams, and grays, as well as the weird spatial shifts, of early Cubist still lifes: the soulful dislocation of the Metaphysical cityscapes of de Chirico, the humble-yet-miraculous means of Chardin, the geometric precision of Piero, and the parched, sun-drenched ruins of classical antiquity. Morandi looked back, through the landscapes of Cézanne and Corot, to the frescos of Giotto, Masaccio, and Pompeii. He combined all of these influences, stirring them, bringing them to a simmer, creating monumental works built up out of subtlety upon subtlety.

Morandi paints a small bouquet of roses in a vase or a few objects on a table. His pictures have the handheld scale of devotional works. He infuses his objects with an elegiac-yet-unassuming, almost-seismic weight. Plainspoken yet never simplistic, Morandi approaches form, air, and space with an intimacy not seen since Chardin. In thin, washy surfaces, he creates a veiled, buttery light, through which we can sense the entire history of art.

In the beautiful "Roses" (1917), a pink, white, and gray-blue composition, the vase — heraldic, hieratic, suggesting medieval insignia and Romanesque carving — feels split open, as if the painter had vivisected his subject. And the roses, as if sculpted, suggest viscera, a nest of broken eggshells, and baby birds. Yet we can also sense in this work his love of Masaccio and of Picasso's Rose period.

The Met's elegant exhibition is the largest to date, and the first ever to be mounted in this country. The show, made up of some 110 paintings, drawings, watercolors, and etchings, is organized by the director of the Fondazione Roberto Longhi in Florence, Italy, Maria Cristina Bandera, and the director of New York's Italian Cultural Institute, Renato Miracco. It is supervised at the Met by Laurence Kanter, with assistance from Neville Rowley and Lesley Schorpp. And it is a knockout. Arranged chronologically and thematically in the lower level of the Met's Robert Lehman Wing, the show provides a circular survey in which Morandi's final works blend into his earliest works — and you are encouraged to start all over again.

At the Met, we are introduced to Morandi's early paintings — compositions in the manner of his influences. But I can sense in the first galleries that Morandi, rather than mimicking his loves, is taking them to heart — synthesizing them — as he is finding his hand as a painter. The show offers us a range of gorgeous and unusual landscapes (some of them masterpieces), a handful of self-portraits, spare watercolors that feel Chinese, and groupings of amazing etchings in which still-life objects, built out of crisscrossing lines, vibrate like plucked strings. But the real meat of the show is the artist's flower paintings and still lifes.

Cézanne, one of Morandi's chief influences, once remarked that he could paint the same motif for his entire life — that all he needed to do was to move an inch to the left or the right, and be offered an entirely new composition. Morandi, who approached the same forms and motifs for decades, more than any other artist took Cézanne's adage to heart. By the 1920s, Morandi had already established his voice, and he investigated his signature groupings of objects fully throughout his career as a painter.

Morandi explores the same bottles and vases and boxes and bowls, with love and innocence and an unceasing sense of wonder. He never repeats himself. His forms feel discovered or unearthed, as if they were the bones, souls, or vestiges of things — as if they were emissaries for everyday objects. They appear to have all been carved out of the same quivering, clay-like material. Wood is not wood; glass is not glass; seashell, ceramic, fruit, and flower are not those things. They exist somewhere amongst all of these substances — a material unique to Morandi.

In this sense, Morandi, unlike Chardin, is not interested in conveying the particular qualities of glass, velvet, plum, or lemon. His oranges, like the skin in his self-portraits, are smooth as polished wood. His restless objects appear still to be moving; to be forming; to be undecided about their shape, volume, contour, and substance. Wall planes, which move ever forward, sometimes compress his still life objects into silhouette and shadow, if not void. Like his bottles, pitchers, and boxes, wall and table planes fluctuate between flatness and roundness, convexity and concavity, opacity and translucency, object and air.

People often talk about the quietude of Morandi (and he is said to be the father of Minimalism), probably because his pictures are small, his forms are few, and his colors are often close in tone and hue. But I have never felt that Morandi's art was anything but loud and clear. His paintings, though economical and spare, are filled with disquietude and anxiety — the anxiety of solitude.

Morandi's still lifes arrive at a kind of Asian distillation, in which objects are pared down to essences. It could be said that he neutralizes the world — that he denatures nature. Focusing on universal relationships, Morandi generalizes his forms into something akin to chess pieces. And he stresses the inner life of objects, and of the game, rather than particularities like the fuzzy skin of a peach. But this does not mean that his paintings are not each infused with a different light, and that the interactions among his forms are not heart-stopping and unique. His work — in which an acidic lemon-ocher drenches a scene like miasma, or with the light of an annunciation; in which dark, searching contours knife their way between forms, forever uniting as they divide them, and in which vases, twisted, knotted, and incised by their fluting, can feel as if they were being strangled by a boa constrictor — is anything but Minimal.

Morandi's still-life forms, though solid and forceful, preserve their desire to be malleable. Contours wrestle, explore, crawl, and turn. His forms remain simple objects on a table but they are human in nature. Overlapping objects, as if familial, are born of one another. They feel surprised by their shapes and they entwine like lovers. Objects appear to shift in their skins — as if surfaces were uncomfortable and could be shed. At times, the neck of a bottle or a vase rides its body like a child on his parent's shoulders. And straddled by long horizon lines, forms can feel submerged, as if struggling at the surface for air.

In these small, humble paintings, it is as if Morandi were presenting us with the secret of life or inwardness of forms — as if those forms had turned their backs on us or were disrobing, laying themselves bare. Morandi's still lifes have arrived not seemingly on a table but in a middle ground — an arena, in both substance and space, somewhere between the everyday and the eternal.