Text by Martina Corgnati

Among hooks and curved lines

Finding oneself immersed in Gillo Dorfles' world today feels like offering your eyes a kind of healing balm — one made of ingredients that art, communication, and culture at large seem to have mostly lost: irony, above all; lightness; intelligence; and taste — a taste that moves gracefully between sharp wit and refined discretion, like that of an old 19th-century salon.

Among hooks and curved lines, in Dorfles' drawings, paintings, ceramics, and sculptures — born from different moods and thoughts, often years apart and many of them unseen until today — a world of hybrid figures lurks. There are amoebic jugglers, elegant gentlemen with bow ties, even an irreverent portrait of Sigmund Freud. Plump, long-eared couples appear too, always in motion, always fluid. They seem ready to dissolve at any moment back into the pure play of lines and childlike arabesques from which they had just emerged — seemingly only a moment before.

As both a great theorist and an artist, Dorfles spent his life practicing a kind of deliberate and insightful "lateral thinking." He stood apart from conformity, as well as from academic and disciplinary rules. This allowed him not only extraordinary critical insights but also the development of a unique style — a visual language that, in my view, should never be separated from the theoretical, philosophical, and even journalistic work of Dorfles the critic. They are two complementary parts, each essential to the other.

His ability to anticipate — in art and in thought — was remarkable. He had an early and instinctive sense of what was about to happen in the world: which city to be in, which author to follow, which book to read, which idea or trend was about to emerge, and, of course, which painter was the one to watch. All this was not only the scientific achievement of a visionary theorist and a clear-sighted critic. It was also the poetic intuition of an artist — one who not only absorbed the concerns of an aesthetic philosopher but also offered him a rich and relevant field of ideas and images to explore.

In this twenty-first century with its short memory, it's worth remembering that Dorfles began first and foremost as a painter. This was back in the 1930s, between earning a degree in medicine with a specialization in psychiatry and taking a few restless trips to the Goetheanum in Dornach. And even earlier, he grew up in the stimulating and complex city of Trieste — the Trieste of Italo Svevo, Umberto Saba, the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Edoardo Weiss, as well as Arturo Nathan, Leonor Fini, and Leo Castelli. It was there that Dorfles painted his first works, which he rarely showed to anyone. They were made of airy, fluid, or solid substances — floating figures and shapes suspended in an ether thick with symbols and celestial bodies. At the same time, the young doctor began an intense critical career, fueled by numerous connections with some of Italy's most advanced intellectual circles — a journey that only the war would interrupt. During the hardest years, Dorfles stayed in Lajatico, Tuscany, where he continued to write and paint. His canvases already displayed the elegant, interlacing lines that would become so distinctive of his work. He also shaped a few small glazed terracotta pieces, organic in form and softly rounded — the only sculptures of this kind he would ever make. The large sculptures exhibited here are an expanded reflection on those early explorations in form — thoughts once modeled and impressed into the sensitive body of ceramic, now magnified in scale and meaning.

The end of the war and the founding of the MAC brought new energy to Dorfles's artistic exploration. He was, in fact, one of the four founders of the movement—together with Atanasio Soldati, Gianni Monnet, and Bruno Munari—playing the dual role of theorist and artist. His embrace of concretism, and his deep critical reflection on what that term truly meant, stemmed from a desire to break free from the provincial, insular shell of an Italy that had become far less "European" during the Fascist period. Looking instead to the international scene—particularly the Swiss-German context, perhaps a natural affinity for someone from Trieste—Dorfles quickly established a unique and original voice, one that stood apart from post-Cubist or Informalist trends, which he viewed with open skepticism. It's impossible not to recall his words in *Ultime tendenze nell'arte d'oggi* (quoted from memory): "Informalism: a trend that's too easy to copy."

Within the MAC, Dorfles's analytical and clarifying contributions were invaluable. In a rich series

of essays, he relentlessly examined the origins and reasons behind his own work and that of others, identifying what made each member of the group distinct. He also engaged with ideas that were, at the time, strikingly original but would later prove to be truly insightful—such as Rudolf Arnheim's *Art and Visual Perception* (1954), which was translated into Italian by Feltrinelli in 1962, thanks precisely to Dorfles's initiative.

During the MAC period, Dorfles wrote prolifically, painted, drew, and discovered extraordinary artists who had been overlooked or dismissed by the prevailing conformism—starting with Lucio Fontana. In the early 1960s, however, with his first university appointment, he temporarily put aside his artistic activity. As he later explained: "If I had said I was a painter while applying for a professorship, I certainly wouldn't have gotten it. Painting has always fascinated me, but I kept that side of my personality hidden for practical reasons. Only when I felt secure—when no one could take my position away, and any publisher would accept my books—did I finally decide to show my paintings." [1]

The artistic revival came twenty years later, joyful and uninterrupted. Dorfles' sharp, imaginative spirit moves freely from one insight to the next, experimenting with genuine curiosity across many techniques—from monotypes to ceramics, from pencil to tempera. His unusual versatility with color is striking in this exhibition: from aqua green to candy pink, from fuchsia to baby blue, there isn't a single perceptual or sensory resource that Dorfles avoids, no matter how difficult or seemingly obvious or banal. "It is the precise and clear pursuit of a particular form that guides the pencil and the brush," the artist explained. "The form arises from something already experimented with or strives toward it—whether the hand traces a mark borrowed from a real element (though never a copy of a naturalistic object) or relies on recurring formal schemes that, in my view, can be considered the progenitors of all graphic expression, conscious or unconscious… We witness the projection of formative archetypes, long unused, which now reappear and become the generators of new plastic ideas."[2]

From one image to the next, from one mark to another, almost letting his hand guide itself, following its natural psychomotor impulses and, so to speak, its unconscious intelligence, unfolds a leisurely, ironic, and poetic thread. This thread secretly nourished all the polymorphic facets of a free and nonconformist personality, without parallels or followers, not only in Italy.

Without Gillo Dorfles, a great master whom I am honored to consider indirectly my own, the world would undoubtedly have been less intelligent, less lively, less brilliant, less curious, less witty, less beautiful, less imaginative, and less open. Without Dorfles, perhaps no one would have invented and practiced the "critique of taste" or used the concept of Kitsch with the ease and sophistication that we know today.

In our world of lost intervals, overflowing social media, artificial intelligences, deprivation of critical thinking, prevailing and even violent conformity, we desperately need to remember him.

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[1] G. Dorfles, F. Puppo, *Dorfles and Surroundings*, Archinto, Milan, 2003, p. 99.

[2] G. Dorfles, *The Artists of the MAC*, exhibition catalogue, Galleria Bompiani, Milan, 1951, in M. Corgnati (ed.), *Gillo Dorfles, the Clandestine Painter*, Mazzotta, Milan, 2001, p. 13.