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Magazzino Italian Art in Cold Spring, New York, hosts from Nov. 15, 2024 to July 28, 2025 the first retrospective in the United States dedicated to Maria Lai, one of the most significant figures in Italian art of the second half of the 20th century.

Magazzino Italian Art in Cold Spring (New York) presents *Maria Lai. A Journey to America*, the **first retrospective in the United States** dedicated to one of the most significant figures in Italian art of the **second half of the 20th century**. The multifaceted and visionary work

of **Maria Lai** (Ulassai, Sardinia, 1919 - Cardedu, 2013) was able to interweave the traditions of her homeland, Sardinia, with the experimentations of Arte Povera and the influence of American culture on the global art scene.

On view from Nov. 15, 2024, to July 28, 2025, the exhibition brings together **about 100 works** by Maria Lai, many of them **exhibited for the first time**. Most of the works featured have never been exhibited in the United States. The exhibition traces Maria Lai's creative journey from the 1950s to the 2000s, with a focus on her innovative approach to **collective and relational art**. Curated by **Paola Mura**, artistic director of Magazzino, the exhibition includes a significant nucleus of works from the collection of **Magazzino Italian Art** (MIA), along with loans from **private American collections and Italian institutions**, including the Maria Lai Foundation, the Fondazione di Sardegna, MAN - Museo d'arte della Provincia di Nuoro, the Museum of Aggius, the Musei Civici di Cagliari, MUSMA - Museo della Scultura Contemporanea di Matera, the Council and the Autonomous Region of Sardinia, with contributions from Ilisso Edizioni.

Maria Lai's research, original and personal, was often marked by obstacles and long isolation, which, however, pushed her to find an autonomous artistic dimension. The exhibition recounts this story, emphasizing the innovation that has characterized her journey, an artistic and human journey that begins in Sardinia, from which she departs and then returns. This itinerary includes **America**, visited by Maria Lai for the first time in 1968. A central section of the exhibition is devoted to the paintings, witnesses to her transition to abstract art, that she took with her during her trip to America, between Montreal and New York, in the hope - never realized - of exhibiting them to the local public. These works, which remained stored between Canada and the United States and were never exhibited until now, are presented alongside a selection of paintings from the 1950s, including the monumental *Herd of Sheep* from 1959 (3 meters by 1.20 meters), kept by the Regional Council of Sardinia and never shown elsewhere.

Maria Lai. A Journey to America opens with a survey of works that investigate the Sardinian landscape and culture, elements that profoundly influenced her early work. In 1945 Maria Lai began creating drawings in pencil, ink and watercolor (shown *View of Cagliari*, 1952, MIA; *Portrait of Salvatore Cambosu*, 1952, Cagliari Civic Collections), as well as paintings and sculptures that reveal her extraordinary technical and artistic skills in figuration. In 1956 she moved to Rome, where her work also evolved thanks to her confrontation with Arte Povera artists. Inserted in the lively Roman environment, she frequented galleries that presented both American and Italian artists. Notable among these were **La Tartaruga**, which hosted the first European exhibitions of Franz Kline and Cy Twombly; **L'Obelisco**, where Robert Rauschenberg and Alexander Calder exhibited; and **L'Attico**, known for its collaboration with Pino Pascali and Mario Merz. Lai lived in Rome from 1956 to 1991, weaving relationships with such prominent

figures as Alighiero Boetti (1940-1994), Jannis Kounellis (1936-2017) and Pino Pascali (1935-1968).

At the end of the decade, his artistic production undergoes a significant transformation: the realism that had characterized the works of the previous years evolves into a more essential style, where poetic synthesis becomes increasingly pronounced. In the exhibition, this change is evident in works such as *Sheepfold* (1959) from the collection of the MAN in Nuoro and *Flock of Sheep* (1959) from the Regional Council of Sardinia, where formal simplicity is intertwined with a profound narrative tension. From the late 1950s and for almost a decade, Lai devoted himself to his artistic research without seeking exhibition opportunities. He progressively leaves behind figuration to embrace abstraction and moves away from painting and drawing, moving toward more radical research. He began to explore the use of various materials, giving rise to an innovative artistic language. This shift is evidenced in the exhibition by works such as MIA's *Composizione Polimaterica* (1964) and *Composizione Policromatica. Sardinian Territory from the Sky* (1965) from the Fondazione di Sardegna Art Collection.

In love with the poetry of Walt Whitman and familiar with the painting of Jackson Pollock and Robert Rauschenberg, Lai then decided to visit America in the spring of 1968. The exhibition highlights Maria Lai's trip to America, between Montreal, Canada and New York, USA, during which she took with her some of the works most significant to her with the hope of exhibiting them. Visible for the first time in the exhibition are seven of these works, including *Nocturne No. 2* and *Stones* (1968), from an American private collection. On this occasion Lai developed a strong interest in Native American visual cultures, which he explored during his stay in Ontario. Soon after his return to Italy, the artist found the courage to present the results of his experiments at the Bolzano Biennale in 1969 and at the Schneider Gallery in Rome in 1971, where he presented his *Telai*. In fact, it was in these same years that the artist gave birth to perhaps the best-known series in her oeuvre, inspired by the tools historically used by the women of Sardinia to create everyday objects, rugs, and dowry cloths, often of high aesthetic value. A large section of the exhibition is devoted to this important series, which includes, *Telaio* (1965) from the Cagliari Civic Museums, *Telaio del Mattino* (1969) from the Fondazione di Sardegna Art Collection, *Telaio in sole e mare* (1971) and MIA's *Untitled* (1975) loom, never before exhibited.

These works will be followed by experiments in which canvases, assembled and stitched, and threads tracing signs and geometries, completely replace the painting technique: the *Stitched Canvases* and *Geographies*. The exhibition gives relevance to these works through, among others, the stitched canvas *Veliero* (1972) and the geography *La costellazione di Raffaello* (1983) from MIA; the loom *Untitled* (1975) and *Geografia* (1986) from the MAN collection.

Also, the asemantic *Stitched Books* (on view *Non era un sogno*, 1979, from MIA), exhibited in the group show *Materialization of Language*, curated by Mirella Bentivoglio on the occasion of the 1978 Venice Biennial, to be followed by the *Stitched Fairy Tales* (on view *Tenendo per mano*

l'ombra, 1987, MIA and *Maria Pietra*, 1994, private collection) that reflect her fascination with legends, dreams and archetypes, recurring themes in her work.

Maria Lai returns periodically to her island and home village, where she undertakes the first Italian foray into what is now known as relational art. In Sardinia, in 1981, she made one of her most significant works, *Legarsi alla montagna*. For this project, she involves the villagers of Ulassai, connecting the village buildings to each other and to the mountain, using 26 kilometers of a blue ribbon of denim cloth. The goal is to involve every villager and map the connections between them and the rugged Ogliastra landscape. The ribbons varied from house to house based on relationships: a ribbon-wrapped loaf indicated members of the same family, knots indicated friends, no marks for those with grudge relationships.

On display is a video on *Tying oneself to the Mountain* made by Tonino Casula and photographs by Pietro Berengo Gardin with interventions by Maria Lai.

The exhibition, which traces Maria Lai's research and production over the course of her life, then includes works following her return to Sardinia in the twentieth century, with a section that develops the theme dear to the artist of **Maria Pietra**, a figure of a woman/artist in painful and perennial search, to reach the production of the first decade of the twenty-first century, in a large section that includes polymateric works, large sewn sheets, sewn books, and some extraordinary more recent works, among which *Li trammi* (2006) and *Fili di vela spaziale* (2007) find prominence in the exhibition. The exhibition bears witness to Maria Lai's recurring relationship with America, confirmed in the 1970s by her participation in the group show, *From Page to Space: Women in the Italian Avant-Garde between Language and Image*, held in 1979 at the Center for Italian Studies at Columbia University in New York and curated by Bentivoglio. Maria Lai's focus on America is evidenced by *Il canto delle formiche rosse No. 5* (private collection) and *Millequattrocentonovantadue* (MIA), 1992, dedicated to the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus' voyage in search of the "passage to India": these stitched books of vivid colors report dense asemantic writings inspired by Native peoples and the American land. Still to America and to the tragic attack on the Twin Towers on September 11, which sadly marked recent history, Lai dedicates the *Canvas, The Tower* (MUSMA Matera collection), significantly dated 1971-2002. Finally, the exhibition focuses on Lai's last group action, *Being is Weaving*, made in 2008 in the Sardinian town of Aggius, known for its textile tradition. On this occasion, Maria Lai, almost 90, wanted the collective action and the creation of a series of textile works to be accompanied by readings of verses by Walt Whitman. These works will be displayed in the exhibition *Maria Lai. A Journey to America*, their first presentation outside their context of origin (Frame No. XIII, Letters, Cartouches I-IV, 2008, Museums of Aggius ONLUS collection).

"Maria Lai. A Journey to America explores Maria Lai's creative and personal journey, with Sardinia as her anchor point and inexhaustible source of inspiration. From these deep roots, Lai expanded her artistic research, interweaving Sardinian traditions with the principles of Arte

Povera. In the process, she engaged with the cultural and social debates of her time, welcoming the influences of the American artists and writers she admired. These unique combinations make Maria Lai an extraordinarily relevant artist in a world where the fusion of historical traditions, different philosophies and conflicting images is an integral part of our everyday life,” says **Paola Mura**, Magazzino’s artistic director and curator of the exhibition. “I am profoundly proud to present the first U.S. retrospective of her work at Magazzino Italian Art, where the museum’s exceptional collection of Arte Povera will provide the ideal context to enhance Maria Lai’s unique contribution.”

“Just as Maria Lai created a bridge between places and cultures in her art, and in her most famous initiative literally bound a village to unite its people, so Magazzino creates a singular place where visitors can encounter the greatest art of postwar Italy. We are exceptionally proud to be able to offer our audiences a broader experience of contemporary Italian art by offering the first North American retrospective of this extraordinary artist,” concludes **Adam Sheffer**, director of Magazzino.

Image: Maria Lai, *Frame in Sun and Sea* (1971). Courtesy © Maria Lai Archive, by Siae 2024/Artists Rights Society (ARS).