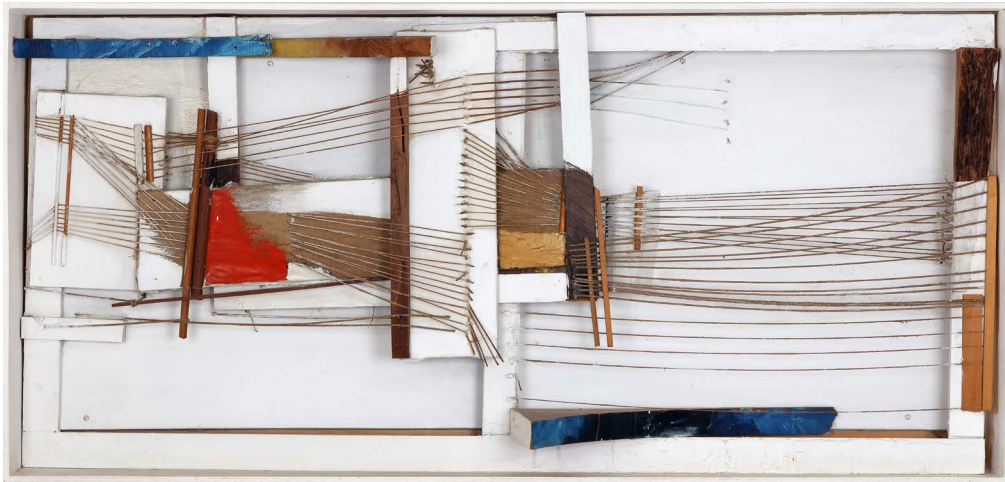


15 October 2024



Maria Lai, *Telaio in sole e mare*, 1971. © 2024 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Roma.
Courtesy Magazzino Italian Art.

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Magazzino Italian Art presents *Maria Lai. A Journey to America*, the first retrospective in the United States dedicated to one of the most important Italian artists of the 20th century.

On display will be approximately 100 works tracing a career that bridged her native Sardinian traditions, Arte Povera, and the influence of American culture.

**Magazzino Italian Art
November 15, 2024–July 28, 2025**

Cold Spring, New York (October 15, 2024) – This fall, Magazzino Italian Art will present the exhibition *Maria Lai. A Journey to America*, the first retrospective in the United States dedicated to a key figure in 20th-century Italian art, whose eclectic and visionary work bridged the traditions of her native Sardinia, the sensibilities and methods of Arte Povera, and the influence of American culture on the international art scene.

On view from November 15, 2024, to July 28, 2025, the exhibition will feature approximately 100 works by Maria Lai (Sardinia, Ulassai 1919–Cardedu 2013), including numerous works that will be presented to the public for the first time. Most of the pieces on display have never been exhibited in the United States. This exhibition offers a comprehensive overview of Maria Lai's work, from her beginnings in the 1950s to the 2000s, with a focus on her innovative approaches to collective and relational art.

The exhibition, curated by Magazzino Italian Art Artistic Director Paola Mura, presents a significant body of work from Magazzino's collection and from private American collections and Italian institutions, including Fondazione Maria Lai, Fondazione di Sardegna, MAN - Museo d'Arte della Provincia di Nuoro, Museo di Aggius, Musei Civici di Cagliari, MUSMA – Museo della Scultura Contemporanea Matera, the Sardinian Regional Council and the contribution of Ilisso Edizioni.

Maria Lai's artistic journey spans a century of conflicts and contradictions, which the artist faced with a determination to make her mark in a predominantly male world. Throughout her career, she sought and found her own independent dimension, often at the cost of isolation and a sense of otherness. The exhibition highlights her innovative journey, beginning in Sardinia, where she was born and to where she returned later in her career.

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This journey encompasses America, which Lai visited in 1968: a central focus of the exhibition will be the paintings that signify Maria Lai's transition to abstract art—works the artist carried with her during the travels between Montreal and New York, hoping—though it never materialized—to present them to the American public. These pieces, currently held in Canada and the United States and never before exhibited, are displayed in close dialogue with an important collection of 1950s paintings. Among them is *Gregge di pecore*, created in 1959, a striking work measuring 3 meters by 1.2 meters, held by the Regional Council of Sardinia and never shown elsewhere.

Paola Mura, Artistic Director of Magazzino and the curator of the exhibition, said: "*Maria Lai. A Journey to America* explores Lai's creative and personal journey, with Sardinia as her anchor point and as an inexhaustible source of inspiration. From these deep roots, Lai expanded her artistic exploration, intertwining Sardinian traditions with the principles of Arte Povera. In this process, she engaged with the cultural and social debates of her time, embracing the influences of American artists and writers she admired. These unique combinations make Lai an extraordinarily relevant artist in today's world, where the fusion of historical traditions, different philosophies, and contrasting images is an integral part of our daily lives. I am deeply proud to present the first U.S. retrospective of her work at Magazzino Italian Art, where the museum's exceptional Arte Povera collection will provide the ideal context to highlight Maria Lai's unique contribution."

Adam Sheffer, Director of Magazzino, said: "Just as Maria Lai bridged places and cultures in her art, and in her most celebrated initiative literally tied a village together to unite its people, Magazzino creates a singular place where visitors may encounter the greatest art from post-war Italy. We are exceptionally proud to be able to provide our audience with a broader experience of contemporary Italian art by offering the first North American career retrospective of this remarkable artist."

Magazzino founders Nancy Olnick and Giorgio Spanu, said: "When we first encountered Maria Lai's work decades ago, we quickly understood its significance for the development of Arte Povera. Yet her role is still under-recognized. Unmatched among her peers in pursuing a singular vision, Lai carried on her craft with ingenuity and determination. We are honored to present her work to the American public."

The exhibition and the artistic journey of Maria Lai

Maria Lai. A Journey to America begins with a survey of works that explore the Sardinian landscape and culture—elements that deeply influenced her early works. From 1945, Maria Lai began creating pencil, ink, and watercolor drawings (on display will be *Veduta di Cagliari*, 1952, from the Magazzino collection, and *Ritratto di Salvatore Cambosu*, 1952, from the Civic Collections of Cagliari), 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 evolved through interactions with Arte Povera artists. Immersed in the vibrant Roman art scene, she frequented galleries showcasing both American and Italian artists. Notable among these were La Tartaruga, which hosted the first European exhibitions of Franz Kline and Cy Twombly; 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, establishing connections with prominent figures such as Alighiero Boetti (1940-1994), Jannis Kounellis (1936-2017), and Pino Pascali (1935-1968).

By the end of the decade, her art underwent a significant transformation: the realism that characterized her earlier works evolved into a more essential style and poetic synthesis became increasingly pronounced. This change is evident in works like *Ovile* (1959, from the MAN collection in Nuoro) and *Gregge di pecore* (1959, from the Sardinian Regional Council), in which formal simplicity intertwines with profound narrative tension.

For nearly a decade from the late 1950s onwards, Lai focused on her artistic research without seeking exhibition opportunities. Gradually, she distanced herself from painting

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and drawing, turning towards more radical explorations. She began experimenting with various materials, which is evident in works such as *Composizione Polimaterica* (1964, from Magazzino's collection) and *Composizione Policromatica. Territorio Sardo dal cielo* (1965, from the Collection of the Fondazione di Sardegna).

In love with the poetry of Walt Whitman and knowledgeable about the works of Jackson Pollock and Robert Rauschenberg, Lai visited North America in the spring of 1968. During this trip, Lai developed a strong interest in Native American visual cultures, which she explored during her stay in Ontario. Immediately after returning to Italy, the artist exhibited the results of her experiments at the Biennale di Bolzano in 1969 and at the Galleria Schneider in Rome in 1971, where she presented her *Telai* (looms). In these years, the artist created perhaps her most renowned series, inspired by tools historically used by Sardinian women to make everyday items, such as carpets and decorative fabrics, often of high aesthetic value. A significant section of the exhibition is dedicated to this important series, including works such as *Telaio* (1965, from the Civic Museums of Cagliari); *Telaio del Mattino* (1969, from the Collection of the Fondazione di Sardegna); and *Telaio in sole e mare* (1971) and the telaio *Senza titolo* (1975), never exhibited until now, by Magazzino collection.

Alongside these works will be her experiments with assembled and stitched canvases (the Sewn Canvases and Geographies), where threads trace signs and geometric patterns, completely replacing traditional painting techniques. The exhibition highlights these works with pieces such as *Veliero* (1972) and *La costellazione di Raffaello* (1983), both from the Magazzino collection; and the *Untitled* (1975) loom and *Geografia* (1986), both from the MAN collection.

Also featured are her asemantic Sewn Books (including *Non era un sogno*, 1979, from Magazzino), exhibited in the group show *Materializzazione del Linguaggio*, curated by Mirella Bentivoglio for the Venice Biennale in 1978. This is followed by the Sewn Fairy Tales (including *Tenendo per mano l'ombra*, 1987, from Magazzino, and *Maria Pietra*, 1994, from a private collection), which reflect her fascination with legends, dreams, and archetypes, recurring themes in her work.

Maria Lai periodically returned to her island and her native village, where she embarked on what is now considered an early example of relational art. In Sardinia, in 1981, she created one of her most significant works, *Legarsi alla montagna* (Binding to the Mountain). For this project, Lai involved the inhabitants of the village of Ulassai, who together connected the buildings of the village to one another and to the surrounding mountain using 16 miles of blue denim ribbon. The aim was to engage every villager and map the connections between them and the rugged landscape of Ogliastra. The ribbons varied from house to house according to relationships: a loaf of bread wrapped with a ribbon indicated family members, knots represented friends, and no sign was given to those between whom there were grievances.

The exhibition features a video created by Tonino Casula that documents the work and photographs by Piero Berengo Gardin with interventions by Maria Lai.

The exhibition traces Maria Lai's research and production throughout her life, including works from her return to Sardinia in the 1990s. It features a section dedicated to the theme of *Maria Pietra*, depicting the figure of a woman/artist in a painful and perpetual search. It extends to her work from the first decade of the 21st century, with an extensive section that includes poly-material works, large stitched sheets, sewn books, and some remarkable recent looms. Highlights include *Li trammi* (2006) and *Fili di vela spaziale* (2007).

The exhibition explores Maria Lai's recurring relationship with America, which was further affirmed in the 1970s through 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.

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Maria Lai's attention to America is evidenced by *Il canto delle formiche rosse n. 5* (private collection) and *Millequattrocentonovantadue* (Magazzino), both from 1992, dedicated to the 500th anniversary of Columbus's voyage in search of the "passage to India." These brightly colored sewn books feature dense asemantic writing inspired by Native American cultures and the American landscape. Lai also dedicated *Telaio, La torre* (MUSMA Matera) to America after the tragic 9/11 attacks. This work is notably dated 1971-2002.

The exhibition also focuses on Lai's last collective action, *Essere è Tessere* (Being Is Weaving), realized in 2008 in the Sardinian village of Aggius, known for its textile tradition. On this occasion, nearly ninety years old, Maria Lai wanted the collective action and creation of a series of textile works to be accompanied by readings of Walt Whitman's poetry. These works will be displayed in *Maria Lai. A Journey to America*, marking their first presentation outside their original context (*Telaio n. XII, Lettere, Cartigli I-IV*, 2008, from the Museums of Aggius ONLUS).

About Maria Lai

Maria Lai (1919-2013) was born in Ulassai, a small village in the heart of Sardinia. Born in a critical moment in history, albeit in an apparently marginal place, Maria Lai's life—spanning almost a century—was intertwined with the conflicts and contradictions of the 20th century. In the 1960s, Maria lived through the happy arc of post-war reconstruction and an economic boom in Italy. Rome was open to the world and profoundly influenced by American culture. There, she encountered artists who, using humble materials and an original poetic language, proposed their own models, rather than imported ones. In 1968, while the protests that rocked France were spreading everywhere, she decided to embark on a long journey to America to understand its endless possibilities.

A prophet in her own land, Maria Lai became a pioneer of relational art in Italy. Throughout her life, she narrated the legends of her land, but to accompany her last collective artwork, she chose the verses of *Passage to India* by her beloved Walt Whitman. She identified both as Maria Pietra, a painful figure of mother/artist, and as an eternal child who played with art and refused to grow up.

A prolific artist and experimenter of all materials and techniques, Maria considered her masterpiece to be *Legarsi alla montagna*, an immaterial and communal work. In 2011, her extraordinary work *Orme di Leggi* was chosen as a symbol and placed in the seat of Parliament to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Italian unification.

About Magazzino Italian Art

Magazzino Italian Art is a museum and research center dedicated to advancing scholarship and public appreciation of postwar and contemporary Italian art in the United States. Located in Cold Spring, New York, the museum was founded by Nancy Olnick and Giorgio Spanu.

In 2017, the first building, designed by architect Miguel Quismondo and set within several landscaped acres of the Hudson Highlands, was inaugurated with an exhibition drawn from the Olnick Spanu Collection and dedicated to Margherita Stein, founder of the historic Galleria Christian Stein in Milan and a key advocate and supporter of the artists associated with Arte Povera.

In 2023, Magazzino inaugurated the Germano Celant Research Center, named for the art critic and historian who gave Arte Povera its name.

Created as an educational not for profit museum, Magazzino Italian Art increased its indoor space by two-thirds in September 2023 by opening the freestanding Robert Olnick Pavilion designed by architects Alberto Campo Baeza and Miguel Quismondo and named in memory of philanthropist and art advocate Robert Olnick. This new building provides a multipurpose room with auditorium capabilities, a store, and Café Silvia serving Italian specialties.