

# BEN BROWN FINE ARTS



Alighiero Boetti (1940 - 1994), *Aerei*, 1989, Ink and watercolour on paper laid down on canvas, 3 parts, 95 x 66 cm; (37 3/8 x 26 in.) each

## ALIGHIERO BOETTI

9 March – 10 April 2021

Private view: 19 February – 5 March 2021 (by appointment only)

Ben Brown Fine Arts is proud to present a comprehensive exhibition of **Alighiero Boetti** (1940-1994) at the Hong Kong gallery. This will be the Italian conceptual master's second solo show in Hong Kong, following his highly acclaimed first exhibition at the Hong Kong gallery in 2012. Ben Brown Fine Arts has exhibited the work of Alighiero Boetti for the last two decades, with six solo exhibitions and numerous group shows, highlighting our depth of interest and expertise in 20<sup>th</sup> century post-war Italian art. This exhibition brings together iconic examples from various periods of Boetti's *oeuvre*, including embroidered *Arazzi* and *Tutto*; *Aerei*, *Faccine*, *Biro* and other experimental works on paper; and a rare rug (*Tappeti*) and kilim.

Born in Turin, Italy, in 1940, Alighiero Boetti was an influential member of the *Arte Povera* movement, though by the 1970s diverged from the collective movements of the time and forged his own unique explorations of time, space, language, mathematics, wordplay, classification and collaboration, producing one of the most fascinating and radically conceptual bodies of work of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Boetti first traveled to Afghanistan in 1971, where he became enamoured with the landscape and culture, and would spend much of the decade working and collaborating there. He commissioned his mosaic-like word grids, geopolitical maps and various tapestries to be embroidered by local Afghan craftswomen, first in Kabul, and following the Soviet invasion of 1979, in Peshawar, Pakistan, where many had taken refuge. Boetti would provide the blueprint for these works while he left the selection of colours and other serendipitous interpretations and flourishes up to the weavers.

The *Arazzi* are vividly coloured embroideries comprised of letters arranged in grids of varying sizes, typically read vertically, to reveal witty and enigmatic phrases, in Italian, that enthralled the artist. Boetti's approach to language was both playful and cerebral; with a desire to expose dualities, oppositional forces and hidden meaning in every aspect of his work, such as in the dazzling *Niente da Vedere Niente da Nascondere* ('Nothing to See, Nothing to Hide'), 1988, and *D'un Jour à l'Autre* ('From One Day to Another'), 1991.

*Tutto*, c. 1988, a large-scale tapestry teeming with myriad imagery, symbols and motifs arranged like an immersive jigsaw puzzle, represents a culmination of all the imagery and chaotic ideas that encompassed Boetti's work. This series offers a fantastical panorama of his world and visual lexicon, without hierarchy or scale as guiding factors to the haphazard arrangement of imagery. To create these works, Boetti and his

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assistants cut out thousands of images from magazines, newspapers, encyclopaedias and textbooks, traced their outlines onto canvas, and sent them to the Afghan craftswomen to embroider with as many colours as possible, at their discretion.

Boetti similarly collaborated with art students and assistants in Italy to create his *Aerei*, *Biro* and *Faccine* series. In 1972, Boetti began the *Biro* series, a project in which others were commissioned to take turns methodically filling sheets of white paper with rows of minute hatch marks in ballpoint pen, leaving no white of the sheet exposed except for the cryptic letters and symbols Boetti had allocated to be reserved as negative space. These laborious collaborations resulted in sublime monochromatic sheets with a variegated, vibrational quality, achieved by the varying hands making the marks, and revealed the coded wordplay that preoccupied Boetti in all of his work. Some of the *Biro* works can be deciphered by aligning letters of the alphabet with commas scattered throughout the sheets, such as *Mano Libera Pensieri Sciolti* ('Free Hand Loose Thoughts'), 1981, a four-panel work executed in emerald green and a rare orange *biro*, while others contain a single word or phrase spelled out at the top of the sheet, like the velvety black *Giocare*, 1978.

A nomadic, intrepid traveler who frequently visited Afghanistan, Guatemala, Ethiopia, Japan, Morocco and Pakistan, Boetti was fascinated by the history of air travel and aircraft imagery. In 1977, Boetti collaborated with Guido Fuga, an Italian architect and cartoonist, to produce a large-scale triptych depicting highly-detailed aeroplanes, of varying design, scale and flying direction, teeming against a blue watercolour sky, and was so enamoured of this work that he reproduced it, in varying sizes, with only the forms of the aeroplanes registering on the sheets and then had assistants fill in the areas surrounding the aeroplanes' outlines, in *biro*, ink and watercolour, resulting in a broad body of work known as the *Aerei* series. The *Aerei* series encapsulates Boetti's interest in 'order and disorder' and 'bringing the world into the world', with fighter jets, passenger planes, Concorde, cargo craft, two-seater jets, and early propeller engines flying harmoniously, and impossibly, across infinite skies, conjuring an uncanny panorama in which the artist could obsessively classify all manner of aircraft. The planes hail from either the USSR or the United States and perhaps suggest Boetti's interest in subtle political critique through artwork, much like the displaced Afghan embroiderers would incorporate oblique political messages in Farsi in his *Arazzi*.

*Alternando da uno a cento e viceversa* ('Alternating One to One Hundred and Vice Versa'), 1993, is one of fifty kilims produced by Boetti for a solo exhibition at the Centre National d'Art Contemporain in Grenoble, France, in 1993, each based on a complex sequencing of 100 squares, each divided into 100 squares that sequentially alternate between black and white, the graphic grid surrounded by a colourful border. Boetti's series of *Tappeti*, or rugs, are the last series of works the artist completed before his death in 1994. Though Boetti had initially planned to make 100 wool and cotton rugs like *Senza Titolo*, 1994, ultimately only eleven were realised, all unique colour variations with kaleidoscopic iconography and text that incapsulate his life and work, such as the violin case of his mother, a toy of his son Giordano, swinging apes, scattered *Arazzi* and *Tutto*, and lines of esoteric text.

Alighiero Boetti is represented in prestigious public and private collections worldwide. Notable solo exhibitions of his work have taken place at the Centre National d'Art Contemporain de Grenoble; Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles; Museo Nacional de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; Tate Modern, London; and Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York.

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