Volf Roitman: From MADI to The Ludic Revolution

The Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum

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VOLF ROITMAN:
FROM MADI TO THE LUDIC REVOLUTION

The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum
May 26 through August 29, 2010
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum wishes to acknowledge the assistance of the many artists, galleries, and museums in Taiwan and New York that have supported this project with such great enthusiasm. We would especially like to thank the Consul General of Taiwan in Miami and his staff, and Dr. Jane Hsaio for her vision and commitment to introduce the art and culture of Taiwan to the South Florida and university community.
VOLF ROITMAN
FROM MADI TO THE LUDIC REVOLUTION

The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum
Carol Damian and Klaudio Rodriguez, Curators
MADI Collage, 1993
Cardboard and acrylic
33 x 21 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Opposite:
Spatial Echoes, 1998
Wood and laser cut metal
68 x 50 inches
Courtesy of the Artist
When the works of Volf Roitman were scheduled for exhibition at The Frost Art Museum, we did not know that it would be the last exhibition for the artist and would turn into a memorial. Volf Roitman passed away in May, one month short of the opening of an exhibition that he had been planning with us for almost two years. He knew it would be among his last major installations. After a long career that began with Grupo Madí in Argentina in 1945 and his founding of MADI International in Paris in 1951, he was excited to move beyond his recognizable MADI objects into new artistic ventures which he described as the Ludic Revolution.¹ The work is playful, in keeping with the Ludic discourse that arose out of Roitman’s “Playing MADI” projects. Wall pieces become light boxes; sculpture is robotic; objects move in space and are so mathematically complex that they change from every vista. His large interactive works include kinetic sculpture and mathematical puzzle pieces called “tridimensional” that are characterized by irregular frames, flat surfaces, geometric shapes and planes of color. Unlike other geometric abstraction exhibits that are familiar to most viewers, many of Roitman’s works are actually moveable and invite participation. MADI artists practiced their art with all seriousness, but inspired by DADA, they wanted the viewers to have fun.²

In Latin America there were a number of art movements that emphasized the abstract, geometric, scientific and mathematical appearance of their work. This was a direct repudiation of the dominant trends that were the result of emotional, subjective, fantastic and expressive interpretations of the world. These groups proposed an art that was anti-romantic and rational and sought a new identity that was not inherently traditional or narrative. They worked in Argentina, Venezuela and Uruguay and are relatively unknown in South Florida, despite their influences throughout the Americas and in Europe.

Grupo Madí, founded by poet/painter Carmelo Arden Quin, had its first exhibit in Buenos Aires in 1945. MADI painting is described in a manifesto written in 1946 as “color and two-dimensional in form. Its planes are articulated with linear, revolving or shifting movements.” Their work is not abstract, but rather “concrete,” indicating that nothing was abstracted or had any reference to nature or symbolism. It is what it is. Madi and other Concrete art movements also had political ramifications as they were totally apolitical and immune to censorship for forbidden narratives. At the same time, it was a social and communal group with a collective message about the rational. Some say the letters MADI stand for Movimiento Artístico De Invencion. Others say the letters MADI stand for MAterialismo Dialectismo (Dialectical Materialism). Still others say it is taken from letters in the name CarMelo ArDen Quin.

Whatever the origins of the name, the movement has combined complexity and uniqueness with playfulness and whimsy. The true understanding of MADI is situated among the other important abstract movements of the twentieth century, beginning with the journal Circle and Square, founded in 1929 by Joaquin Torres-García in Paris. In 1934, upon his return to Montevideo, the city of his birth, Torres-Garcia organized a workshop that was the basis for the geometric tendencies throughout Latin America, including MADI. Focusing on geometric shapes that spill out of the traditional frame, and articulated and mobile structures, MADI artists refuse to make the object representative, but rather focus on the object and the colors themselves. One does not have to look for meaning behind the art, but rather enjoy each piece for itself.

The ludic or playful element in the history of art and culture has been described by Dutch historian Johan Huizinga in his classic book, *Homo Ludens*.¹ The fundamental thesis of the book is based on the writer’s assertion that human activities are infused with a playful nature. From this point of view, we may surmise that play manifests itself as the gear that moves the wheels of artistic creation. Of course, this does not mean that it is reduced to childish activity in a pejorative sense. On the contrary, what alchemists called *Ludus Puerorum*, was the work of the philosopher’s stone after its first preparation, as Dom Pernety states in his *Dictionnaire Mytho-Hermetique*.²

In one of the images of *Splendor Solis* by the alchemist Salomon Trimosin, we read the following: “wherefore is the art compared to the play of children, who, when they play, turn undermost that which before was uppermost.”³ That childish game, in a sense, was serious and profound. Free activity par excellence, as Huizinga characterized play, in turn becomes an indispensable element in the performance of hermetic art. But not only of that art, but art in general. It is in that context, that we view the works of the Uruguayan MADI artist, Volf Roitman.

Born in Montevideo, where his father settled after leaving Romania, Volf Roitman practiced various forms of expression, among them poetry and fiction. His initial proximity to Surrealism probably made him understand the importance of play in poetic creation, since the Surrealists were the first to apply that activity in their own poetic perception. But in 1951, Roitman met Carmelo Arden Quin in Paris, who founded the MADI movement in Argentina in 1946. Together with Arden Quin, he created the MADI Research and Study Center, where they experimented with different abstract trends within an atmosphere that resembled the Bauhaus. From that point on, Roitman became a tireless promoter of MADI aesthetics, not only in his paintings and constructions, but also in architecture. The facade of the MADI museum which he executed in Dallas, Texas, demonstrated in a convincing way how Volf Roitman was able to apply the principles of MADI art to his exuberant concepts of architectural space. For the building’s inauguration, Roitman wrote a "Manifesto in Favor of a Madi-Ludic Architecture"⁴ where he advanced, among other things, the following: “Since its inception, MADI defined itself as being, above all, a ludico or whimsical movement, thus emphasizing the primordial importance of play in the creative process.” That principle, whose poetic origin Roitman has emphasized, goes radically against the other trend (as presented by Adolf Loos in Vienna), which discarded any ornamentation in architecture. In support of his ideas, Roitman reminds us that: “In Oriental, Islamic and pre-Columbian cultures,... no distinction is made between decoration and art. No valid reason exists for such aesthetic opposition.”⁵ The crowning result, of course, was a whimsical, lively building, that plays with its surroundings, making music with its intense range of colors. The musical improvisation which, from the beginnings of Jazz to the present has indelibly marked the cutting-edge, is ever present in Roitman’s works.

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THE LUDIC ART OF
VOLF ROITMAN

Carlos M. Luis

The ludic art of Volf Roitman

Round Portholes, 1990-99
Paper and acrylic
12 x 12 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

The musical improvisation which, from the beginnings of Jazz to the present has indelibly marked the cutting-edge, is ever present in Roitman’s works.
Let us then return to the ludic element. In it we find that a spirit of transgression seems to guide it. What does that transgression consist of? If we look at Volf Roitman’s work, his radical opposition to the canons of concrete abstractionism will jump out at us, in favor of an asymmetric relationship between the different components he uses to bring it to life. Everything indicates that in his MADI constructions, the will to make the rigidity of concretism falls to pieces in order to substitute it with the irregularity of forms, which moves him to invent an imaginary geometry. But, what motivates him? In my opinion, what motivates him is his self-insertion into the ludic spirit which has always been a constant in the MADI movement, and which Roitman takes to its ultimate consequences. The traditional concepts of static geometric forms, which in the long term led to minimalism, become questionable. In his case, to talk about a rigorous discipline that only governs itself by the reproduction of squares, circles, triangles etc. would be to weaken the intention of his project. In the same fashion that MADI always rejected being closed in within the square or the rectangle of a painting with the intention of breaking its harmony, Volf Roitman explores all possibilities which that rejection may offer. Somewhat following the romantic ideal of pointing in the direction of a goal, Roitman follows that path creating new and unexpected structures.

There is nothing further from the aesthetic aspect of medieval writers than the ideal of beauty proposed by this artist. From there originates another transgression. The Middle Ages was known for its aesthetics of proportion, what its theologians called, according to Umberto Eco: “congruentia or congruence of proportion of numbers,”” which authors such as Vitruvius applied to architecture. That perfect harmony, whose notion originated from the Greek ideal, formed part of the divine plan. “We love similarity, but hate and resent dissimilarity,”” says Boecio, as quoted by Eco. Volf Roitman, on the other hand, practices dissimilarity. His rules of the game are different, similar to the ones that encouraged the Surrealists when in their “exquisite cadavers” or “collages” they invented beings who altered their identity in favor of something marvelous. If the Surrealists played with figures taken from reality, Roitman does it starting from geometry which maintains congruence. There is no one more willing to alter it than a MADI artist like Roitman who enjoys an empathy with his paintings and constructions. Wilhelm Worringer in his seminal work Abstraction and Empathy states: “Aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment.”8 I believe this formula defines the feeling of aesthetic enjoyment that possesses Roitman when, at the time he renders his work, he breaks from traditional frameworks.

Hence, we find ourselves before the works of an artist whose long trajectory has continued to be faithful to the initial principles which stimulated the MADI movement. But, without rejecting what its founders proposed, Volf Roitman followed his own path, applying those principles to the diverse techniques that have tempted him throughout his career. To see Volf Roitman create in his “decoupages” a labyrinth which hints of Islamic ornamentation or fractal art is to contemplate it within an environment bathed in the humorous spirit of light similar to the one that bathed Matisse when at the end of his life he dedicated himself to his own vision. Therefore, Volf Roitman’s works have enriched one of the most fertile plastic arts movements of the twentieth century, which to this day continues to display its vitality.

5 Idem.
7 Ibid., 31.

Spatial Echoes, 1998
Wood and laser cut metal
68 x 50 inches
Courtesy of the Artist
# Checklist of the Exhibition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exhibition</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ink on Paper 3, 1952</td>
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<td>16 x 12 inches</td>
<td>Courtesy of the Artist</td>
</tr>
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<td>MADI Collage, 1993</td>
<td>Cardboard</td>
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<td>Courtesy of the Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver Flower, 1996</td>
<td>Laser-cut metal on wood</td>
<td>15 x 15 x 6 inches</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trompe l’Oeil 1, 2007</td>
<td>Digital print on acrylic</td>
<td>30 x 22 inches</td>
<td>Courtesy of the Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red and Black Flower, 1996</td>
<td>Laser-cut metal on wood</td>
<td>15 x 15 x 6 inches</td>
<td>Courtesy of the Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Ink on paper</td>
<td>16 x 12 inches</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Portholes, 1990-99</td>
<td>Paper and acrylic</td>
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<td>Courtesy of the Lenherr Collection</td>
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<td>Cardboard on acrylic</td>
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<td>MADI Book Page 2, 1999</td>
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<td>40 x 32 inches</td>
<td>Courtesy of the Artist</td>
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<td>MADI Banner 1, 2010</td>
<td>Poplin</td>
<td>156 x 48 Inches</td>
<td>Courtesy of the Artist</td>
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<td>23 x 20 x 6 inches</td>
<td>Courtesy of the Artist</td>
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<td>Three Dimensional Paper Collage, 1991</td>
<td>Cardboard</td>
<td>28 x 22 inches</td>
<td>Courtesy of the Artist</td>
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<tr>
<td>At the Movies 2, 2000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shadow and Light Play 4, 1995</td>
<td>Laser-cut metal</td>
<td>23 x 19 x 6 inches</td>
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<td>Cardboard</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sunflower 1, 1999</td>
<td>Laser-cut metal on wood</td>
<td>60 x 60 x 18 inches</td>
<td>Courtesy of the Artist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Memory of Miro 1, 1994</td>
<td>Laser-cut metal</td>
<td>15 ½ x 10 x 7 inches</td>
<td>Courtesy of the Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Dimensional Paper Collage, 1991</td>
<td>Cardboard</td>
<td>22 x 19 inches</td>
<td>Courtesy of the Artist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Memory of Miro 3, 1995
Laser-cut metal
19 x 12 x 6 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

MADI Galaxy, 1995
Laser-cut metal
40 x 33 x 8 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Memory of Gaudi 2, 1996
Laser-cut metal
16 x 14 x 4 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Memory of Zimbabwe 1, 1996
Laser-cut metal
36 x 26 x 11 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Memory of Zimbabwe 2, 1999
Laser-cut metal
36 x 26 x 11 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Memory of Zimbabwe 3, 1999
Laser-cut metal
40 x 32 x 11 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Metal Tower 2, 1999
Laser-cut metal
28 x 7 x 6 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Rotational Tower, 2003
Laser-cut metal and stainless mirror
22 x 16 x 16 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Rotational Tower, 2000
Laser-cut metal and stainless mirror
33 x 24 x 24 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

MADI Facade, 1997
Laser-cut metal and stainless mirror
44 x 14 x 14 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Hanging Mobile, 1995
Laser-cut metal
17 inch diameter
Courtesy of the Artist

Hanging Mobile 2, 1995
Laser-cut metal
12 inch diameter
Courtesy of the Artist

Hanging Mobile 3, 1995
Laser-cut metal
12 inch diameter
Courtesy of the Artist

Hanging Mobile 2, 1995
Laser-cut metal
12 inch diameter
Courtesy of the Artist

Hanging Mobile 3, 1995
Laser-cut metal
12 inch diameter
Courtesy of the Artist

Series Chaplin’s Quest, City of Lights, 2010
Plastic, wood and light
52 x 45 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Series Chaplin’s Quest, Lumières de la Ville I, 2010
Plastic, wood and light
81 x 43 inches
Courtesy of Anna and Edmund Wood

Series Chaplin’s Quest, Lumières de la Ville II, 2010
Plastic, wood and light
90 x 42 inches
Courtesy of Anna and Edmund Wood

Series Chaplin’s Quest, Lumières de la Ville III, 2010
Plastic, wood and light
80 x 47 inches
Courtesy of Anna and Edmund Wood

Series Chaplin’s Quest, Lumières de la Ville IV, 2010
Plastic, wood and light
80 x 51 inches
Courtesy of Anna and Edmund Wood

Series Chaplin’s Quest, Lumières de la Ville V, 2010
Plastic, wood and light
78 x 40 inches
Courtesy of Anna and Edmund Wood

Ocean Drive I, 2006
Acrylic on wood
42 x 38 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Ocean Drive II, 2006
Acrylic on wood
37 x 19 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Ocean Drive III, 2006
Acrylic on wood
37 x 19 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Ocean Drive IV, 2006
Acrylic on wood
19 x 23 inches
Courtesy of the Artist
Florida International University

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Gabriela Nuñez Silva
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Jahzel Dotel
Kristina Villa de Rey
Alex Garcia

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The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum
Florida International University
10975 SW 17th Street
Miami, FL 33199

Museum Hours:
Tuesday through Saturday: 10am - 5pm
Sunday: 12pm - 5pm
Monday: Closed
The Frost Art Museum is closed on most legal and University holidays.

Admission is free, but donations are welcome.

Accessibility
Our facility is wheelchair accessible and includes electronic doors, elevators, and TTY. If you require additional arrangements, please contact 305.348.2890.

Phone: 305.348.2890
Fax: 305.348.2762
Email: artinfo@fiu.edu
Web: http://thefrost.fiu.edu

Catalog Design: Raymond Mathews
The Frost Art Museum receives ongoing support from the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, the Cultural Affairs Council, the Mayor and the Miami-Dade Board of County Commissioners; the State of Florida; the Steven & Dorothea Green Endowment; Funding Arts Network; Dade Community Foundation; The Miami Herald; Target; and the Members & Friends of The Frost Art Museum.