

Then, Oh Then, Oh Then Dominic Michel

Date

15.09.2023
04.11.2023

Location

Milano

Istituto Svizzero

Category

Art, Exhibition

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In his solo exhibition in Milan, titled *Then, Oh Then, Oh Then*, Dominic Michel delves into the themes of the adaptation and the reinterpretation of urban spaces.

With his works he explores the aesthetic and symbolic aspects of industrial machinery, factories, and urban landscapes, researching the traces of these social, economic, and spatial changes in the topographies that surround us. In this sense, the Centro Svizzero, designed by Swiss architect Armin Meili and opened in 1952, which today houses the exhibition spaces of Istituto Svizzero, is the ideal place to present Dominic Michel's new works developed specifically for the exhibition. With his use of different materials and techniques the artist often mimics the mechanical nature of industrial processes, offering a multifaceted exploration of this transformative force.

In the exhibition space, exceeding six meters in height, he presents the installation *Charm*, chains of spherical, translucent plastic objects illuminated by fairy lights, where he employs an industrial process called thermoforming, commonly used for mass-producing PVC items.

In his silkscreen prints titled *Locomotive*, Dominic Michel deconstructs and reassembles images of locomotives into layers, resulting in abstract and symbolic interpretations. Even the exhibition's title, borrowed from a poem by Scottish filmmaker and author Margaret Tait, 'Then, Oh Then, Oh Then,' evokes a sense of intermittence, repetition, or the rhythmic breath of a locomotive.

Dominic Michel's work blends traditional materials with industrial production processes, generating a dynamic interplay between the unique piece and the reproduction, inviting the viewers to contemplate the nuances of modern and contemporary consumer culture and its imprints on urban spaces.

Dominic Michel (1987, Aargau) lives and works in Zurich and graduated in Fine Arts at the Basel University of Art, School of Fine Arts Athens and Bern University of the Arts. He is a 2022 recipient of the Manor Art Prize as well as the 2020 encouragement award of Neue Aargauer Bank.

He has recently held solo exhibitions at Unanimous Consent, Zurich (2023); Aargauer Kunsthau, Aarau (2022, 2020); Hamlet, Zurich (2021). Recent group exhibitions include Sgomento, Zurich (2023, 2021); Sentiment, Paris (2022); Milieu, Bern (2022, 2018); Kunsthalle Bern (2021, 2018); Kunsthalle Zurich (2020); Palazzina, Basel (2020) and Fri Art, Fribourg (2019).

Dominic Michel's practice also includes co-founding and curating the artist-run space Riverside (since 2015), as well as independent exhibition projects such as: *Hot Ticket* by Zoe Lund, Zurich (2022); *Jeanne Randolph*, exhibition and publication (curated and edited with Geraldine Tedder) for Lateral Roma (2021); *Crisis of Glass Bell*, group show (curated with Noemi Pfister) at Der Tank Basel (2020).

With the support of Aargauer Kuratorium

Then, Oh Then, Oh Then

Dominic Michel

Gioia Dal Molin, September 2023

In May 1952, Centro Svizzero, as it was known at the time, designed by Swiss architect Armin Meili, opened on Piazza Cavour in Milan. In his exhibition *Then, Oh Then, Oh Then* at Istituto Svizzero, Dominic Michel considers questions of reinterpretation and appropriation, particularly of urban spaces. The exhibition rooms are inside that very building by Armin Meili on Piazza Cavour—so this is where I will begin. The area not far from the Duomo was one of the most crucial construction sites in the war-ravaged capital of Lombardy in the early 1950s. Centro Svizzero, with its 80-metre-high tower and 21 floors, was the tallest building in the city until the completion of the Pirelli skyscraper (1955-1960, designed by Gio Ponti, among others). It symbolised the aspirations for a modern metropolis that were so important in the post-war era. Armin Meili, who had been director of the Swiss National Exhibition in 1939, was talented at using architecture to convey the ideals of progress and innovation. In the case of Centro Svizzero, the building's modern architectural forms and abundant marble, travertine and glass promised prosperity and a bright future. And let's not forget the pneumatic mail system, a network of compressed air-powered tubes that connected all 21 floors, enabling swift document delivery before the digital age. In a January 1954 issue of the newspaper *Schweizerische Bauzeitung*, I find photographs of the building complex and its interiors. It takes me a moment to get my bearings—today, many of the original murals and ceiling paintings have disappeared. Back then, the spaces that now house the exhibition rooms of Istituto Svizzero used to be occupied by the *Quick-Bar*. It featured a black terrazzo floor, swivelling bar stools, a geometric mural by an artist named Fritz Fricker (about whom I cannot find any more information) and organically shaped neon tubes that contrasted vividly against the blue ceiling.

Similarly, in the exhibition *Then, Oh Then, Oh Then*, the first thing that catches our eye is a light source—to be precise, string lights. Dominic Michel uses the considerable volume of the exhibition space—over six metres tall—to display three strings of light with spherical, luminous objects made of thin and correspondingly translucent plastic, which wind their way through the space, suspended between

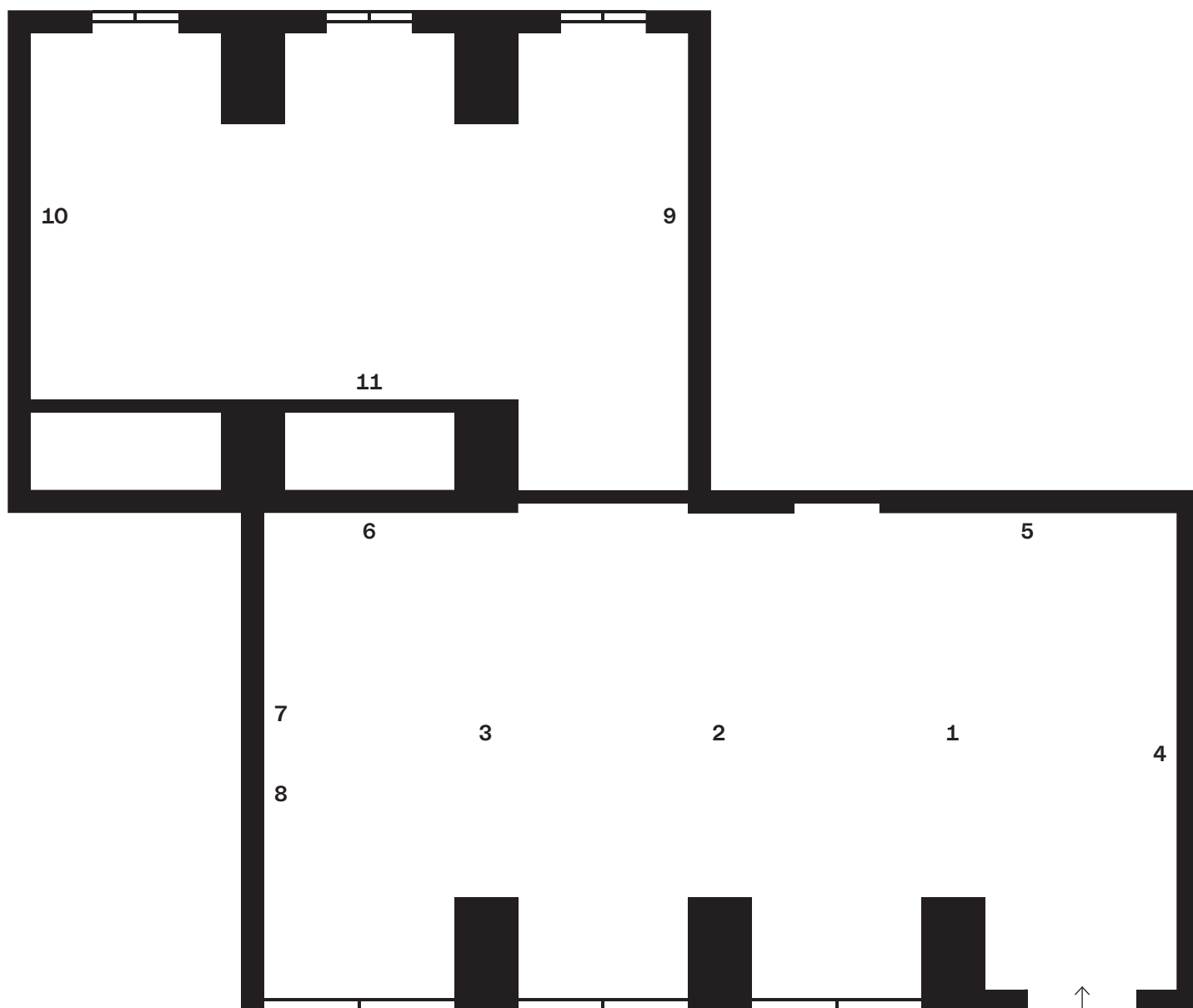
the ceiling and the floor. To produce these objects, the artist employed thermoforming, an industrial process commonly used for mass-producing everyday PVC items, such as yogurt containers. However, as he explains to me during a visit to his Zurich studio on this hot August day, he hacked the system. During the replication process, he positioned various found objects—tools, hoes, screws, staples, a heart, a star or even a model of the Eiffel Tower—onto the metal positive form. We can now discern these objects by their silhouettes, their traces in the smooth PVC surface of the spheres (which are the negative form). Dominic Michel refers to the plastic objects as 'prototypes' and calls the work *Charm*. Within the exhibition space, *Charm* becomes an expansive sculpture, evoking memories of the elaborate neon tubes that once illuminated the *Quick-Bar*. For Dominic Michel, this installative work ties in with his fascination for shells or dummies—objects that represent a sort of empty vessel, whose surface or outer appearance doesn't necessarily match its interior or may conceal another meaning. He has produced a variety of works in this context, such as a hollowed-out concert grand piano and sculptures made from repurposed and painted consumer product packaging. In *Charm*, the sphere we see is actually the shell of a sphere, with visible riveted edges. The spheres gleam in different white tones ranging from cold to warm. They are illuminated with standard consumer bulbs, and are somehow reminiscent of the courtyard lighting designed by Armin Meili. Dominic Michel refers to the string lights as a kind of «sequence of voids». Moreover, *Charm* is a mass-produced object that, due to its manufacturing process, retains a tangible imprint, a memory of a thing that once existed. Meanwhile, the title of the work refers to the widely known armbands called charm bracelets. Their pendants (here too: hearts, stars, Eiffel Towers...) represent emotionally charged symbols or memories, and, in my view, serve as modern-day insignias for consumer culture.

The silkscreen series *Locomotive* (Dominic Michel uses aluminium trays as a printing surface—there it is again, the void!), is on display in both this room and the adjoining room. The series depicts a decommissioned steam locomotive that the artist photographed in a playground. The steam locomotive—an icon of industrialisation—now functions as a climbing structure for children. To create the silkscreen prints, Dominic Michel separated the photographic source image into three layers and printed each

of them separately: the lighter tones, the grey half-tones and the dark solid areas.

The light blue colour of the prints resembles that of blueback paper and, like the colour of light bulbs, somehow feels ambiguous. In this process of deconstruction and reconstruction, the visual information changes; sometimes the silkscreens take on an almost abstract and non-representational appearance. As with *Charm*, repetition is a recurring theme. Again and again, we see the wheels of the locomotive, just as one glowing sphere follows the next. The screenprint, Dominic Michel notes, becomes a symbol for change but also a search for traces, as with the disused locomotive. The image becomes a symbol of itself.

Dominic Michel's exhibition *Then, Oh Then, Oh Then* addresses the traces, reminiscences, appropriations, and reinterpretations of objects, architectures and symbols. He borrows the title from a poem by Scottish filmmaker and author Margaret Tait: 'Then, Oh Then, Oh Then' as a nostalgic sigh, as the breath of the locomotive, as rhythmic repetition. The economic boom in post-war northern Italy was largely driven by the textile, automotive, chemical and manufacturing industries, concentrated in the economically influential region known as the *triangolo industriale* comprising Turin, Milan and Genoa. This growth was significantly fuelled by the migration of people from southern Italy (who faced substantial racism). Meanwhile, Milan emerged as an important centre for commerce and banking. The urban spaces around us today are always also the result of repurposing and overwriting. And they bear—sometimes more and sometimes less visibly—the traces of these past times. For Dominic Michel, the screenprinted locomotive also stands for this. Extracted from its original context, deconstructed and reconstructed through printing, it is reduced to its symbolic content. As a work of art, it might also be considered a component of an economy of reinterpretation. Dominic Michel calls it a 'stowaway' in this process. And in the same spot where suit-clad bank clerks once enjoyed a quick espresso before dispatching transaction confirmations via pneumatic tubes to the 19th floor, we now contemplate contemporary art.



1
Charm, 2023
PVC, various light bulbs, 30m electric wire
variable dimensions

2
Charm, 2023
PVC, various light bulbs, 20m electric wire
variable dimensions

3
Charm, 2023
PVC, various light bulbs, 10m electric wire
variable dimensions

4
Locomotive, 2023
Acrylic and silkscreen print on aluminium
120×90×4 cm

5
Locomotive, 2023
Acrylic and silkscreen print on aluminium
120×90×4 cm

6
Locomotive, 2023
Acrylic and silkscreen print on aluminium
90×120×4 cm

7
Locomotive, 2023
Acrylic and silkscreen print on aluminium
50×50×4 cm

8
Locomotive, 2023
Acrylic and silkscreen print on aluminium
50×50×4 cm

9
Locomotive, 2023
Acrylic and silkscreen print on aluminium
50×50×4 cm

10
Locomotive, 2023
Acrylic and silkscreen print on aluminium
90×120×4 cm

11
Locomotive, 2023
Acrylic and silkscreen print on aluminium
50×50×4 cm