



Artists at work

# Discipline without punishment

**Monica Bonvicini feels at home in brutal, beautiful Berlin**

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MONICA BONVICINI, an Italian artist based in Berlin, is best known for her three-dimensional works, particularly those that take on the male-dominated domain of large-scale sculpture. Her acclaimed “Stairway to Hell” (2003) sawed through a ceiling to occupy two floors of the Istanbul Modern, while “She Lies” (2010), a new sculpture made of steel, glass and styrofoam that floats in a fjord in Oslo, rises to a height of three-storeys. When Ms Bonvicini first started making sizeable works, she says that their “hugeness was almost existential”. Now the scale is less about self-assertion than affinity and aptitude—skills which no doubt contributed to her winning one of the art competitions for the Olympic Park in London. The exact form of the public sculpture is still under wraps, but it might very well assume a grand luminosity and involve the word “run”.

Ms Bonvicini's studio, which used to be a workshop that made tools for repairing buses, is in Wedding, a working-class part of the Mitte district of Berlin. She liked the space instantly because it was “empty and dirty”, unlike her pristinely renovated previous studio, which inhibited her from making a mess. In one area, metal chains in various colours and sizes are draped like samples in a hardware shop. In another, a cluster of strap-on dildos, one of which

was used as a prop in her “No Head Man” video, hang from a hook like a bouquet of drying flowers. On the floor a stack of text-on-glass works say, “Bet your sweet life.”

Ms Bonvicini was born in Venice and grew up in Brescia, where her mother used to call her *la tedesca* or “the German” because she was stubborn. She was accepted by an art school in her hometown but opted instead for Berlin. “Venice is a gorgeous, romantic city,” explains Ms Bonvicini, in her low smoker's voice. “When I came to Berlin in the winter of 1986, it was dark. The heavy Prussian buildings had the scars of the war. I thought: this is beautifully ugly!” Berlin is now home to the largest artist community in Europe, but before the wall came down its art world was small and provincial. “You couldn't order a coffee unless you spoke German,” explains Ms Bonvicini, who has an affection for *Berliner Schnauze*, the curt, gruff way that people speak in the city.

Ideological environments are important to artists at work. After art school, Ms Bonvicini went to Los Angeles to study further and then to teach. After seven years of criss-crossing the Atlantic, she was desperate to return home to Berlin. “If you spend too long in Los Angeles, you become wacky,” she explains. “The sense of reality is not there. Hollywood is so present. And even intellectuals are obsessed with TV.” Also, after September 11th, Ms Bonvicini felt overwhelmed by the ubiquity of American flags. “I started thinking that I should put an Italian flag on my truck. Then thought, oh my God Monica, what is happening to you?”

Ms Bonvicini's work is not so much about politics as power games. Many of her works evoke the vocabulary of S&M culture. “I'm a soft sadist towards the viewer,” she admits as she fingers her gold name-plate necklace, which spells out the word “suckass”. The necklace is part of an edition made by the artist in 2007.

The gender and sexuality of Ms Bonvicini's work is often unresolved. It's not clear if the identity of the artist implied by the work is male or female, homosexual or straight. In terms of artist's personas, however, Ms Bonvicini is not one to play the role of the *enfant terrible*. “I was a very good girl. I worked hard to become a bad girl,” she explains. “Or maybe I am the husband who wears the skirt.”

Not a collaborator, Ms Bonvicini is, in her own words, a “control freak” who likes to “decide on the shape and colour of every screw.” The artist makes as much as she can in her studio, such as small sculptures and the monochromatic ink-brush-on-paper works that she calls “drawings”, sometimes with the help of one of her two assistants, who work on weekday mornings. She also deploys a variety of Berlin fabricators and dark rooms when scale, medium or materials require it. In general, she is eager to make the artistic process less stressful, whether by taking hula-hoop breaks in the studio or by making fewer works on location to tight deadline.

Ms Bonvicini fears repetition and values precision. “I like it when my work is sensual and to the point, with not too much blah-blah-blah in it,” she says. While attention to detail is considered a positive trait in artists, she laments, “It's so easy to be labelled 'difficult' if you are a female artist.” Although a taste for tricky top-bottom dynamics may be suggested by some of her artworks, Ms Bonvicini assures, “I'm the easiest person on the planet!”