

# MARIA LAI. Tenendo per mano il sole

curated by Bartolomeo Pietromarchi and Luigia Lonardelli

On the occasion of the centenary of her birth, MAXXI is dedicating a major exhibition to Maria Lai. More than 200 works will be on display, reconstructing her complex and fascinating biography and free and unprejudiced approach to creativity.

19 June 2019 – 12 January 2020

*I played with great dedication, and at a certain point, they called my games art - Maria Lai*

[www.maxxi.art](http://www.maxxi.art)

Rome, 18 June 2019. MAXXI, the National Museum of XXI Century Arts is devoting a major exhibition entitled **Tenendo per mano il sole** to Maria Lai (1919 - 2013), one of the most original voices in Italian contemporary art. An artist with extraordinary generative capacities, ahead of the artistic research of her time, which would catch up only later, she succeeded in creating a different and original language while being aware of the long process of decantation that her art would have to undergo before it achieved recognition. Today that process appears to be complete: over the last few years there have been numerous initiatives devoted to her, and her works have recently been displayed at Documenta 14 and the 2017 edition of the Venice Biennale. In 2019 - states **Giovanna Melandri**, Fondazione MAXXI President - we chose to focus substantial attention on feminine artistic visions. Therefore, we could not exclude a project on Maria Lai. The exhibition is a tribute to the character and to the work of a woman who has been able to unravel infinite artistic languages throughout her career, always keeping her research at the centre: representing and reinventing - gently and poetically - all the traditions and symbols of an archaic, eternal culture to speak directly and powerfully to the contemporary generations.

The retrospective at MAXXI focuses on what has been defined as her second period, that is to say, the works she created from the 1960s and which she started exhibiting again, following a long absence from the public and the art scene, only in 1971. "This was because", underlines **Bartolomeo Pietromarchi**, director of MAXXI Arte, "it was from that time, through to her death in 2013, that many of the aspirations that make her today a very contemporary artist are present in the work of Maria Lai, allowing us to restore her to a central position in the history of recent art."

The exhibition, curated by **Bartolomeo Pietromarchi** and **Luigia Lonardelli**, has been produced in collaboration with the **Archivio Maria Lai** and **Fondazione Stazione dell'Arte**, with the patronage of the **Municipality of Ulassai** and the support of the **Fondazione di Sardegna**. More than 200 works will be on display, including sewn books, sculptures, Geographies, public works and her celebrated Looms, presenting as comprehensively as possible, the personality of Maria Lai and the diverse aspects of her work. The exhibition will also feature some works recently added to the MAXXI Collection: *Terra*, 1984; *Il viaggiatore astrale*, 1989; *Bisbigli*, 1996; *Pagina cucita*, 1978 and *Untitled*, 2009, a rare Geography on acetate currently being accepted as a donation.

## The exhibition

*Tenendo per mano il sole* is the title of the exhibition and the first Sewn Fable made by the artist. Both the title and the work contain many of the elements typical of Lai's research: her interest in poetry, language and the word; the cosmogony of her geographies evoked by the sun; the pedagogical vocation implicit in that "taking by the hand". Not so much a classic retrospective as a story that is not bound by purely chronological constraints and follows a peculiar biographical and artistic path, characterised by discourses and intuitions apparently left suspended before being taken up again many years later.

Through a broad selection of works, many of them previously unseen, the exhibition presents the multi-faceted world of Maria Lai and the dense stratification of ideas and suggestions that characterised her imaginary. The show is structured in five sections which take their name from citations or the titles of works by Lai, while the subtitle describes the typical methods of her research; the voice of Maria Lai accompanies each section through a montage of previously unseen material compiled by the director Francesco Casu. There is also a final section documenting the works of environmental art realised by the artist, in particular in the Ogliastra region. The section **Essere è tessere. Cucire e ricucire** documents the first works produced in the Sixties, a decade in which the artist decided to abandoned painting and drawing techniques to devote herself to experimentation with materials. This led to the first Looms and the Sewn Canvases: functional, quotidian objects associated with Sardinian craftsmanship were stripped of their practical function and transformed into works revealing fervid expressive research. The thread also represents an idea of transmission and

communication, Lai saw art as an instrument and a language capable of modifying our reading of the world, an approach that derived from her background as a teacher and which was later manifest in the Sewn Books and Sewn Fables. **L'arte è il gioco degli adulti. Giocare e Raccontare** brings together the *art games* created by Lai, re-readings of traditional games with which she reiterates the fundamental role of creativity in society. Play as a means of attaining self-awareness and learning how to relate to the other, an activity not to be relegated to the world of childhood, but to be cultivated in adulthood too. The **Oggetto paesaggio. Disseminare e condividere** section recounts the relational aspect of Lai's practice through a large corpus of objects associated with her affective universe, including sculptures that simulate the appearance of a book or single pages, shapes that reference everyday manufactures while laying claim to their own individuality. Il viaggiatore astrale. **Immaginare l'altrove** brings together the series of the Geographies, visionary and fantastical astral maps that delineate constellations, chimaeras and infinite imaginary universes. The successful season of participatory works is lastly the protagonist in the section **L'arte ci prende per mano. Incontrare e Partecipare. Legarsi alla montagna** (1981), for example, is considered to be the first episode of relational art in Italy, a work inspired by an ancient legend in which Maria Lai succeeded in involving the entire population of the village of Ulassai. Her deeply-held belief in the redemptive power of art, the theme of play held to be fundamental to the growth of ideas for the community, art as an instrument capable of bringing people together, imagining and relating: all this and more renders Maria Lai one of the most innovative artists of her generation, one who managed to intercept and interpret at their origin specific cultural mechanisms that underlie contemporary society. As in the Looms and the weavings that were so dear to her, with her threads strung between tradition and contemporaneity have traced a dense network of relations between people, contributing to a profound change in personal, social and collective stories and identities. The exhibition will be accompanied by a **catalogue** published by 5 Continents, with texts by **Maria Alicata, Antonella Anedda, Franco Farinelli, Luigia Lonardelli, Davide Mariani, Bartolomeo Pietromarchi and Elena Pontiggia.**

The Fondazione Stazione dell'Arte is collaborating with MAXXI – the National Museum of XXI Century Arts and the Archivio Maria Lai on the occasion of the exhibition **Tenendo per mano l'ombra**, curated by Davide Mariani, which will open on the 23rd of June 2019 in the Stazione dell'Arte museum spaces in Ulassai. On Tuesday the 18th of June and again on Wednesday the 19th of June, the Fondazione Stazione dell'Arte and the Fondazione di Sardegna will be previewing at MAXXI the performance **Cuore Mio** by **Marcello Maloberti** (curated by Davide Mariani, scheduled for the 21st of September 2019 at Ulassai).

Three special events have been planned within the ambit of the **Public Program** in order to explore the themes of the exhibition: a talk with the writer **Michela Murgia** who, on the basis of her latest book, will present a unique story about Maria Lai (10 July); the **study day Maria Lai oggi** that will bring together critics, lecturers and researchers on Maria Lai's birthday (27 September) and which **will be followed by two days of screenings** recounting through a selection of films and documentaries the world of Maria Lai and his artistic influence on other expressive idioms (28-29 September). **MAXXI Educazione** will be presenting an intensive programme of activities for various groups including schools, families and adults; from weaving workshops to experimentation with the Sardinian artist's papers, an educational instrument within everyone's reach understood as a system for making sense of the world through space, time and matter. The documents will also be the object of experiments conducted with the *Istituto Leonarda Vaccari – Centro per la riabilitazione, l'educazione e l'inclusione delle persone con disabilità*. A project has also be launched with the Cooperativa Tessile Artigiana **Su Marmuri** of Ulassai which has created a number of products that can be purchased directly from the museum bookshop: manufactures in natural fibre using traditional handloom techniques and a decorative repertory with motifs designed by Maria Lai on the occasion of her collaboration with the cooperative that began in 1981.

**PRESS KIT AND PHOTOS:** <http://www.maxxi.art/area-stampa/> password **areariservatamaxxi**

in collaborazione con  
in collaboration with



con il patrocinio di  
with the sponsorship



MAXXI Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo  
via Guido Reni, 4A - Roma | [www.maxxi.art](http://www.maxxi.art)

con il sostegno di with the support of



media partner



soci

