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BROOKLYN RAIL

David Rhodes, "Luigi Ghirri: The Idea of Building", Brooklyn Rail, October 2020. <https://brooklynrail.org/2020/12/artseen/Luigi-Ghirri-The-Idea-of-Building>.

Luigi Ghirri: The Idea of Building



Luigi Ghirri, *Modena*, 1978, Vintage c-print, 7.75 x 11.6 inches.
Photo: Matthew Marks Gallery.

Arguably the most influential Italian photographer of the 20th Century, Luigi Ghirri was born and lived in the region of Emilia-Romagna in northern Italy. In 1992 he died of a heart attack at the age of 49. Throughout his life Ghirri wrote insightfully on photography and the photographers that interested him. He also noted the people who influenced his work—Walker Evans, Jorge Luis Borges, Fernando Pessoa, and Bob Dylan, among others. Teju Cole writing in the *New York Times* in 2016 related Ghirri's work to the poems of Elizabeth Bishop. He saw that the abundance of small everyday objects, maps, and travel in Bishop's poems share a theme with Ghirri's own globes, tourist signs, and postcards. Cole also astutely observed that both artists presented these themes "in miniature without being trivial."

The exhibition is curated by the artist Matt Connors, and comprises 29 vintage prints together with archival material, handmade exhibition invitations, books, commercial work, presented in vitrines. In his accompanying statement Connors writes, “To me, as a painter, the photographs of Luigi Ghirri are built rather than composed, *things* rather than *images*.” The title of the exhibition is taken from a text by Ghirri’s widow, Paola Ghirri, in which she describes his attitude to not only printing—each print is handmade and unique—but also to his construction of images and fascination with hand-built objects. The photographs, usually taken frontally, have often been taken for montages, when in fact the various parts of the composition existed in place out in the world already, and are simply framed by Ghirri using the photograph’s own rectangular limit.

From the series “Still Life,” *Modena* (1979) is 10 1/4 by 15 inches. The small size of the print does not diminish its quiet and powerful impact. A dark piece of card is half repositioned at a diagonal behind an ornately framed, 19th-century daguerreotype glass plate. The image is cropped close to the two hands holding the card and glass plate. The left half of the plate, with card already behind, reveals a seated woman, the man to her left existing in Ghirri’s photograph as a negative awaiting the full insertion of the card before he becomes fully part of this double portrait. The simplicity and complexity, both pictorially and as a register of making, combined with an indication of the photographic mechanical process itself is as understated as it is brilliant and moving—aligning intimacy, time, memory, process. *Marenello, Ferrari Automobili* (1985–88) is 14 1/8 by 17 5/8 inches, and about as large as Ghirri’s photographs get. The size of all the photographs feels perfect. Larger would not add more, it would be an unnecessary distraction from the subtle, quietly intense presence the photographs possess. The raised red hood, at the far side of the Ferrari motor workshop is flanked on either side by a worker and matches the inside rectangular shape of the entrance, and the rectangle of the photograph itself. It is like a mirror that doesn’t reflect but allows a fluid seeing into with its repeated forms—a cool, cerebral but not unemotional geometry. Ghirri’s camera is not socially rarified, looking only for fine objects and exclusive circumstances, though such images are not excluded. Rather, Ghirri travels through social classes, and object categories accessing the visual world as it presents itself with all its flux and free association, its multitude of signs and textures. This is an art where the peripheral is centered and the perpetual is stilled, allowing recombinations to press on consciousness and further pleasurable awareness whilst constantly deferring projected meaning.