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Stefano Arienti at Guenzani - Milan

By Adrian Dannatt

Now in his early 40s, Stefano Arienti belongs to the generation of Milanese artists who emerged in the early '90s. At the time, they seemed to offer the promise of a lively local clique worthy of international attention, similar to the "Freeze" team in London. As with their English counterparts, these artists were interested in pursuing the strategies of Conceptual art, but with more media savvy than their forebears.

Although this group, which included Umberto Cavenago, Mario Dellavedova and others, failed to achieve success in the wider way Hirst & Co. did, Arienti has remained an interesting artist, usually working with found printed matter that he subtly alters. He first made his reputation with free-standing sculptures created from closely pleated and folded pages of comic books, their gaudy colors and cheap paper transformed into elegant three-dimensional objects. He went on to use modeling paste to overpaint posters of iconic Impressionist paintings, including Monet's poppy fields.

Arienti's relatively modest recent exhibition at Guenzani continued to explore a floral motif. He covered a corner of the gallery with generic photographic posters of brightly colored tulips. The posters are reminiscent of the kitsch wallpaper scenes of nature favored during the 1970s, which have recently come back into vogue. Arienti cut and layered the tulip posters to create a large collage directly on the wall. The overlapping sheets of repeating images were tacked up with plain metal pins. The result was a large "field" of vibrant flowers that would have looked entirely appropriate in any brand-new boutique hotel lobby or design store, except for its deliberately provisional presentation. The main art-historical reference being made seemed to be less Impressionist landscapes than Warhol's silkscreened flowers. Like Warhol's flowers, Arienti's appropriated images evoke flatness, artificiality and the numbing aura of mass-reproduction. Presumably industrially bred and marketed for wide consumption, the tulips Arienti deftly recycles have a bright gaudiness and a knowing vulgarity that chills as much as it attracts.