

Alberi: Frammartino's Trees at MoMA PS1

Natsha Lardera (April 23, 2013)



The camera of Italian artist/filmmaker Michelangelo Frammartino captures the men of the village of Satriano, in Basilicata, who each year participated in a ritual where they covered themselves with ivy until they were totally unrecognizable and became one with nature.

“Not so many years ago, during the festive period of the [Italian Carnevale](#) [2], there were men who lived in the village of Satriano, in Basilicata, who each year participated in a ritual whereby the village men covered themselves with ivy until they were totally unrecognizable. They became transformed, in fact, into strange, ghost-like walking trees. This rite, dating back all the way to the middle ages, eventually disappeared, as newer generations no longer took an interest in traditions of once-up-a-time.” Yet, the lens of Italian artist/filmmaker [Michelangelo Frammartino](#) [3], captured the images of this ritual in [Alberi \(Trees\)](#) [4], a cinematic installation, on view at [MoMA PS1](#) [5], in the VW Dome, until April 27. The installation is part of this year's [Tribeca Film Festival](#) [6].

“Basilicata is home to numerous arboreal rites,” Frammartino told the press, “Trees are not just figures in the background, they are protagonists, they are the center, what gives meaning to the fest and above that, to life. I found this to be incredibly interesting.”

“Through the tools of a cinematic language, Alberi brings back into existence something that had



receded into the intangible dimension of memory. From the past to the present, back into the past, from fiction to reality, from invisible to visible, from memory to film, Alberi breaks the dimension of time, opening an endless loop." Indeed Alberi is a never-ending cinematic installation, repeating itself over and over again, as the final images merge with the initial ones without notice, in a perpetual vortex, which may be fallen into at any moment and at any point.

The cycle shown in Alberi, starts in the darkness of night in beech woods; one slowly emerges from here at the first crack of dawn and discovers an isolated village down in the center of the forest; men exit their houses and proceed in long lines along trails towards the wood; they cover themselves in ivy, celebrating the fusion of man with earth, the cosmos. Once the disguise is complete, the Romiti (Vegetation Men) return to the village like a vegetation army. Their dancing multitude however ends up by swallowing the camera, which easily can be "us, the viewers," and takes us back to primal darkness, which becomes a new sunrise ... in an endless loop.

"The choice of such a cycle corresponds profoundly to the nature of this project: in the first place, because the rites are cyclical, both within their inner structure and in their return year after year, marking the passing of time, always identical but always different too, in many details, firstly the climate conditions in which they take place. Then, because trees, with their extraordinary regenerating capacity, are a symbol of life cyclically fading and reigniting: birth, death and rebirth, for countless times, season after season. Finally, and perhaps this is the most profound reason, a cycle is the characteristic trait of moving images as we got to know them through the movies of the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties."

When entering the [VW Dome](#) [7] at MoMa PS1, you experience the immediate sensations of sound, leaves rustling, and darkness. Then you see the screen, a colossal window into the forest-encrusted terrain of a distant world. Red fabric cubes are scattered around so viewers who want to be comfortable can sit, or even lie, down and be engulfed by the experience and become part of that world of nature.

"Alberi depicts the sense of belonging of Man to the world and nature," Frammartino explains, "The video is centered around the character of the Romito, a Vegetable Man who, according to an ancient custom of the Basilicata region, is a man who has rejected the idea of migration, having therefore "planted his roots" in his own land. During the Carnival, the men of the village of Satriano covered themselves up with ivy, no longer recognizable... And - holding onto a stick decorated with a sprig of holly - they walked around the city, knocking on doors to beg for food. This tradition survived intact since the Middle Ages. The video aims to give a profound meaning to any ritual, starting from Satriano and giving it a universal dimension, which should not be a difficult task given the number of masks and similar rites that can be found in all over the world. The Romito is a powerful symbol of the fusion of humanity with nature, of his feelings of belonging to the cosmos. It is also profoundly cinematic, as the essence of cinema, is to bring things together, as if they were one."

Frammartino continues to explain that the Romito now exists only in the memory of the people, it is part of their identity, even more deeply it is part of their mentality, in the same way it symbolizes land surrounded by woods and resulting in a fusion between humans and vegetation, with different degrees, due to its geographical layout. An internalized character, a mask that stands for itself, however the Romito risks of losing its specificity since it is no longer transmitted as a practice from a generation to another.

"Our curiosity for this rite threatened with extinction thus met with the need for the part of the Satriano people to recuperate all its concreteness, in order to make the tree-man and his allegory visible again; however, we decided together to give visibility not so much to the historical and folklore details of this tradition as to its *raison d'être*, to its deep significance, to what the Romito represented, during the centuries, in the minds of the people who invented him."

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