

LUCÍA PIZZANI

*MERUNTÖ:
In the house of spirits*



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“The mammoth hunters spectacularly occupy the cave wall and the mind, but what we actually did to stay alive and fat was gather seeds, roots, sprouts, shoots, leaves, nuts, berries, fruits, and grains.”

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*¹

Feminist science fiction writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin and Octavia E. Butler have long understood the vital interdependence between humans and plants, and the integral role of seeds in our becoming. Venezuela-born Lucía Pizzani centres many of these ideas in her poetic hybridised language fusing the human and non-human across sculpture, collage, photography, video and performance. Themes of body and nature, transformation and renewal, past and present are recurrent threads. Implicit in her work is the question: how to [re]negotiate our physical relationship with the vegetal world in the Anthropocene?

Pizzani, a keen environmentalist who studied biological conservation, emphasises kinship as a response; in her sensuous photographs, films and performances she inserts herself - or more often fragments of her body - into nature, skin-to-skin, dissolving the boundaries between them, rendering both unfamiliar and compelling. Working with clay, the artist luxuriates in its primordial materiality; she creates beguiling organic forms that at once evoke the antiquity of Mesoamerica and the quotidian, globalised present. “I love the idea of trying to humanise the vegetal world in my work,” she says, “but also of finding threads that are common to humanity going back to very ancient images.”

Uniting these themes, “MERUNTÖ: In the house of spirits”, is the fruit of Pizzani’s first return in six years to her homeland since the socio-political and economic crisis somewhat abated. “I needed to be there,” she says. “My roots are there.” The exhibition’s title was born out of her journey to Canaima, a hallucinatory terrain in south-eastern Venezuela, that inspired Arthur Conan Doyle’s 1912 science fiction novel *The Lost World* about a wilderness enclave where prehistoric animals still roamed. This pre-Cambrian landscape of table-top mountains, or “tepui”, that jut majestically out of the savannah is believed to be inhabited by spirits or gods in local indigenous Pemon mythology. Meruntö refers to the vital cosmic life force that the Pemon believe is housed in the body and all living organisms; the show’s title thus pays tribute to Venezuela’s ancestral cultures. Immersed in the green-yellow painted gallery, surrounded by large-scale images of tropical plants and anthropomorphic faces looming from solar prints and ceramic totems, one has an undeniable sense of vegetal encounter.

Riqui Riqui Ramo, Moriche Ser, Rey del Mango, Helecho, Escarlata, Caoba, Kanaimö. These mellifluous names sound like a plant language. Pizzani pays careful attention to her choice of plants in her work; each is woven with references and echos. The snakelike kanaimö seeds in her solar prints come from Canaima, whose name denotes the spirit of death in Pemon; the Riqui Riqui, named onomatopoeically for the sound of wind moving through its flowers, was collected from the artist’s family home in Caracas; Rey del Mango allude to Pizzani’s childhood memories of playing among mango trees and the fact that the Indian fruit, now abundant in Venezuela, was a lifeline for many during the recent hunger crisis. “There is a tension between the work being rooted to the country where I was born and the sense of movement, migration, displacement you get with a lot of these species,” she says.

Produced without a camera, the emergent images of plant forms and symbols such as snakes and spirals are enigmatic apparitions of the original.

Kanaimö, a collage of solar prints layered over closeup and panoramic photographs, takes us into the Pemon heartland. The mask-like images printed on muslin appear to recede and shift like forest spirits, thanks to the fabric’s membraneous transparency which renders the photographic images behind visible.

Pizzani’s sumptuous photographs from her *Tactile Botánica* series offer a counterpoint to the solar prints. These focus on tropical plants such as coffee, banana, eucalyptus, Asian palm and breadfruit, which originated on other continents but were dispersed to South America by colonisers, traders, migrants and winds. I am reminded of Octavia E. Butler’s dystopian novel *Parable of the Sower*, in which the protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina founds a new religion called Earthseed.² Amid social breakdown and catastrophe, Olamina’s group find hope in the belief that the seeds of life can be transplanted and adapt in different circumstances - as has happened through history. The plants in these photographs are bearers of narratives across centuries and geographies, narratives that tell of survival and resilience. The breadfruit, for example, was first “discovered” in 1769 when Captain Cook arrived in Tahiti; the British botanist Joseph Banks, who was on the trip, saw the potential of the knobby fruit as a cheap source of nutrition for enslaved plantation workers in the Caribbean colonies. But Pizzani’s interest is not exploitative; each image shows her hand holding or caressing the plants. In *Turgua* her puckered palm mirrors the leaves’ waxy patterns, in *Cambur* the purple banana flower seems to nuzzle Pizzani’s hand. “There is the performative element of the touching, the haptic quality, and the fact that I also work with my hands to make clay,” she explains. “So I like the presence of the hands.” These lush images invite us to feast on the vibrant colours, textures and forms of the plants, and to reflect on their complex embedded histories.

The ceramic works, made from black and red English clay imprinted with the texture of Mexican corn cobs, return us to the theme of hybridity and bring an embodied earthiness to the show. Playing with dichotomies of animate and inanimate, human and vegetal, the artist has filled some of her totems - or vessel-vase-beings - with live plants that sprout at the top like hair. Two intriguing clay forms on plinths further highlight the porousness of the human/non-human division, their inside-out surfaces, folds and recesses recalling body organs such as the brain or vagina.

“MERUNTÖ: In the house of spirits” pays homage to ancient knowledge systems of indigenous cultures that have persisted in the face of oppression. Clay objects, photographs and solar prints converse with each other in a lively call and response between two and three dimensions, body and plant, the material and immaterial. In this time of climate emergency, Pizzani celebrates human connection with non-human species, harnessing hybridity as a powerful creative strategy.

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1 Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, (1986, Ignota Press; 2019)

2 Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, (1993; Headline; 2019)