

## Fading Loss. Tales from the Forest

by Cecilia Canziani

*Empathy has grown. The awareness that, much like a plant,  
I, too, suffer damage from storms. I can dry out, wither,  
shed pieces, and, above all, not move around as I would like.  
Far from seeing myself as the master of my garden's wellbeing,  
I know I am exposed and vulnerable to its chance events.*

Pia Pera, *Al giardino ancora non l'ho detto* [I Haven't Told My Garden Yet], 2016

Author Raffaele Milani wrote that landscape is "nature transformed by man over the course of history."<sup>1</sup> Although it is often confused with nature, it isn't nature. Instead, it is the way mankind organizes space to suit a certain aesthetic. The gaze perceives a series of geographical and environmental features in a landscape; the act of viewing is a cultural experience laying halfway between philosophy and art. It serves as an introduction to the experience of the world, as well as the self. In other words, when we produce an aesthetic image of a place, in reality we are talking about ourselves. We project our own experiences, convictions, aspirations and desires onto it. It's no coincidence that this subject has preoccupied the minds of countless artists over the ages, who continue to offer ideas, pose questions and solicit answers, because this allows them to recreate an image whose point of view is always inevitably rooted firmly in place, thereby projecting the self outside of oneself. When we change the landscape, the landscape changes us.

The Italian landscape owes its incredible variety and uniqueness precisely to the fact that it is almost entirely manmade, preserving traces of the various visions of the world that alternated over the centuries. Knowing how to read it gives us a precise image of previous eras, thereby allowing for a greater understanding as to the problems and crises tackled by art over long periods of time, ranging from the 15th century to the present day.

The forests surrounding the Piedmontese town of Trivero are a testament to the reciprocal relationship between the land and the local community and the desire to restore its natural beauty to both the location, as well as the gaze of those who view it. In the 1930s, this

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<sup>1</sup> Raffaele Milani, *L'arte del paesaggio*, (Landscape art), Il Mulino, Bologna 2001, p. 43.

mountain was laid bare by the exploitation of wooded areas for lumber and the creation of new pastures. It was reforested with a European spruce monoculture, according to the criteria of the era. The European spruce was used throughout the Alps and Pre-Alps until the end of the 1950s and has shown signs of suffering in recent years.

Just as humans fall ill, the forests have recently been getting sick. We are closely linked; we both feel the effects of globalization and the resulting rapid changes in terms of climate that can no longer be properly metabolized by the planet. An increase of two degrees in temperature exposes the forests of Trivero to attacks by insects that previously were not a threat. A small parasite with the evocative name of the European spruce bark beetle is largely responsible for the forest's demise — a forest that was already made fragile by lack of sunlight and for being surrounded by invasive, tenacious ferns, who are always the first colonizers of grazing areas abandoned by man.

Laura Pugno has known this mountain since childhood. It is part of her interior landscape, and, in a certain sense, a part of the imaginary landscape she created as an artist. By exploring this landscape through photography, video and drawings, it has become the subject — or rather the pretext — used to analyze the perceptions and signals with which we organize it, and, ultimately, organize ourselves through it. Her gaze comes from two perspectives: on one hand, as an artist working according to a client's commission, and on the other, as a member of the local Trivero community. This is perhaps the key to another aspect of her work. If the term "landscape" requires a vision and, therefore, a gaze, the work of Laura Pugno demands a use of all the senses, not only sight, but also touch and hearing, creating a bodily experience within a given place.

On this occasion, a story is told from the point of view of the forest, which also serves as a provider of material support and subject matter for a collective body of works with a story to tell.

In preparation of this commission, Laura Pugno walked along the forest paths once again, bringing back two words whose tonal qualities influenced the creation of her work: obscurity and darkness. She also experienced another inspiration: sound. Finally, she observed the European spruce bark beetle's method of leaving visible traces on tree trunks through excavation. She created her exhibition using overlapping textures that symbolize the traces we leave on a place, signifying, in my opinion, a certain kinship. Laura Pugno evokes the small tracks left by these tiny parasites by abrading an image or printing it with Braille text, thereby partially erasing the landscape, but at the same time opening it to new, more complex interpretations.

Eyesight is always put to the test by the other senses in the works of Laura Pugno. Not even a photographic image of a landscape – which, in itself, is a sort of *mise en abyme* in the act of viewing — is a retinal process, because it is always accompanied by other sensory perceptions, such as touch and hearing.

The audial qualities of the European spruce are well known to violin makers. Stradivarius made his famous instruments from these trees that grew during the Little Ice Age, which lasted from the second half of the 14th century to the late 19th century. Coniferous forests thrive in the cold and evidently so does their sound.

For *Fading Loss*, the artist wanted to preserve the sounds of the forest by creating a soundtrack with sound artist, Magda Drozd. When the European spruce bark beetle eats the outside of a tree, it cuts into its lymphatic system, causing dryness and death. Yet, at the same time, it creates carvings on the tree's surface. In fact, these beetles are sometimes called "engraver beetles", and Laura Pugno traced these markings with graphite — an action that also creates, and welcomes, change. The sounds created are a translation of an action that undermines the forest, while also changing the face of it.

At the same time, Laura Pugno created a series of landscape drawings of the forest in its current state, using carbon obtained by burning European spruce branches. It is as if the forest is drawing its own portrait or participating in the material structure of the image. The paper used is covered in scientific data that offers yet another interpretation of the place, revealing that there are always at least two ways of understanding and analyzing things. The exhibit's photographs were obtained by creating a self-contained ecosystem by placing photographic paper into the trunks of trees about to be felled. The cavity then becomes a dark room, and the resulting image, along with the soundscape and carbon drawings, offers the tree's point of view on the forest — a chronicle *of* the woods, as well as *from* the woods. This is the final glance of the dark forest captured at the moment of its demise.

The center of the exhibition space showcases a structure constructed from ferns and planks made from local European spruce wood, evoking the place analyzed by the artist; the retrieved input data becomes a support for articulating her art works.

*Fading and Loss* are two words intrinsically linked to the monument's mnemonic function, in public and private, as well as through the use of photography. By recording the fading and loss of a place, Laura Pugno stages a sort of ritual, where its remains are gathered and reconfigured to transmit memories. In its present state, this project appears to be a

monument to the disappearance of a landscape, which will soon be substituted with another that brings with it new visions, emotions, desires and memories.