

ARTFORUM

Francesco Clemente

VITO SCHNABEL GALLERY AT THE OLD SANTA MONICA POST OFFICE

by Suzanne Hudson
February 1, 2022



Francesco Clemente, *Two Trees*, 2001, fresco (traditional pigments on honey comb panel plastered with fresh lime), 9' 10" + 19' 8".

"Twenty Years of Painting: 2001-2021" was the first show of Francesco Clemente's work in Los Angeles in almost two decades. (The artist's last outing, an elegiac 2003 Gagolian presentation that spanned New York and LA, offered a selection of then-recent works that conspicuously absented the human figure—a resonant meditation on loss.) Here, in a decommissioned and vacated Depression-era post office in Santa Monica, thirty pieces were spread across some fifteen thousand square feet of exhibition space. The spare Moderne interior, all rose marble and stained wood, supplied a surprisingly pitch-perfect backdrop for the expansive and willfully heterogenous collection of large-scale fresco panels and watercolors, oils and mixed-media pigments on canvas and linen, and some diminutive conjurings on glass. The appropriateness of the setting, however, owed less to the historical framing within the literal shell of the Public Works Administration's civic efforts than to the art-friendly aesthetics of the building's vast incandescent rooms. Nevertheless, this temporal and ideological disjuncture was a vital complement to the installation, which foregrounded Clemente's sustained interests in time and mortality, along with the somatic and spiritual rituals various cultures use to confront impermanence.

The massive *Two Trees*, 2001, a twenty-foot-long, lemon-yellow, three-panel fresco depicting the titular plants in blossom—one resplendent with blushing fruit and festooned with prayer flags, the other split in half—presided over a central space, exemplifying Clemente's none-too-subtle commitment to themes of precarity and transience. The aforementioned pennants recurred in *White Flags 1*, 2015—now coded more obviously as a symbol of defeat—in which a flag stakes a heart caught in a swarm of swallows. By contrast, two of the earliest pieces (indeed, made before the years defined by the show's title), *Dormiveglia IV* and *V*, both 1998, portrayed oversize drapery-clad goddesses that hover, as per their names, at some indeterminate threshold between wakefulness and sleep. These oneiric pieces remain physically imposing and simultaneously out of reach: They are seemingly personal without revealing the specificities of their intimacy—attempting something like communication, if not communion, out of individuated experience. Clemente was centered more directly as subject, however mutable, in other works, such as *Father*, 2006-2007, where the artist dons a Roman Catholic bishop's headdress, or *Summer Self IV*, 2011, where, in a frank expression of metamorphosis, he sprouts antlers.

FRANCESCO CLEMENTE

Clemente's earlier studies in the Rome of his youth, his travels through India and Europe thereafter, and his philosophical engagements with Jiddu Krishnamurti and theosophy are well-known aspects of his biography. Sometimes these matters come up in the work. (In this installation, his backstory was mostly peripheral, except during an opening conversation he had with artist Mary Weatherford.) Remarkable, then, are the more direct canvases that Clemente made in 2020 throughout the Covid-19 lockdown, including *5-11 2020* and *5-14 2020*, both of which prominently feature in their composition the dates they were completed. These time stamps are central elements: In the former, the date is written on a sign that cleaves a flower's stem; the whole scene unfolds within a heart-shaped portal that appears to be sitting either in front of or behind a yellow-brick wall. In the latter, the date floats across two banners flanking an hourglass through which a stream of sand passes. Above all, *5-14 2020* particularizes the other abstractions, metering time already past. Cued to our current period in such unequivocal ways, this painting and its companion suggest a possibility for narrative—one that is more intractable than evanescent. They admit a grounding in the stubborn materiality of life and grasp at studio work as not only an allegory but also an imperfect salve.