

*October Country* is a sympathetic and surprisingly lush portrait of working-class life in Herkimer, NY, in the Mohawk Valley. Don and Dottie, the patriarch and matriarch of the clan, are sixtyish and wise, but they seem unable to corral their succeeding generations. Their daughter Donna and granddaughter Daneal are caught in what Dottie calls a “cycle”—drawn to abusive men, both girls got pregnant as teenagers to become struggling single mothers. As the film begins in 2007, Daneal—free at last of Tony, the man who beat her—is attempting to win custody of toddler Ruby, but within months she is living with another tough boy and she’s pregnant again. Her cynical, witty younger sister Desi seems to be the only one with any perspective on the situation.

Two other characters receive the same intimate attention: Don’s sister Denise, a self-styled witch whose apartment is crammed full of unicorns, fairies and dragons; and Chris, an amiably criminous foster child whom the elder Moshers have taken in hoping that the love they give him will turn him around. Off screen and unreferenced in the film is Donal Mosher himself, the guy who got out, the son of Dottie and Don, the brother of Donna, and the doting uncle of Daneal and Desi.

The film, which premiered in June at the Los Angeles Film Festival, is the first feature-length collaboration of photographers Michael Palmieri and Donal Mosher. Mosher and Palmieri met three years ago at the weekly Trannyshack drag show at the Stud here in San Francisco and moved to Portland together in 2007. I met Donal in the mid-90s when he was a undergrad at the Art Institute. Eventually Donal started taking the private workshop I sometimes run in my apartment, where he wrote, among other things, vignettes about his family to accompany photographs he was shooting of them, many of photos centering around Halloween—the season of ghosts and masks that features so prominently in *October Country*. Palmieri’s background in music video, feature film work, and commercial photography, includes a long association with the celebrated Australian-born cinematographer Christopher Doyle.

Palmieri’s lighting is gorgeous enough to make you wonder, how could anybody do such beautiful lighting? On days that I’m blue, I wish Mike and Donal could come over and relight my life to the luminous golds and olives and scarlets they use here. Nature in the Mohawk Valley, especially in autumn, is so vivid it’s hallucinogenic. At Halloween, ghosts and ghouls pop out of a flickering darkness. Denise, whose ghost-hunting expeditions could be worked up as comedy, maintains an elegance, a dignity, denied her in life.

The camera is always on the side of its subjects, lovingly so, presenting the Moshers in glamorous close-ups reminiscent of Douglas Sirk’s iconic treatment of Jane Wyman, Rock Hudson, Robert Stack. The Moshers smoke nearly as many cigarette as Lauren Bacall in *Written on the Wind*, and look so fabulous doing it you feel like lighting up yourself. Palmieri uses quick flashes of slow motion, lingering on a hand, a face, suggesting subliminally that time is more than a linear progression and that it happens to each of us in different ways.

In a recent interview, Mosher told me, “The same things are beautiful in a poor house as in a rich house: the way light strikes, the way time moves, and the ways people get their hearts broken.” When I look for him in this film, I see instead reflections of Donal in the

members of his family—there’s his lips, there’s his jaw, his accent, his frail bone structure. Isn’t all art a montage of fragments of its creator? Even though he goes unmentioned in the film Donal’s everywhere in it, the son, brother, uncle, the absent adoring eye.

The lost innocence of children pervades the film. In home movie footage we see the now ravaged Daneal as a young ballerina in a child’s dance program, adorable in a pink tutu. The documentary as a whole teems with ghosts: the ghosts of colonial America, the ghosts of Vietnam (Don went away at eighteen and came back “changed,” according to Dottie), and the ghosts of the vanished industry that once kept the Valley thriving. Now there’s only the one factory that employs a thousand souls. And wouldn’t you know it, it’s a gun factory—the Remington plant. And what happens, wonder the citizens of Herkimer, when the Iraq war ends and the need for ammunition dwindles? Will their town vanish? The factory is the hidden center of the film, and of the family’s trauma, an ominous reinvention of the house that Jack Built in the child’s nursery rhyme: “These are the people/ That work in the factory/ That makes the guns/ That fuel the wars/ That kill the people/ That . . .”

Often when working class subjects appear in film, the look is either gritty, to emphasize the bleakness of their lives, or it takes on the “no style” style of an anthropological expedition. Palmieri and Mosher decided not to narrate the film, even though potential investors begged them to add a narration and to remove the ghosts, the poetry, and “anything spooky.” Cinema verité, Mosher told me, is the reigning style because people think that if a film is too stylized, it isn’t “true.” (Though this is changing to some degree, he added. I think of Errol Morris’ flashy re-stagings of past events in such films as *The Thin Blue Line*.)

The camera of *October Country* lets us see the Moshers the way they dream of being seen. It’s as if the camera itself longs for them to *be* all their dreams. Desi looks at previous footage of herself on the TV screen and giggles, hiding her eyes. Even Chris, the clownish wigger boy from Queens, is shown executing some remarkable parkour flips up the side of WalMart—and looks dapper as he shares shoplifting tips with us.

Mostly it’s the beauty of the film that will, I predict, win it a devoted following. The film seems to be saying that, no matter how dreary and vicious our lives may seem from the outside, and how limited our horizons through ugly politics and even uglier economic practice, we all have access to beauty. Again and again, *October Country* brings me back me to my own working class childhood, tacky beyond endurance, but there I was, looking out my bedroom window at the alley under moonlight and gasping at the mystery of it all.