



## *Branching out: Giuseppe Penone's tree sculptures*

**The Italian artist has devoted his career to examining the relationship between humans and nature**

By, Samuel Reilly  
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The use of local produce is something you might think it more likely to find advertised in a gallery's café, than at the opening of the exhibition itself. At the Yorkshire Sculpture Park's retrospective of the works of the Italian sculptor Giuseppe Penone, however, a credit tells you that the potatoes for one of the exhibits were supplied by W. Moore and Son and Bradshaw Wholesale Ltd.

For "Patate" (1977, right), Penone took a cast of his face in metal, and buried it in a potato patch. Five vegetables that took an imprint of Penone's features as they grew were themselves cast in bronze, before being hidden in a pile of potatoes. The knowledge that, here, it's a mound of Yorkshire's finest from which you pick out echoes of the artist's nose, lips and mouth is a nice quirk – especially given that Penone has highlighted the importance of the "local reality" of his upbringing in northern Italy, in which his own production has been rooted. But it also makes you consider how Penone's works, uprooted now from Piedmont and repotted in rural Yorkshire, relate to the place in which they appear.



*Pile 'em high "Patate" (1977)*

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Penone's career began in 1968 with a series of photographs, "Alpi Marittime", in which he used his body to interact with trees and streams in the forest around his home, for example, by clinging onto a sapling. It came to the attention of the critic Germano Celant, who, the following year, included Penone, alongside artists like Michelangelo Pistoletto, Maria Merz and Giovanni Anselmo, in his book "Arte Povera", which defined Italy's most influential post-war art movement. Arte Povera (poor art) was a reaction against what many artists and critics saw as a decadent, corporate art world. It advocated the use of everyday found objects, stripping art of convention and pretension. The growth of the movement in Turin coincided with the beginnings of conceptualism in America, and its use of natural materials would have a profound effect on Robert Smithson and the development of Land Art.

Penone's materials of choice are wood, water and stone. Over five decades, he has used them to conduct a profound, poetic investigation of how humanity imposes itself on the natural world, and vice versa. Established now among the rolling hills of rural Yorkshire, Penone's art takes on a new resonance. The Yorkshire Sculpture Park is situated in a traditional English landscape garden, designed in the 18th century according to the wishes of the landed aristocrat, Thomas Wentworth Blackett. Pockets of artificial wilderness appear amid the sprawling pleasure gardens – the hand of man has tried here to disguise its acts, to give an idealised sense of natural harmony and order. Penone's works strip off this mask, displaying both the marks of artifice – literally bearing the prints, in some cases, of the artist's fingers – and their own slow shaping by the forces of natural growth.



*"Idee di pietra – Olmo (Ideas of Stone – Elm)", 2008*

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## M A R I A N G O O D M A N G A L L E R Y

A young, leafless elm tree stands alone in a small clearing of the woodland around the YSP's Upper Lake. Wedged between the branches, you realise with a start, is a vast boulder. It seems at first an affront – a scar on the face of nature. But gradually, as your mind comes to accept this aberration, the structure returns you with renewed attention to those same processes of nature that its creator has harnessed.

The vertical thrust of the trunk countering the immense force exerted downwards by the tons of stone, is a reminder of the gravity-defying growth of trees over centuries, as their huge bulk is borne impossibly skywards. The stone, taken from a river, has been sculpted over countless millennia by forces of erosion; the bole of the young tree has been cast in bronze. Stone and metal, each bearing the memory of the water and wood which have shaped them, achieve an equilibrium between tension and calm – human emotions and natural elements held together in an unlikely balancing act.



*"Trattenere 6, 8, 12 anni di crescita (Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quel punto)  
(To retain 6, 8, 12 years of growth (It will continue to grow except at this point))", 2004–16*

This series has its origins in Penone's early ventures in the forests of Piedmont. Grasping a tree – feeling, in his words, "the flow of the tree around my hand placed against the tree trunk" – he sought a means of freezing in time this fleeting experience of touch. He attached a steel cast of his hand and forearm to the trunk; as the years have progressed, the tree has begun to grow around and envelop this foreign object; eventually, to the naked eye, it will erase even this prolonged memory of contact with the artist. The three bronze casts on display here reveal the extent of this process six, eight and 12 years after it began.

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*"Nel Legno (In the Wood)", 2008*

At the age of 22, Penone realised that by following one tree ring visible at the edge of the beam of wood he could reveal the supple, meandering form of a young tree lying latent within the timber. It was something he would return to again and again, as a way of showing the affinity between sculpture and natural growth, and uncovering the true nature of the materials that lie at the heart of human construction. By exposing the form of a tree in the wood, this work explains the pun in the exhibition's title.



*"Matrice (Matrix)", 2015*

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Spanning almost the full length of the YSP's Underground Gallery is a doubled length of pine tree, with the trunk dissected and the two halves placed end to end. Here, Penone reverses the process of "Nel Legno", cutting out the wood that is encircled by one of the tree's rings to render the younger tree a ghost, visible only by its absence.

This negative space is a nod to one of Penone's favoured techniques: casting trees in bronze by moulding an impression of the tree in clay and pouring molten metal into the hole. Penone has fitted one section of the tree with a cylinder of bronze, cast from the tree's interior; the corresponding section of the trunk's other half has been blackened, to make you imagine the colossal task of piecing the pine back together.



*"L'ombra del bronzo (The shadow of the bronze)", 2002*

A 16-metre-tall tree trunk has had its branches stripped back and a hole cut from its base. The block that has been removed lies cast in bronze nearby; a younger tree, excavated like the sapling of "Nel Legno", rises phoenix-like from the timber. In the void left at the base of the larger trunk, a green sapling has been planted.

On the day I visited the exhibition, a blackbird perched on one of the uppermost, truncated branches, surveying the rolling Yorkshire hills around it, while a tawny companion hopped around the base of the tree, peering skywards up the shaft. Ignoring the thriving ash tree nearby, animating the cold bronze instead with their movements, the birds added a perfect grace note to the eternal round of growth, death and renewal in Penone's art.

***Giuseppe Penone: A Tree in the Wood Yorkshire Sculpture Park until April 28th 2019***

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