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THE THIEVES OF BEAUTY

× Six years ago German police entered a modest apartment and found more than a thousand works of art. What crimes, and whose stories, lie beneath the Gurlitt collection? A report from Bonn and Bern *by James McAuley*



THE HIGHLAND REELS

× London's fine for some, but the true British artistic powerhouse is Glasgow: restless, experimental, and proudly European. Pity, though, about those two referenda *by Susannah Thompson*

QUERIES AND SUBMISSIONS

× Michel Houellebecq imagined a charismatic outsider could take power; so, rather differently, did Emmanuel Macron. France's novelists take stock of an unlikely president *by Cody Delistraty*

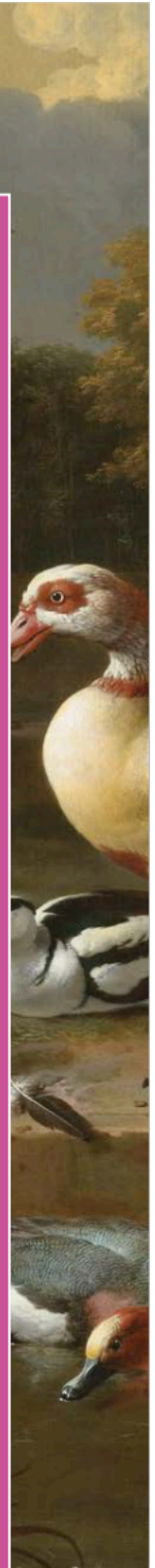
TWO INTERVIEWS × Giuseppe Penone on laurels, oaks, and what grows in Abu Dhabi; Lucy McKenzie on how to paint your powder room

PLUS × The first great European novel; Egon Schiele's art of stimulation; marriage advice for Meghan Markle; ballet's gender-free future; Google's panoptic apartments; reviews from New York, London, and Tokyo; and a portfolio by Michele Borzoni



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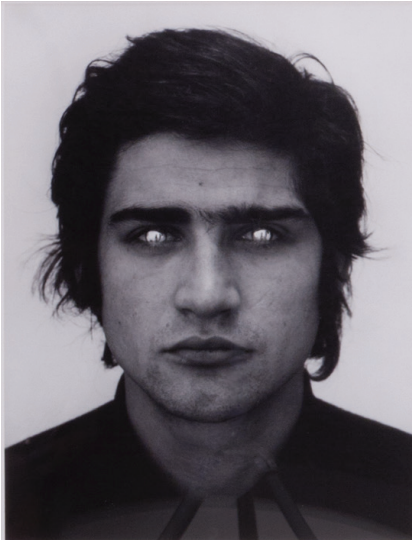
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, Interview

Giuseppe Penone

When the gallery or the government makes you uneasy, look for better answers outside. For Giuseppe Penone, one of Italy's most poetic and influential artists, nature offers the primary materials for an art of new ambitions, in which a careful elaboration of forms reveals the essence of matter and reconciles the organic with the manmade. As the youngest of the artists grouped under the umbrella of Arte Povera, Penone imagined an art that grew from humbler sources, above all from trees: towering conifers carved to reveal their heartwood,



or chambers of laurel leaves whose fragrance filled museumgoers' lungs. Always poised between the personal and the universal, Penone's casts and whittlings have taken on a greater ecological significance in this new century, when the eternity of nature no longer seems so assured.

Penone was born in 1947 in the small village of Garessio, nestled in the forests of Piedmont. When he came to Turin as a teenager, both the art world and Italy were in the midst of massive change—and the vocabulary Penone forged in that fraught era has served him, with slight shifts in tone, for fifty years. We met in New York this winter, where he presented a new exhibition at Marian Goodman Gallery; he was just back from Abu Dhabi, where he had planted an uncanny bronze tree in the oasis of the Louvre. His thinking is capacious, he laughs all the time, and yet, as we talk, he always comes back to process: the slow, painstaking work that turns nature into art.

Though his English is strong, he requested we conduct this interview in French, a language he has spoken since his childhood close to the border. As his art endlessly insists, you can't separate a man from the land in which he thrived. × *Jason Farago*

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Rovesciare i propri occhi. 1970.
Chromogenic print.

All images courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/London/Paris.
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- × There is an extraordinary drawing of yours I saw recently, which pictures the rings of a tree interwoven with your own fingerprint. Its impact is almost like heraldic arms: *here is where I come from*. Can you tell me a little about the forest where you were born and grew up, and the differences between that milieu and Turin, where you spent your adolescence?

I was born in a little village of three or four thousand inhabitants, in the south of Piedmont, not far from the Mediterranean. It's just 30 kilometers from the sea, but there are mountains in between. It was a place that at the time—and still today, among some people who live in the mountains—had barely changed since the Middle Ages. It was really very primitive. I was interested in art, in sculpture, and there was definitely nothing to see there.

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I started to draw at a very young age, although my grandfather, actually, was a figurative sculptor. Let's say he was an autodidact. This was in the 1930s, and he was never able to live from his art. As for my parents, they never put up any obstacles to my being an artist. But just in case, I did accounting school until I was 19. Then I enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Turin. During the mid-1960s, Turin was the most dynamic city in Italy. And there were lots of connections with the United States. Rich industrial families had business dealings in the United States, of course, but also there were galleries showing American art, like Gian Enzo Sperone. His was the most interesting at the time.

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- × You were still very young. Did the academy feel limiting to you? And did you already know, at the age of 18 or 19, that you wanted to be a part of a different, more progressive scene forming in Turin?

I really had no idea what the “art world” was at the time. I tried to learn from books, but I didn't yet have a direct connection to what was going on. It was only when I started going to galleries that I got my bearings.

- × You were a bit of an autodidact yourself, then.

Absolutely. I started at the Academy, and then, after one year, I thought there was nothing more worth learning. I stayed enrolled, because otherwise I would have had to join the army... *[Laughs]* But yes, Turin was a milieu, a context, and I found my way to people with more or less the same interests. Still, the problem was that my sculptor friends were often just remaking the work of earlier artists. *[Henry]* Moore, for example. Whereas I thought, and I'm still convinced of this, that if you begin from someone else's work, you're ultimately talking about someone else's ideas, not your own.

So I thought about what I could do with my own background, which was very limited. This has nothing to do with how sensitive you are—but knowledge matters too, and my knowledge was narrow. I felt that the things that interested me were largely what I saw in Sperone's gallery, artists like Morris, Judd. But my only possibility was to make work that began from what I felt close to, and what I knew best.

× You were 21 years old when you began *Alpi marittime*, your first major series of sculptures, which saw you intervene in the growth of trees in the Piedmontese forest. It was 1968: a moment when young people, especially at the universities, were rethinking everything.

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And the structures of the country, the social and political structures, were still the old prewar structures. We saw an immense social shift, even in the simplest of things. Like travel. It was suddenly easier to travel everywhere in the world, and to come into contact with different cultures. An idea of dialogue. The global village.

Everything that had roots in cultural heritage, especially in a country like Italy, with its cultural roots in the Renaissance, felt like a repetition—like something that no longer had any relevance. What was interesting were the basic, universal motivations of art, a humanist vision of reality. What I tried to do was to get to these germinal ideas, but still stay connected to my Italian culture. Working with elements of nature let me keep links to the past of my country, but offered more liberty.

And this way, too, I could be in dialogue with ideas of minimalism. Instead of treating art as material worked by the hand of the sculptor, here the material itself made the form.

- × For *Alpi marittime*, you cast your hand in steel or in bronze while gripping saplings in the Piedmontese forest. And as they grew, both the sculptures and the trees took on new form; the work of art itself, in fact, was the conjunction of the tree and the bronze. At this time were you looking at other artists working outdoors: the land artists in the American west, for instance?

We were both intervening in spaces outside the studio, sure. But the big difference between my work and what land art was, was that land art always had a highly formal vision. The voids of [Michael] Heizer, for example, had a deep connection to the work of Malevich, a formal connection. My approach to the outdoors was never about manipulation. I wasn't trying to create forms. I was trying to enter into the logic of the materials themselves, into the logic of the growth of the tree.

It was more a connection between my body and a context. Between my ephemeral presence and the tree's rooted one.

- × The connection between your body and this context, this natural context, became a cast. An imprint.

Casting is an important part of my work. Because it's an impression of a body that isn't a representation of a body. In other words, at this moment, the late 60s, when it was essentially forbidden in art to do representation, casting gave the opportunity to reintroduce the figure, to introduce the body in an objective fashion, and not to interpret it.

- × And just to push you here: casting has a history going back to ancient art. You mentioned the Renaissance felt irrelevant to you then, but did antiquity weigh on you more? Was there really no effort to inscribe yourself in a longer tradition?

You know, you never have a clear project when you do things like this. You do them in an instinctive way, with stimuli that are present in your thinking and in your upbringing. I am an Italian. My education was one based on humanism. We read Dante, we read Homer. All



Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quel punto. 1968–2003.

that is an inheritance that you can't just forget. We saw Italian art history; you don't just forget that either. (I always doubted, in fact, whether Italians could ever really do abstract art.) But at the moment I started to work, it was so important for us to be in dialogue with the whole world, and not a specific culture. If you look at minimalism, it was something that could be understood in cultures far removed from where they were made. A relationship with nature or with the fingerprint, too, was shared by large numbers of cultures.

So I did these works about the growth of the trees. And I could have kept doing interventions in the forest. Instead I began a different series of works, which involved taking a piece of wood and finding the form of a tree within. Those, too, were based on the idea of the logic of materials: just what was the material of a tree? Even today, I consider the tree an extraordinary kind of sculpture—because it's a living being that fossilizes its form in its internal structure.

× You don't just reveal the interior of the tree, however; you still create something. There is always a moment of invention, even if the material may dictate the direction.

“Invention”: from the Latin *invenire*, “to find.” Invention is finding something. When you work with a material, you have to find the form that's inside it.

So take this work: a beam that I found. [*He points to Essere vento (2014), formed from a petrified tree trunk.*] After years of growth, I thought, you could still find the initial form of the tree within the beam. I'd looked for a beam of a coniferous tree because there's a linear growth form. I started to follow the rings, and I found the form of the tree by following them.

× With a saw?

With scissors, and then afterwards by scratching with other tools. Even a piece of glass can help. The wood itself, and especially coniferous woods, has a hard layer and then a soft layer. It's not that difficult to follow the line of the growth rings because there's a difference in color.

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- × Along with trees, the other primary material that you used in your work, especially after 1970, was your own body. Your own breath, or the imprint of your eyelid.

It was the logical next step. Because it was already there in my earliest works: the relationship between my body and the growth of the trees. The tree was itself sculpted over time, and then as the tree grew further, the sculpture's gesture was frozen. All that made me think very differently about duration: we don't think about how things transform over time. *Rovesciare i propri occhi* (1970), the work where I wore the mirrored contact lenses, was another effort to see reality differently.

- × What could you see when you wore the contacts?

Oh, I'd made tiny holes in the lenses, so I wouldn't be completely blind... [*Laughs*] But that work, too, began from the idea that when you make a work of art, you're so often producing an image out of something you saw before. And in this case, I was reflecting in the lenses what I *would have* seen. Immediately throwing back the image of a future work.

- × Unlike Bruce Nauman, for example, and also unlike many feminist artists of the 1970s, in these works you didn't use your body as a canvas. The body was more like a paintbrush; the body was the tool to make something new.

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Right. And the same with the fingerprints, or the impressions of my eyelids. The eyelid is a little bit of skin that covers our eyes, that blocks our vision. Our eyes can focus on things at many distances, but not on anything as close as an eyelid. So I made these drawings that were as if you could see the structure of the skin of the eyelids. They were the first large drawings that I ever did, dozens of meters long.

And then in 1978 I began to make works with my breath. When you breathe air in, it's as if the air has entered the shadow of your body. I associated the shadow with leaves; what they absorb into their bodies becomes oxygen. I called the work *Respirare l'ombra*. The mouth and the lungs are made of gilded bronze leaves, to indicate what people did in

the space. Because they were breathing and introducing into the interior of their bodies the fragrance of the laurel leaves.

- × So beginning with the mirrored contacts, really, you were beginning to conceive of art as something that had to be perceived with more senses than just sight. Touch and smell became central to the appreciation of a work of art; the eyes were not enough.

Because my work was about an understanding of materials, and we understand space and materials by touching them. Even children do. Visual perception is a conversion process in the brain. Or think of how you pace a room to measure it: how many feet across? We need the body as a tool, to correct the faulty interpretation of our eyes. Sight can have force, but touching brings you back to reality.

- × These works were made during Italy's so-called "Years of Lead": a time of terrorism and social tension. A prime minister was assassinated. Looking back, how much did those societal pressures weigh on you in the 1970s?

They called conventions into question. Which we had already begun, of course, but there were social, economic, political consequences. The very nature of production was changing. Factory work was being transformed by automation. The oil crisis, too, had an effect.

But then if you look at what happened in the 1980s, artistic production became much more open—and I would not say it was very interesting, from the point of view of art. It was really pretty terrible!

- × And there is today, especially in the United States, a similar anxiety. I wonder: at this late stage of your career, do you have the sense that you are still making works in a world where conventions are in question, or do you have the luxury to remove yourself from what's going on?

No, I don't have that luxury. Everything happening in the world touches you, obviously. The problem is different: once your style of thinking is

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Above: *Respirare l'ombra.*
1998. Laurel leaves, metal
cages, gilded bronze.

Below: View of "Matrice."
2017. Palazzo della Civiltà
Italiana, Rome.

established—and that happens when you're young—it becomes very hard to change it when you're older. The only thing to do is to hold onto the authenticity of the principle of your vision. After that, it's young people who will best understand what's going on.

In Italy today, we are living through an epochal episode of migration. At a scale we have never seen before. You can't not think about it, as an artist, but as for myself, I'm against the idea of using the suffering of others for one's own aims. Even taking photographs is tricky, if you sell them. It's something that bothers me very much. You can say that it allows us to see this suffering, yes, but the artist has an advantage: he earns money. It's that discrepancy that you see in what is sometimes called socially engaged art that bothers me profoundly. Artists' investigations have to take suffering into account, but art has to be an investigation that is also a language, an expression of certain content. If the content is right, that is also a political position.

× I want to ask you about your new work at the Louvre Abu Dhabi: a tree that has steel mirrors sitting in its branches.

Reflective mirrors. I did a first drawing for it as early as 1968: a tree with stones placed in the branches. When they asked me to do a work for the Louvre, I spoke to Jean Nouvel [*the architect of Louvre Abu Dhabi*] and looked at his designs; the roof is a little like the canopy of a forest. So this bronze tree enters into a dialogue with the light that rains down from the architecture. The tree becomes the link between the ground and the canopy.

× But still, Giuseppe, it's a tree in the middle of the desert! When I think about Abu Dhabi, this city that grew from nothing, I immediately think about climate change, about the earth as our common heritage... How much do ecological questions inform your recent work?

I'm certainly very happy people are working on climate change. But if you look at the climate more broadly, you can consider that this fear is ultimately a fear of *human* survival. It's not about the survival of the planet, or of nature. What is nature? Nature is whatever is outside; nature

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Left: *Albero folgorato*. 2012.
Bronze and gold.
Giardino di Boboli, Florence.

Right: *Elevazione*. 2013. Bronze
and trees. From "Penone Versailles,"
Château de Versailles, 2013.



will be present even if the human species goes extinct. If you think of humans as part of nature, rather than above nature, then our concerns and nature's concerns should be equal.

× In our museums we have Greek bronzes that have endured more than 2000 years. Now, with this tree in Abu Dhabi, you have a bronze that could itself endure 2000 years—

—but there won't be any more people to see it! [*Laughs*]

× Exactly, though you don't even have to go that far. We can just say that the natural habitat where you were born, whose trees gave shape to your art, will be transformed in the next 100 years more than it was transformed in the 10,000 years before. Nature will become something that is no longer atemporal—it will be history.

If I look back at my life...well, I was talking to you about the village where I grew up. There were correspondences in the way people lived with how they lived in the Middle Ages, or even further back. I lived that life, and now I live another one. Totally different. There have been so many changes in the last 60 years that I find it very difficult to imagine the next 60.

If you think of Abu Dhabi, it didn't even exist when I was born! When Sheikh Zayed lived it was really a very poor place. He didn't live in a palace—more like a shack. There was nothing. Now, there's this museum. It exists because of oil, and because there's now energy to desalinate the water to irrigate plants, gardens, all that. Clearly this cannot last. There's no such thing as eternal energy; it has to change.

But as for the problem of the duration of a work of art: I make a sculpture, something that occupies a precise amount of physical space. If I make a sculpture that is site-specific, if I want the work to be understood by other people, it has to be durable, because it gives people the time to get to know it. If you're a musician, you can make a recording; if you write literature, you can print a book of your poetry and people can read it anywhere. But if you make a sculpture, people will have to go somewhere specific to see it. A site or a museum, somewhere where it is preserved.



- × Yet if we have built a world that can preserve works of art, but can't preserve the earth on which we can see them...

That's the danger. There have been changes to the climate that were faster than we imagined.

- × For me this is one of the great virtues of your sculpture, though. When I saw your exhibition at the Pompidou in 2004, my ecological commitments were a bit abstract. Now that I spent almost every day obsessing over the fate of the planet, I find in your work a deep comfort, a reminder that we can indeed live as one with nature.

The most basic concept in my work is that it is not a human value to be superior to other elements in nature. It is through respect and equality of values that we should think of humanity. Maybe that can also become an ecological commitment. Too much respect for other living things and you'll never eat [*laughs*], but understanding one's connection to living things... And not just living things, non-living elements too.

This equality of elements stands a bit in opposition to an ideology, and also a religious vision, with God at the top, then man, and then all the other elements down to the rocks. But just think about the length of time a rock is on this earth, versus the time we are here. If you consider duration to be a virtue, then rocks must have more value than humans. We have these anxieties because we know quite well that we all turn to dust. But dust forms into rocks eventually.