

Sculpture

Giuseppe Penone: The Poetry of Art and Nature

By Allison Hunter (December 2004)



Ombra di terra, 2000-03.
Terra cotta and bronze, 230 x 180 x 80 cm.

After nearly four decades, Giuseppe Penone, one of the most famous of the Arte Povera group of artists, mounted his first retrospective exhibition this past spring. Simply titled "Giuseppe Penone: Retrospective Exhibition 1968-2004" (Centre Pompidou, April 21-August 23, 2004), the show presented a varied body of work, ranging from interventions in nature to cast pieces and wall reliefs. The result was a survey of Penone's career that traced his combination of the techniques and aims of traditional sculpture with an avant-garde sensibility. Retrospectives of Arte Povera artists like Penone help us to understand the movement and its influence on scores of younger artists' work such as Maurizio Cattelan's humorous dummies, Vanessa Beecroft's deadpan installations, and Rachel Whiteread's cast architectural objects.

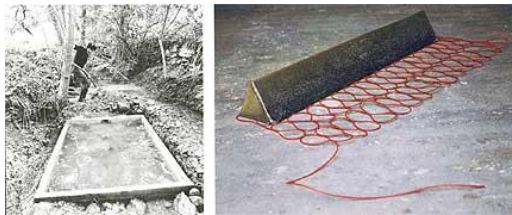
The 57-year-old Penone lives in Turin and Paris, where he teaches at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. He was born in Garessio, a small village near the Maritime Alps, where he began making his first experimental works with nature, the Alpi marittime (Maritime Alps), 1968-70. For Penone, the "space" of his peasant village, with its wooded surroundings, represented a harmonious blend of human life and nature, as opposed to Renaissance cities with their rational planning and overwhelmingly spectacular buildings. Like many artists working with "poor" materials, he found inspiration in the natural environment, secular, pre-linguistic stone carvings, and the land.

Penone was also influenced by the legacy of his father (a hard-working man trained as a traditional sculptor), who had inherited a plot of land tilled by his grandfather 80 years before. In his artist statement of 1969, Penone highlighted details of the family's land: the number of hours that went into its maintenance, the potatoes, vines, and stones found on it still. These were the elements that became the motifs of Penone's later work.

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In 1967, a young critic and curator named Germano Celant coined the term "arte povera" to describe the disparate movements emerging at the time, such as Action art, Land art, and conceptual art. The latter two movements were burgeoning in the U.S., while in Italy a few artists were experimenting with action-based art influenced by street performance known as "poor theatre." In 1967, Celant published "Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerrilla War" in *Flash Art*, which expressed his own politically charged goal for the work of emerging and mid-career Italian artists such as Mario Merz, Jannis Kounellis, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Giovanni Anselmo, Luciano Fabro, and Pier Paolo Calzolari. The Italian artists were still stinging from the fact that the young American Robert Rauschenberg was the first non-European to win the coveted Grand Prize at the Venice Biennale in 1964. Unlike Celant, the poveristi were not as interested in political art as they were in the new-found community and international recognition that the term brought them. The Italian art scene evolved into an exciting stage for artists from all over Europe and the U.S. This climate was supported by a new generation of curators and collectors such as Gian Enzo Sperone in Turin and Ileana Sonnabend (who was responsible for bringing Rauschenberg to Europe) in New York and Paris, who promoted an international exchange of exhibitions so that contemporary work circulated throughout the U.S. and in European cities such as Milan, Bern, Amsterdam, and Paris.

Meanwhile, the young Penone, who was studying art in Turin, brought one of the documentary photographs of his Alpi marittime (Maritime Alps) experiments to Sperone who casually displayed it in his gallery. Soon after, Celant noticed the photograph and tore it off the wall to use in his upcoming book, *Art Povera: Conceptual, Actual, or Impossible Art?*, published in 1969.



Left: Alpi marittime: La mia altezza, la lunghezza dalle mie braccia, il mio spessore in un ruscello, 1968. Cement basin and water, 175 x 160 x 30 cm. Right: Tappeto, 1969. Wax and fuse, 20 x 215 x 70 cm.

The timing could not have been better, because one of the factors that led to the Italian foothold in the late '60s art scene was the death of American Minimalism and Pop art, and to some degree, of painting itself. For the first time since the Futurist movement, Italy became the center for heady, humanist experiments. While American artists like Joseph Kosuth were laying down the gauntlet with non-figurative conceptual art, the Italians refused to abandon gallery spaces, challenging them with installations like Kounellis's famous *Senza titolo (12 cavalli)* (Untitled [12 horses]), 1969, an installation of twelve live horses in the Galleria L'Attica in Rome. Others, such as Mario Merz, referenced nomadic living spaces with a series of igloo forms made of metal and neon tubing. Because the work of the poveristi did not abandon principles of figurative art—a move that finally proved too difficult to sustain—it appealed to a war-weary public hungry for the poetry of art.

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

Soon after the label "Arte Povera" galvanized the group, Celant made a shocking decision. He renounced the term after four years and left the art world and artists at loose ends. For Celant, the term had failed in two respects: to ignite a politically charged art and to define the work of such a varied group of artists. (In fact, Celant had originally included American artists as well, such as Walter De Maria and Bruce Nauman.) The Italian artists, however, never subscribed to Celant's ideology in the first place, and they refused to give up their group identity. Over the years, some of them regretted this decision, as the Arte Povera label became subject to loose translations. The word "poor" was too often emphasized over the word "art," and the nature of the materials overshadowed the objectives and approaches that had distinguished them from the Americans. For example, Penone and Merz created human-scale works in nature rather than the monumental earthworks of Robert Smithson. Penone respected the craft of traditional sculpture and distanced himself from conceptual artists, believing in the poetry of art and nature, which led to his series of empirical studies—the first works on view in the Pompidou exhibition.

The Pompidou took us through an eight-room chronological tour in the South Gallery, a large upstairs wing of the museum. First, the visitor saw a sampling of black-and-white documentary photographs and objects from Penone's early experiments and interventions in nature. Several images depict the young artist braiding, hugging, and embedding objects in tree trunks. A 1969 work, *Scrive, legge, ricorda* (He writes, he reads, he remembers), finds the artist inserting an iron wedge, inscribed with the alphabet on one side and numbers on the other, into a tree. Penone intended the letters as a message that could later be read if one were to split the tree. Another photograph depicts a bronze cast of the artist's hand attached to a tree. This work, *Alpi marittime: Continuera a crescere tranne che in quel punto* (Maritime Alps: It will continue to grow except at that point), 1968, shows the artist's fascination with the relationship between temporal changes in humans and other organic matter; his action will slowly affect the tree as it grows around the bronze hand wedged into a knobby section of bark.

Penone also explores the mass of his body as it touches the trees and displaces the water in the streams. He traces his arm and hand in *Alpi marittime: Albero, filo di zinco, piombo* (Maritime Alps: Tree, zinc wire, lead), 1968, with metal wire embedded into the bark. The tree will permanently adapt, growing around and with the wire. He measures his body mass in water for *Alpi marittime: La mia altezza, la lunghezza delle mie braccia, il mio spessore in un ruscello* (Maritime Alps: My height, the length of my arms, my width in a stream), 1968. As is often the case with documentation of performances, the photographs of Penone's process-based work become fetishized when displayed in an institutional setting. Still, it is better to have a photograph of the event than an old block of wax and wire like *Tappeto* (Tapestry), 1969, to re-present the artist's original dynamic intentions. *Tappeto* was a time-based work that used heated wire to melt the surface of a wax block in less than two minutes. Penone made no aesthetic attempt to draw with the wire as he had with his silhouettes on trees. In the Pompidou show, the aged wax element looked like a science experiment gone awry. In this first room of the exhibition, it was hard to find the dynamic flurry of excitement that Penone lived at the beginning of his career.

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The adjacent room was filled with the installation *Ripetere il bosco* (To repeat the forest), 1969-97, Penone's well-known hollowed-out trees. Penone arrives at these forms from wood beams that he carves, leaving the knots in place until they emerge as limbs. The remains of the core look like a sapling. The multiple trees are displayed in various configurations depending on the installation site; some lean against the wall, others stand on their own wood bases.

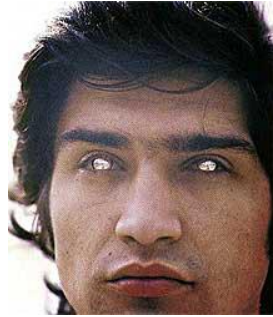


Cedro di Versailles, 002-03. Wood, 600 x 170 cm..

Stepping from his outdoor works in the previous room to these smooth giraffe-like carvings, one wondered why Penone continued with *Ripetere il bosco* and did not explore his other ideas to this extent. Perhaps the aesthetic appeal of the carved trees meshed with his more conservative sensibility after the rebellious period of the '60s. Yet one can't help but find it disappointing that Penone's most recent and technically ambitious work is another carved tree, *Cedro di Versailles* (Cedar of Versailles), 2002-03. Penone acquired the five-ton cedar log after a massive storm uprooted dozens of trees from the Forest of Versailles. *Cedro di Versailles* was displayed in the museum's ground-floor Forum, below a mezzanine cafeteria and bustling crowds, looking sadly decorative and diminished.

Awaiting the viewer in the next room upstairs was perhaps Penone's most famous work, *Rovesciare i propri occhi* (To reverse one's eyes), 1970. The famous photograph depicts the handsome, young Penone wearing mirrored contact lenses he had custom made so that he could experience his own body mass more objectively by blinding himself. This action meant looking inward or, to put it in his poetic terms, "reversing his eyes." It may appear naive today, but this concept, captured on film, evokes a more powerful reaction than any other documentation in the exhibition: it emphasizes Penone and his action in the messy world of "culture," the space he so often avoided, by including such details as clothing, hairstyle, and urban background. Moreover, it includes the image of the photographer reflected in the mirrored lenses. This simple action unfolds multiple readings of self-reflection, photography, documentation, and the complex role of the artist as capable—and incapable—of seeing the world.

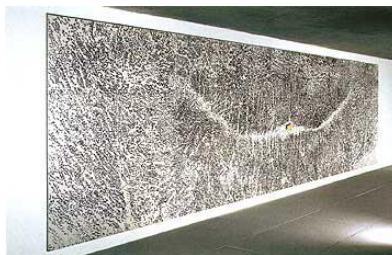
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Rovesciare i propri occhi, 1970.
Mirrored contact lenses, documentary photograph.

Other notable works from the late 1970s included in the exhibition revealed Penone's interest in "automatic drawing," by means of the pattern of lines formed by the skin's surface. Penone used various means to imprint his skin on surfaces, leading to drawing, casting, or photographic documentation. In *Palpebra (Eyelid)*, 1978, the indexical source (from a piece of tape applied to his eyelid) is expanded into the gallery space where it is presented as a 33-foot-wide charcoal drawing. With such dramatic shifts in media and scale, Penone is at his best, combining simple ideas with complex possibilities. In other works, Penone trumps his own cards with figurative representations such as cast bronze potatoes in *Palate (Potatoes)*, 1977. The cast elements include life-sized body parts—one has an ear, another has a nose—that appear comical resting in a pile of real potatoes. In *Zucche (Gourds)*, 1978-79, we see cast bronze pumpkins with human faces. Five years earlier, Penone was more interested in exploring the indexical and the photographic in works like *Svolgere la propria pelle—finestra (Develop One's Skin—Window)*, 1970-72. This work consists of a grid of black-and-white snapshots covering one wall. Each image depicts a part of the artist's body pressed up against a glass pane, which picks up the "automatic drawing" of his flesh.

A few years later, Penone produced *Soffio (Breath)*, 1978, a series of terracotta vessels representing the volume of air drawn from a single breath into the artist's body. Presented as six similar rust-colored and womb-like forms in one space, *Soffio* recalls the installation *Ripetere il bosco*. However, in *Soffio*, the mysterious body-scale forms refuse simple translation. They combine conceptual intent with aesthetic interest. On closer observation, one sees an impression of the artist's body pressed into each form like an inverted spine leading the eye to a curious gaping form that is a mold of the interior of Penone's mouth. This stunning surprise masterfully evokes an entire generation of rants, screams, and Artaud-inspired theater.



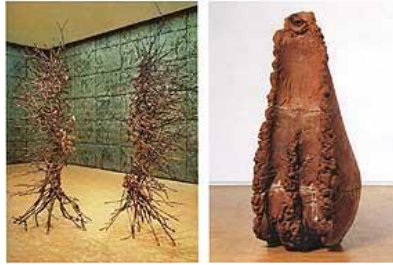
Spoglia d'oro su spine d'acacia d'acacia (bocca), 2001-02.
Silk, acacia thorns, glue, and gold, 30 panels, 100 x 120 cm.

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Penone's more recent work in the retrospective included an installation, wall hangings, and elements cast in bronze, marble, gold, and crystal. *Respirare l'ombra* (To Breathe the Shadow), 1999, was previously included in an exhibition in a medieval castle in Avignon. Here, the installation transformed the white walls of the Pompidou into a welcoming meditative space. The room, lined by laurel leaves held by chicken wire, was darkly lit, and the ambient sound was muted by the leaves which gave off a subtle perfume. Penone seduces us with this display of sensual phenomena. With the addition of a pair of cast bronze human lungs protruding from the far wall, though, the figurative element somewhat overstates the obvious. We see this in other works as well, such as *Spoglia d'oro su spine d'acacia* (bocca) (Golden Skin on Acacia Thorns [Mouth]), 2001-02, an enormous work made of 30 pieces of silk on stretchers forming a 10-by-40-foot canvas dotted with acacia thorns glued to the surface. The thorns appear randomly dispersed, but at a distance, one can distinguish a pointillist drawing of a mouth. Once again, the figurative "key" appears at the center of the work: a small (roughly 10 inches square) sheet of gold reveals an impression of the artist's closed mouth cast in relief as though pressed up against the metal.



Left: *Pelle di foglie* and *Respirare l'ombra*, 1999. Bronze, metal cages, and laurel leaves, view of installation at the Centre Pompidou. Right: *Soffio 6*, 1978. Terra cotta, 158 x 75 x 79 cm.

Penone's works demonstrate a persistent commitment to the *Arte Povera* obsession with the body and nature. His actions of the '60s and early '70s uniquely combined humanist empiricism with a sense of craft, a European artisanal approach crossed with avant-garde actions. Penone insists that he now works in bronze because the oxidation process (over time) mimics the ability of water to change the surface of stones in a river. His interventions are personal and intimate, with a druid-like commitment to the earth and its fallen trees. For this reason, Penone continues to inspire reactions of nostalgia for a time that was best described by the avid collector of *Arte Povera*, Ingvild Goetz: "Art was brazen, revolutionary and also poetic."