

Giuseppe Penone: Leaves of Grass

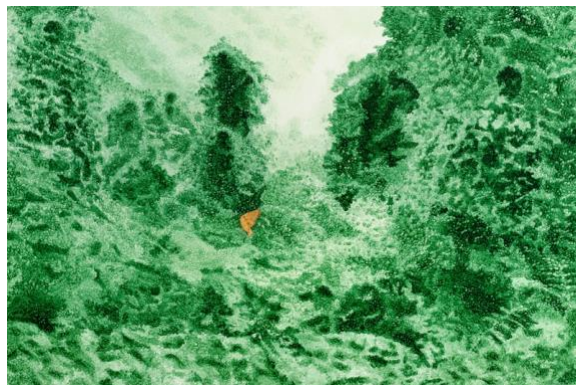
by Phyllis Tuchman (April 2021)



Giuseppe Penone, *Terre*, 2015. 9 elements; terracotta, iron, mesh, 118 1/8 x 177 3/16 x 5 7/8 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. © Giuseppe Penone. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

Sculptures, installations, assemblages, photographs, and other works executed by Giuseppe Penone and his Arte Povera colleagues often look off-kilter and slightly madcap. Think DIY. Or picture these Italian artists, active since the late 1960s and early '70s, stranded on a deserted island and joyously making art from found materials.

Most of this group has been showered with great success. Penone, for example, has exhibited his nature-themed pieces at the Venice Biennale and Documenta several times. He's held solo shows in such prestigious places as the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the palace at Versailles, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, the Nasher Sculpture Center, and Madison Square Park. In 2014, he was awarded the sculpture prize of the Praemium Imperiale.



Giuseppe Penone, *Leaves of Grass*, 2013. Oil on canvas, terracotta, wire, 78 3/4 x 118 1/8 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. © Giuseppe Penone. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

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Nevertheless, when push comes to shove, Penone is not someone you would imagine creating 12 oil paintings that are almost 6-by-10 feet. Nor, for that matter, to have been inspired by the 12 poems found in the first edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Currently on view at Marian Goodman Gallery, these works from 2013 also will be exhibited this autumn at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF) in Paris.

Expansive and pantheistic, the canvases relate to themes Penone has explored throughout his career. This round, they are monochromatic, with various shades of green used to create deep spaces when seen from a distance and abstract marks when viewed close-up. Moreover, the 74-year-old Turin, Italy-based artist didn't apply color with brushes. Astonishingly, these are finger paintings writ large. Talk about work that's labor intensive.

The depicted scenes range from the arcadian to the tumultuous. Plants and trees abound. In some, the sky is visible; others thrust onlookers into dense, overgrown foliage. A few even suggest turbulent seascapes that would cause havoc if ships sailed on their roiling waves.

As familiar as these verdant and aqueous places may be, you'd never confuse them with Romantic landscapes. In the middle of each canvas, a small, terra cotta amulet-like impression of the sculptor's clenched fist is suspended from a wire filament. With this intrusive, abstract element, the 19th century meets the 21st century—or, perhaps, we're meant to picture the Stone Age brought up to contemporary times.

In the South Gallery, Penone has hung a huge, impressive, iron and mesh wall assemblage divided into nine sectors, on which he's attached scores and scores of similar terra cotta components. Executed in 2015, it calls to mind more typical works you'd associate with Arte Povera. Are these slightly unusual forms found objects or merely meant to look that way? Compounding the situation, on the floor nearby, the artist rests a mixed media sculpture executed in terra cotta and bronze that's a larger version of these eccentric terracotta pieces.



Giuseppe Penone, *Indistinti confini - Contatto*, 2015.
White Carrara marble, bronze, 65 1/2 x 20 5/8 x 13 3/8 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. © Giuseppe Penone. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

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Three other sculptures are installed in the South Gallery. There's a tall bronze sculpture *Artemide* (2019) dedicated to the goddess of nature (known in English as Artemis) and a pair of shorter works, *Indistini confini – Contatto* (2015), combining white Carrara Marble and bronze. *Artemide*, which is hollow, is a cross between a tree and a figure. As such, Penone is coyly reversing the transformation of Bernini's *Daphne* from a young woman into a tree while having fun with his title because Apollo, Daphne's pursuer, is the twin brother of Artemis.



Giuseppe Penone, *Artemide*, 2019. Bronze, 135 1/8 x 43 3/4 x 40 1/2 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. © Giuseppe Penone. Photo: Alex Yudzon.

Rounding out the show at the Marian Goodman Gallery are more than a dozen works on paper that call to mind sheaves of grass blowing in the wind as well as non-figurative marks. In some cases, actual leaves have been attached to the sheets as if they belonged to a scrapbook.

Penone's reflections on nature were a welcome antidote to being stuck in the city during lockdown this year.