

ARTFORUM

Giuseppe Penone

Frick Madison

by Elizabeth Mangini (October 1, 2022)



View of "Giuseppe Penone," 2022.

Every time we touch something, evidence of the encounter persists. Even if the trace is a nearly imperceptible veil of oil, the disturbance of a layer of dust, or, reciprocally, the activation of nerve endings in the fingertips, this haptic relationship indicates the nature of sculpture. For more than half a century, Italian artist Giuseppe Penone has found ways to elaborate upon this bond between flesh and the material world, and his exhibition here highlighted the enduring complexity of these human-thing entanglements.

Upon passing through a third-floor gallery containing devotional gold-ground paintings by early Italian painters such as Cimabue and Piero della Francesca, one entered a room hung with ten large white-porcelain disks, divided evenly between two adjoining dark-gray walls. At first glance, these white convex circles resembled large eyes, breasts, or split tree trunks, owing to the flinty, concentric lines drawn on their surfaces with metal-oxide paint. On closer inspection, these dark pen strokes radiated, like ripples on water, from a fingerprint at the center of each plate. It became clear that each platter represented one of the artist's five fingers, arranged as if his outstretched hands were bracing the walls, with thumbs flanking the corner. Enigmatically, an eleventh disk limned with gold paint hung by itself on a wall facing the others.

These works, completed at the lauded Sèvres porcelain factory in France in 2013, are part of a much larger line of inquiry through which Penone explores skin as a sensory boundary that defines the self. Both a limit and meeting place, the artist's fingerprint concentrates this idea, signifying the affective and reciprocal nature of human touch. Since 1995, the artist has created "Propagations," amplifying his fingerprints on varied surfaces in order to communicate the way a single touch, action, or solitary human presence can have a lasting impact on the material environment.

These porcelain objects add complexity to the “Propagations” series by engaging with the history of European craft. Since 1740, in the twilight of the ancien régime, a high level of technical proficiency has typified the Manufacture nationale de Sèvres. There, artisans have for centuries innovated the processes and materials of ceramic sculpture, coaxing ever more refined forms from the encounter between human hands and mud. Penone pushed the limits of the clay and the factory’s kilns, creating the largest plates he could while challenging the Sèvres designers to engage in the meticulous task of drawing the fine radiating lines that begin at each of his fingerprints.

Penone’s partnership with the Sèvres artists was visible in each of these works: One could see places where the iron-oxide paint pools, just slightly, and intuit that this was a moment when the draftsman had to pause, perhaps to rest their eyes or to stretch their hands, tired from holding one of the pens that were designed especially for this project. Subtle variations in the lines further indicated that each “fingerprint” was drawn by a different hand: Some were consistently wobbly, while others wavered only slightly, perhaps indicating the speed at which someone worked. Some marks radiated to the very edge of the plate, while others left a wide border of unglazed bisque.

The Frick Madison was an ideal place to showcase this collaborative body of work, made by a contemporary Italian artist in a Rococo-era French factory and displayed amid a collection of ancient to early-modern objects temporarily housed in a Brutalist building. Having entered the exhibition through the visual style of the cinquecento, one exited through a gallery containing the Qing dynasty porcelain collected by the institution’s founder, Henry Clay Frick, as well as recent additions to the museum’s collection made by European manufacturers that preceded Sèvres. In this context, Penone’s exhibition offered viewers an opportunity to pause and consider the hands that were applied to a material to achieve a given form, which then attracts the eye and mind. Perhaps the lone disk with the gilded fingerprint, *Propagazione di Sèvres—oro* (Sèvres Propagation—Gold), 2013, tied it all together: Its glittering paint, like that in the Cimabue work and the Chinese vases, does not merely indicate wealth in the common sense, but also signifies something beyond the everyday: a negotiation of forces that supersede an object’s constituent parts.