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Gagosian Now: Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas Giuseppe Penone Being the River, Repeating the Forest

<https://www.gagosian.com/now/giuseppe-penone--nasher-dallas>

By Pepi Marchetti Franchi



The exhibition at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas included work from over five decades in a variety of materials to highlight the development of Giuseppe Penone's oeuvre. Working in a stunning variety of materials—including clay, wood, stone, metal, plaster, resin, and acacia thorns—the artist makes palpable and present the analogous relationship between nature and art.

In the following conversation, Giuseppe Penone discusses the Nasher exhibition, and his Gagosian Gallery Hong Kong show with Gagosian's Director Pepi Marchetti Franchi.

Giuseppe Penone, *Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quel punto (It Will Continue to Grow Except at That Point)*, 1968, bronze and tree, 15 3/4 × 4 × 5 1/8 inches (40 × 10 × 13 cm) © Giuseppe Penone. Photo by Todora Photography

PEPI MARCHETTI FRANCHI *Being the River, Repeating the Forest* represents an important chapter in your exhibition history in the United States. In 1970, your work was included in *Information*, the legendary exhibition of conceptual art at MoMA. In 1982 Diane Waldman installed your sculpture of an enormous tree that had been stripped of its bark in the Guggenheim rotunda, which was enormously impressive. What are your memories of these past American experiences?

GIUSEPPE PENONE It was curator Kynaston McShine who invited me to participate in *Information*, which was extraordinary because I was twenty-three years old, and it was the first time I visited New York City, so it was a very formative experience. During that visit, I went to many galleries and was introduced to quite a few people who were very important for the development of my work in a variety of ways. At the time I was in touch with Ileana Sonnabend's gallery, and one evening she invited me to visit Robert Rauschenberg's studio. I have a clear memory of this space, which was in a church, and then we went to Rauschenberg's house, where I met Cy Twombly. Back then, relationships between artists were more direct. The art world was very small and relationships developed easily.

In 1982, Diane Waldman selected my work for an exhibition of Italian art at the Guggenheim Museum, where I had the opportunity to install a 12-meter-tall tree in the center of the museum's famous rotunda. That was an extraordinary experience, because architecturally, the Guggenheim is such a unique and emblematic place. Being able to install one of my works in the center of that space had great significance for me. These were my first important encounters with America, and since then there have been many others.

PMF The Nasher exhibition is not technically a retrospective but, from a thematic and chronological viewpoint, it very thoroughly maps your practice as an artist. Did exhibiting at this museum, which is dedicated exclusively to sculpture, play a role in the development of the project? Did you want to establish some type of dialogue with the collection or with other works?

GP In 1984, I had a solo exhibition at the Fort Worth Art Museum. Then, there was one at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. This exhibition at the Nasher is my third solo exhibition at a museum in the United States, after so many years, and it is conceived around issues related to sculpture.

The Nasher has an excellent exhibition space, which is open and very luminous. Being able to see the garden from the street establishes a relationship between an urban space and a natural environment, which is quite well suited for my work, all things considered, and that relationship help defined the path I have sought to take: Gradually starting inside the space, I installed the first work, *Breath of Leaves* [1979], followed by other works, until I arrived at the latest ones, including the most recent *Indistinct Boundaries* [2012], at that point I proceeded outside, where *Space of Light* [2008] is shown with two other works, a bronze and stone tree from the *Ideas of Stone* [2010] series, and then *Path* [1986], which is a plant-related gesture, as well as *It Will Continue to Grow Except at That Point* [1968], the bronze hand marking the growth of a tree, which is an idea from 1968. There is a range of time, beginning with the early works, from the late '60s, and following through with works that are recent, but the exhibition is not chronological in the space; rather, it is a visual path through a sequence that is internal to the work.

PMF You are renowned and respected as one of the greatest contemporary sculptors working today, but it is important to remember that you began your career by carrying out actions outdoors, in the countryside around your town, Garessio, Piedmont, between the mountains and the sea, at a historical moment when other artists, geographically distant from you, including Bruce Nauman and Richard Serra, were reflecting on similar concerns. Subsequently you utilized your body to create sculptures, such as *Potatoes* or *Breaths*, which remained crucial and can both be seen in Dallas. What role did the use of your body play in those early years? Were you acquainted with investigations being carried out on the other side of the Atlantic, and how has your presence been transformed in your present work?

GP When I began working, in the late '60s, nearly all artists' work took place within a closed space. Even large sculptures made by artists such as Alexander Calder and Henry Moore were created in enclosed studio spaces and then installed outdoors; in a certain sense, the idea of the landscape, of man's relationship with the landscape, was missing. In the United States, there were artists who were working with landscape as material, those involved with land art, but that work was established on a fundamentally different idea, one specifically based on vastness, on the relationship between man and virgin nature where man could make a mark. But in Europe this could not happen, because in Europe there isn't any place in nature that hasn't been influenced by the historical presence of man. If perhaps some exceptions do exist, then they are exceptions. As such it wasn't possible to confront nature without the presence of man in the same way that it was in the United States.

At that point it was my desire to establish a relationship with a space in which man's presence could be felt. The only way to do this was through the physical contact of my person. I developed very simple gestures; for example, in one work I placed a sculptural hand (that had been created out of metal) into a position where it would hold back the growth of a tree. I made a series of works that originated from this concept, which then led me to create works that reflected on the abstract space of the gallery, such as *To Unroll One's Skin* [1970] and *To Reverse One's Eyes* [1970], and the rest followed. In the historical moment when I started out, values were being reset, conventions were being erased, and there was a tendency to consider reality beyond interpretation. For me one way of simplifying reality was in getting to know the space with my body. This attitude, which many artists shared, was fundamental and decisive for sculpture, which became privileged over painting with regard to pictorial expression from this point forward. The sculptural interest in the process behind the making of the work, the phenomenology of the work, was also part of this resetting. For instance, the phenomenology of the growth of the tree allowed me to make a sculpture that was independent from the action of being sculpted by man: instead, man was motionless, fossilized in metal, and it was the tree that grew and established the action. Another example of process is a work that I entitled *Being the River* [2000], made for the first time in 1981, where I chose a small boulder from the river, then went up to a quarry, where that type of stone originates, selected a block of marble, and carved it to replicate exactly the original contours of the rock from the river. This action emphasized the affinity between carving a sculpture out of marble, through cuts and polishing, alongside the same process that occurs in nature, with similar modalities, but over a much longer time, within a river. Man can accelerate this process, but the material transformation occurs in the same way. This is why the work has this title, because, by making it, in some way one becomes the river.

PMF In relation to your work, you often speak of "intention." What do you mean by this term and how does it relate to sculpture?

GP Even when I have incorporated unusual materials, such as growing trees, my work is fundamentally about sculpture. The way the works are exhibited at the Nasher, various materials are addressed as subjects: You move from the real leaves in *Breath of Leaves* to bronze elements, to wood, to marble. Of course there are different aspects and ways of using materials, but I believe that sculpture is not about working on an image; rather, it deals with material. You cannot apply an image to the material, and you cannot represent something different from what the material is, so you need to find the intention within the material. The material itself must suggest the image. Certain materials can suggest the figurative. In fact, marble can be very sensuous and suggest the idea of flesh or of the body. And sculpture is also tied to sensuality, to tactile perception. This idea of using the material in a specific way, of heightening aspects and intrinsic possibilities, was also the genesis for works like the one where I recovered the shape of the original tree from inside an industrial beam of wood. The first examples of that idea were established during Minimal art, which celebrated industrial forms and products, where man-made forms were used almost as natural products, as expressive elements reduced to minimal terms. Within this beam of wood, I excavated and rediscovered the form of a living being, in fact the specific form that generated this material. This work is earlier than *Being the River*, but in some way there is an affinity, because I have to follow the rings of the tree's growth and travel backward through time, almost like a slow-motion film, to find the form of this tree from different epochs.

Space of Light, in the Nasher exhibition, also emerges from an attempt to rediscover the tree form within the wood. In '69 I took a sapling and covered it with wax. The wax naturally took on the impression of the bark and recorded the imprint of my hands, which in some way enveloped and traversed the form of the tree. A few years ago I redid this action, however this time I used a very large tree to create *Space of Light*, which was based on this idea of recording both the form of the bark and the action of my hands. Then I covered the inside of this tree with gold leaf. The structure of a tree grows in all its parts because of light and energy the tree has appropriated. However in my

sculpture, only the bark remains, so there is the absence of the wood at its core, which is why it is titled *Space of Light*; the title explains the work. In my work, titles are part of the way I think about the sculptural process, sometimes they add a key element for interpreting the work, and other times they only partially complete the idea, but they are always part of the work's intention.

PMF Your titles are always very evocative, and your writings, which began as personal notes were subsequently published. How important is language for you?

GP My writing helps me to understand the logic of the action that I want to carry out on the material; it helps to focus the succession of actions. My work is not something that I can do only on a formal basis: I need to fully understand the logic of the material before I can arrive at the finished work. Sometimes it is an immediate process with a certain freshness, other times it is a bit more laborious, but writing helps me through this process, and it nurtures my ideas about associating images with form.

PMF In January your work returned to the Far East, with an exhibition you prepared for Gagosian Hong Kong. You are close to Japanese culture and to Japan, where you first exhibited in 1970, and where you received the Praemium Imperiale in 2014, after a large exhibition at the Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, a few years earlier. What expectations did you have for your first exhibition in China?

GP Yes, I have a long history with Japan. The first works I showed there were presented in Tokyo in 1970 as part of an exhibition entitled *Between Man and Matter*. It was an important exhibition within the Japanese context of that period. But other than that, I have never shown in the Far East, except for one time in Korea.

It's interesting for me to place the work in a different context, because I am aware that Japanese culture, at least in part, emerges from Chinese culture, which is extraordinarily rich and vast. It has been dynamic for me to bring a Western way of thinking, in fact a specifically European way of thinking, and compare it to a history, culture, and art that is quite different, especially one with such deep roots.

You mentioned writing earlier, think about how different that practice is between our cultures: Chinese writing is made up of twenty or thirty thousand characters that must be memorized, and so there is a visualization component to language that offers a different capacity for the imagination or recollection of images. Europeans have a completely different approach to writing. The Hong Kong exhibition is the first time I have presented work that includes fragments of architecture from a historic building, in this case French. Some Western architecture has origins in certain logic and plant forms, and in my sculpture elements from that architectural history are supported by bronze branches. This leads to the work's title, *Leaves of Stone* (2013).

"Giuseppe Penone: Leaves of Stone / Foglie di Pietra" is on view at Gagosian Gallery Hong Kong through Saturday, March 12, 2016.