

# GIUSEPPE PENONE

BEING THE RIVER,  
REPEATING THE FOREST

SEPTEMBER 19, 2015 – JANUARY 10, 2016

TEACHING RESOURCE



**Giuseppe Penone** (*ju-ZEP-ay peh-NO-nay*)

Born 1947, Garesio, Italy. Lives and works in Turin and Paris.

**Arte Povera** (*AR-tay POH-vuh-ruh*)

Penone's work is associated with the Arte Povera movement that originated in Italy in the 1960s. The term, meaning "poor art" in English, was coined by writer Germano Celant in 1967 to describe artists who were turning to "poor" or simple materials in response to the rapid postwar growth of industry and technology. Penone chose to work with natural materials because those were the materials he knew from his childhood in a rural area.

## NATURAL PROCESSES AND ARTISTS' PROCESSES

"It makes more sense to think that man is nature than to separate him from, or set him against nature." –GP

Much of Penone's work explores how the actions of a sculptor relate to the effects of nature on a material, and encourages viewers to think about how natural processes compare to the industrial processes of modern society.

### *It Will Continue to Grow Except at This Point*

In 1968, Penone installed a metal cast of his hand around a narrow tree in the foothills of the Italian Alps. By doing this, Penone set up a lasting point of contact between himself and the tree, two beings that live at different paces. Over time, the tree has grown around the hand, altering the form of its trunk, and will continue to grow and change in the future, beyond the life of the artist.

• In traditional sculpture, the artist moves his or her hands to shape a material. How does this process compare to the role of Penone's hand in this sculpture?



Giuseppe Penone, *Continuera a crescere tranne che in quell punto (It Will Continue to Grow Except at That Point)*, 1968 – 2003.

### *Being the River*

This sculpture consists of two seemingly identical stones, one of which was taken from the end of a river's course, shaped by the force of the water, and one taken from the river's source and sculpted into a perfect replica by Penone. This process reflects on how a river can be a sculptor and a sculptor can become like a river.

• How do forces of nature shape the earth? How do these natural changes compare to changes made by man in terms of process and time?



Giuseppe Penone, *Essere fiume 8 (Being the River 8)*, 2010.

### *Repeating the Forest*

Penone often works with trees and has compared the growth of a tree over time to the growth of a human body. In these sculptures, Penone takes logs or planks of lumber that have been mechanically cut and carves them, layer by layer, to reveal the sapling still hidden in the wood.

• Have students make a list of the natural materials in their classroom. Where do they see evidence of the material's natural formation? How were the materials altered by humans?



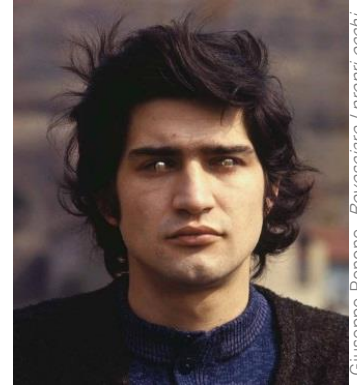
Giuseppe Penone, *Nel Legno (In the Wood)* (detail), 2009.

## SCULPTURE AND TOUCH

“Sculpture is born from the imprint of feet in mud, painting from the imprint of hands—dirty with mud—on the walls of a cave.” – GP

The sense of touch is important to Penone’s process as a sculptor. He points out that babies first explore and understand things through touch and only later through sight. In a 1970 performance called *Reversing Your Own Eyes*, Penone wore mirrored contact lenses that obscured his vision, symbolically looking inward and compelling him to experience the world through touch.

- Ask students to close their eyes and touch an object they haven’t seen. What can they tell you about it without seeing it? Have students sketch how they imagine it.

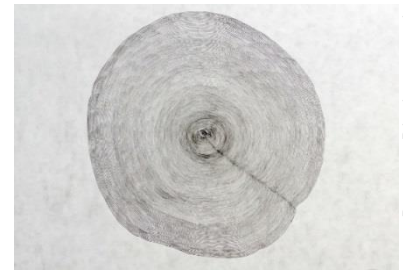


Giuseppe Penone, *Rovesciare i propri occhi* (Reversing Your Own Eyes), 1970.

### *Propogations*

Penone notes that when a finger touches a material, the fingerprint it leaves behind is like a small sculpture. A fingerprint can stand for the identity or specificity of an individual. In the *Propogations* series, Penone traces around the rings made by his fingerprints, expanding their imprints and creating an image that recalls the growth of trees in rings around their original forms.

- Have students make fingerprints then trace around them as Penone did. What do they notice about the shapes that emerge?

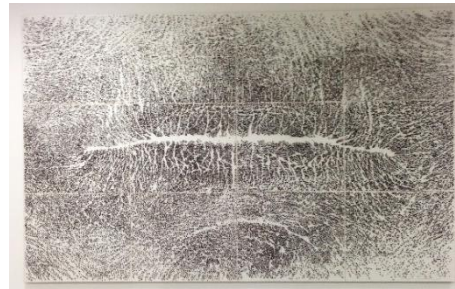


Giuseppe Penone, *Dieci propogazione* – Agosto 2011 (Ten Propogations – August 2011) (detail), 2011.

### *Acacia Spines*

Penone is interested in skin’s role as the organ that both separates us from and connects us to the outside world. In this work, the artist recreated the imprint of his face using the thorns of the acacia tree. He chose to use thorns to highlight the sensation of touch, which is heightened or made more sensitive when skin touches a sharp object like a thorn. He chose acacia thorns because he noticed that acacia trees that have been cut back grow larger and more beautiful thorns as a defense.

- Other than pressing a finger on a stamp pad, what are other ways students could make prints of their skin?



Giuseppe Penone, *Spine d’acacia* – contatto, Maggio 2005 (Acacia Spines – Contact, May 2005), 2005.

### *Breath of Clay, Breath of Leaves*

Penone created several sculptures that explored the idea of breath as a sculptural medium. In *Breath of Clay*, the artist depicts the form of his breath in terra cotta, a material that comes from soil. In *Breath of Leaves*, the artist uses his body and breath to create a shape within a pile of dry leaves.

- How can your breath affect the air and objects surrounding you? What other ways does your body alter the spaces you live in?



Giuseppe Penone, *Soffio 3* (Breath 3), 1979. Giuseppe Penone, *Soffio di foglie* (Breath of Leaves), 1979.