

Giuseppe Penone**3 June – 19 July 2009****First and Second Floor Galleries**

Giuseppe Penone is one of the central figures of Arte Povera, an Italian art movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Rather than a style, Arte Povera was a proposition that united artists with a common approach to art. It coincided with other European and American art movements that challenged previous art forms and concepts such as minimalism, conceptual art and land art. Similarly Arte Povera rejected ideas of art simply as expression or visual representation, using unconventional materials, exploring possibilities of presentation outside the gallery or museum, and acknowledging the crucial role of the viewer in artistic experience.

In an early work, *Reverse your eyes* (1970), Penone wore mirrored contact lenses. A close up photograph shows his eyes reflecting the world before him, visible to the viewer but not to the artist, who is blinded by the lenses. By this act the artist yields his own vision to the viewer. This has now become an iconic image of Penone's practice, revealing an important theme in his work: the exploration of the relations and boundaries between human beings and their surroundings.

Sight and the other senses are the connective channels between our bodies and minds and the world around us. Penone is interested in how we connect to the world by touch and leave traces of ourselves in our environments. He has used his own fingerprint and prints of other parts of his skin spread over a wide surface, or drawn magnified images of the closely observed wrinkles and texture of his skin. *Skin of graphite* (2004) is a huge drawing on black paper, a reflective detailed map of the surface of the organism that defines us.

A more profound connection with the surroundings is established through breathing, the exchange of gases to and from the body. In works like *Breath 4* (1978) and *Breath of leaves* (1979) Penone uses his body to make an impression on his chosen materials: by leaning into the soft clay of a human-sized terracotta vessel, or lying prostrate on a pile of leaves and breathing into it.

Respiration, a biological process that releases energy, is a sign of life. The leaves of a tree and human lungs breathe differently, whereby carbon dioxide is transformed into oxygen and vice versa. Leaves exhale oxygen as a waste product that is essential for our survival.

Likewise there are many correspondences between various aspects of human anatomy and other natural phenomena. In many of his works Penone plays on the resemblance between a tree, with its roots, branches and leaves, and our nervous and circulatory systems. In *Marble skin* (2003–2007) he carves around the veins of the stone in order to reveal the uncanny similarity between the patterns that exist both in inanimate material and under our skin.

Other works are based on the growth of living organisms. In the first of two photographs, *Maritime Alps. It will continue to grow except at that point* (1968–1978), we see a steel cast of the artist's hand grasping the trunk of a young tree. Taken after an interval of ten years, the second photograph shows us how nature has coped with the intrusion of a foreign body into its life processes: the tree has grown around the hand, incorporating it into itself. In *Maritime Alps. The tree will remember the contact* (1968) Penone outlined with nails and wire the shape of his body embracing a tree trunk. The contact left the tree with a long lasting memory, the scars slowly covered by the growing bark, but still visible after years. These works are characterized by a kind of violence, a confrontation between humanity and nature that makes invisible forces and energies visible.

In his *Trees* Penone seems to reverse the process of growth, and goes back in time to reveal the younger tree inside a length of timber by carving away from growth rings. He also fossilizes trees and other natural forms into bronze, thus freezing the flow of time.

Being a river 5 (1998) has its starting point in a river stone that has been 'carved' and polished over thousands of years by the movement of water as it has travelled from the mountains towards the sea. Penone went to the source of the river to find the bedrock and quarried a new block of stone. Identifying himself, the artist, with the river he mimics the natural process with sculptural techniques to produce a replica of the original stone.

Penone says about time and matter: "In my opinion the elements are fluid, even stone is fluid, a mountain crumbles and becomes sand, it's just a matter of time. The duration of our life allows us to ascribe values of 'hard' and 'soft' to certain things, while time annuls them." The two stones, exhibited side by side, raise interesting questions about the relationship between art and life, the value of culture versus nature. *Being a river* suggests that they are equally important.