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Trees Get Second Life In Bronze

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*Giuseppe Penone/Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris
A tree sculpture from 'Ideas of Stone.'*

When a tree falls in Turin, or its surroundings, who hears about it? Often, sculptor Giuseppe Penone, who lives part-time in the Italian city and receives phone calls from neighbors about such events. The artist has made a practice of hauling fallen trees—felled by sickness or accident—back to his studio and casting them in bronze.

Three of these trees have been planted in Madison Square Park in lower Manhattan, where they will stand among the park's permanent residents through early February. The first outdoor exhibition of the artist's sculpture in New York, "Ideas of Stone (Idee di Pietra)" opens Thursday as part of the Mad. Sq. Art public series, which has featured commissions from contemporary artists including Sol LeWitt, Richard Deacon and Jim Campbell.

The project took Mr. Penone several months to complete because of a process that includes breaking the tree into smaller pieces, creating a mold for each piece, and casting it in bronze, a material he favors for its similarity to tree bark. In an interview this month, Mr. Penone said, "Bronze is a material that is fantastic for sculpture... It takes the color of the weather where it is, like a tree that takes the color of the climate."

Workers moved the 30-foot, 7,000- to 12,000-pound sculptures in sections, and they reassembled and mounted them onto steel foundations planted into the park's grounds. They used a 127-foot crane to place several large stones, taken from a river near Mr. Penone's home, onto the forks between branches.

The artist's works "have almost the illusion of the natural appearance of a tree," said the exhibit's curator, Brooke Kamin Rapaport.

Mr. Penone, who has an exhibition at the Palace of Versailles near Paris, belonged to the Italian artists' group Arte Povera, formed in the late 1960s and known for using everyday materials and subjects in their work.

In the interview, he said, "I think that the tree is a perfect sculpture."