

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

# THE FLORENTINE

### Where form and content meet *Giuseppe Penone commands the heights in Florence*

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Giuseppe Penone, for four decades one of contemporary art's leading figures, has long sought to bridge the gap that consumerism has opened between our experiences of art and nature. With Florence's unique skyline for background, the enclosed natural setting of the Boboli Gardens and Forte di Belvedere provides this artist with an astonishing setting for his distinctive sculptural forms, which characteristically not only ask searching questions about how art relates to life but also trigger forgotten rhythms that link man to all existence.

'To make sculpture,' Penone stated in 1968, 'the sculptor must lie down, slipping to the ground slowly and smoothly, without falling. Finally, when he has achieved horizontality, he must concentrate his attention and efforts on his body which, pressed against the ground, allows him to see and feel with his form the forms of the earth.'

This approach may be familiar in the practices of today's artists. Interest in the natural environment influences not just the arts but also politics, industry and everyday life. But in 1968, the situation was different; for 50 years modernism had preferred the abstract world of the mechanised city to landscape. When the change came, artists were at the forefront with work almost unprecedented in its concept, appearance and make up.

Penone quickly emerged as an innovative participant in this assault on the status quo. Barely into his 20s when he wrote his statement and already associated with Arte Povera, the diverse grouping of Italian artists whose open forms upset old attitudes, he was working with the primary materials that had surrounded him since childhood. He had grown up in close contact with the forests around Garessio in Piedmont, where his family bought land to work in 1881, and his work in many media still alludes to these experiences and his heritage.

In addition to marble, clay, wax and bronze, which have long histories in art. Penone has used thorns, leaves, potatoes, skin, fingerprints, his own body and even breath—materials that are

altered by life cycles and exposure to the elements. A relationship with time, place and nature resonates through his work like a metaphor for the harmonic rapport between man and his environment.

Forms invariably spring from his patient observation of growth processes, such as when plants take root in clusters on unlikely surfaces where they settle and expand. In a walled area of the Boboli, the vegetation climbing through the spaces within the shell of a bronze man makes this point.

At first sight, *Sentiero* is hard to make out. A curious symbiosis of human and plant forms, the implied forward movement of the man is opposed by the upward surge of foliage anchored in the soil below. To get the shape, Penone probably used his own frame; the bronze strips are studded with finger marks. In time, nature will enclose that body and the sculpture will be complete. Until that moment it will continue to evolve in volume and colour.

By contrast, the line of huge trees on the ramparts of Forte di Belvedere is clearly visible. The most striking detail of these tall, slender, sprouting columns is the presence in the branches of hefty river stones, an unexpected weight carried with apparent ease and strength.

One inversion of expectations leads on to another. For all their apparent vitality, the trees are cast in bronze, a staple of sculpture; a simple tap on any trunk returns a hollow, metallic sound. By careful fabrication, metal imitates wood and bronze, like bark, acquires coloured patinas with time and weathering.

Penone is fascinated by the energy that adds mass to trees as they grow towards the light. Art can give a shape to these phenomena. So a ring of gold leaves effervesces around the trunk of *Luce e Ombra*, the tree that echoes the obelisk below the hill to the amphitheatre, like a miasma of exhaled energy revelling in sunlight. On the high ground of the fort, long limbs of gold crown a bronze tree blasted by lightning to give permanent physical form to another force of nature, its immense transformative power.

These trees have anthropomorphic tendencies: with branches like limbs, they stand and almost walk. The pointed shards of *Albero folgorato* (Lightning-struck tree) reach out like arms in exaltation and, nearby, *Le foglie delle radici* (The leaves of the roots) stands on its head, with its roots in the air. But then, perhaps, its roots are really the brain of this magnificent plant. Although unearthed, they support a fresh canopy of vegetation, feeding on light.

Penone casts trees felled by age or storms. Traceable on every bronze trunk are records of growth as idiosyncratic as fingerprints captured in the instant of casting. Touching is irresistible: it becomes the equivalent of looking when, as palms travel a tree's history frozen in sinewy tissue, one skin meets another.

The gardens already host numerous historic sculptures. But when Penone carves into the inanimate surface of Carrara marble (the material Michelangelo used), he reverses culture into nature, drawing from the stone veins, which closely resemble the vessels through which life flows.

The outstanding feature of this beautiful show is Penone's quiet concentration on the natural origins of essential processes that unite all living beings. Art transforms and, by a complex

combination of gestures and structures, he establishes a remarkable balance between reason and imaginative wonder, between sudden revelation and the eternally enduring.

Giuseppe Penone: Prospettiva Vegetale  
Until October 5, 2014  
Boboli Gardens and Forte di Belvedere