

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Forbes

4 Questions: Giuseppe Penone

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Giuseppe Penone, "Spazio di luce," 2008. Photo by Matteo D'Eletto, M3 Studio; Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery

When you step into the Gagosian Gallery on Via Francesco Crispini in Rome, housed just steps from Palazzo San Lorenzo in a neoclassical building with its soaring ceilings and treated floors, there's no immediacy, no art in sight, just a simply vinyl stating the artist's name and chic associates milling about.

But then you ascend the stairs and staring at you is the 65-and-a-half foot-long sculpture, "Spazio di luce" by Giuseppe Penone, made purely of bronze and gold. It's stunning and mesmerizing and for a moment, you may miss the the selection of drawings to your left. It drifts seamlessly between the kingdoms of animal and plant, taking on characteristics of touched bark, of insects, of carved mountains, possessing perhaps none of them and all of them concurrently.

Penone takes his cue from the natural world. The root of the work— both it's material and inspiration— is from a place on the edge of France and Italy. He writes "There is a place on the border between France and Italy, the Valley of Miracles (Valle delle Meraviglie), where there are

circa 30,000 rock carvings around Mount Bego, a sacred mountain. The miracle is not the carvings, but the beauty of the site with its valleys, its mountains, its larches, and the presence of the sea evoked by the smell of the grass. It is a beauty that suggests a sense of sacredness.”

Captivated by material and physicality, by beauty and age, he’s devoted a five-decade career to exploring our relationship to the organic. We sat down (virtually) with the 68-year-old Italian artist, who splits his time between Paris and Turin, to chat about the sacred, the language of sculpture, and what’s so special about the Valley of Miracles.

You mention the sacred when you speak about the Valley of Miracles — that the sacred existed in the beauty of the place. I’m hoping to explore this idea of sanctity, or rather sacredness, and how it aligns with the natural world. What is your interest in sanctity and how does it inform your work?

I am interested in sanctity in that it conjures up an epiphany and a disappearance – both are connected to sculpture where there is a volume that appears, the positive, and one that disappears, the negative.

As a member of the Arte Povera movement, material is such a significant part of your practice. What is your relationship to the material of “Spazio di luce” and how do you approach your use of this material?

Material is itself the language of sculpture. The use of bronze creates a connection with the history of sculpture. In the same way gold is a very evocative material and in the case of “Spazio di Luce” it reflects the light absorbed by the tree and necessary to its growth. Through bronze, the gesture of the sculptor becomes manifest. In ” Spazio di Luce” one can see the cast of the layer of wax that registered the shape of the trunk as well as the imprint of the hand of the artist that laid it down.

You grew up surrounded by nature, which has been largely influential for you and your consideration of the interdependence of all living things. “Spazio di luce” particularly embodies this sentiment as it seems to conjure flora and fauna simultaneously. Can you speak to that?

The boundaries between the material of different worlds are very indistinct, our blood is similar to the lymph flowing in a plant. A sculpture can speak about man and also about plants and minerals. Bronze fossilizes plants in an extraordinary way and mimics its colors beautifully.

Can you tell us more about the Valley of Miracles and Mont Bego? How and when did you come to find it and what was your experience with this place? How was the decision made to create “Spazio di luce”, it’s root being this place?

It is a very well known area near the maritime alps region where I am from. On this mountain there are about 30,000 petroglyphs some of which extremely old. It is located in what is now France in a natural park called valley of miracles where the larch I cast for Spazio di Luce comes from.

Giuseppe Penone: *Spazio di luce is on view at Gagosian Gallery Roma through June 6, 2015.*