

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Giuseppe Penone returns to Hong Kong after 45 years for exhibition

A member of the Arte Povera movement in the late 1960s and 70s, Penone recalls a heady time of infinite possibility and changing times

Enid Tsui



Penone's 1968 piece Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quel punto (It will continue to grow except at that point). Photos: Archivio Penone

An exhibition in Asia 45 years ago helped establish Giuseppe Penone as a major figure in one of Europe's most significant contemporary art movements.

In 1970, the then 23-year-old Italian artist was included in two influential exhibitions that acknowledged his role in the budding Arte Povera movement.

One was in New York's Museum of Modern Art. The other was "Between Man and Matter", an exhibition at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum that also featured Richard Serra and other prominent names.

"Being included in those exhibitions was a breakthrough for me. After the Tokyo exhibition, I stopped briefly in Hong Kong and that was the last time I came here," he says at the start of his solo exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery.

Today, he looks back at the 1960s and early '70s as a time of infinite possibilities. The Italian economy was booming. In fact, it is often said that the country experienced *il miracolo economico* for roughly two decades between the post-war stimulus of the Marshall Plan and the 1973 oil crisis.

Meanwhile, the Western world was being turned upside down by events such as the Vietnam war protests, women's liberation movement and the 1968 Paris uprising.

"The post-war decades saw a great urge for renewal and solidarity. There was a strong feeling that things were changing," he says.

Arte Povera, literally "poor art", was about reinventing the language of art and using simple elements, including "found" objects, that could communicate with many people, he explains.

Penone's works on show in Hong Kong have not deviated from those ideas, though they certainly put paid to the common misconception that Arte Povera is about using humble, worthless materials.

Highly realistic tree branches cast with bronze lift up an 18th century remnant of a stone capital that once stood above columns of a European mansion. A tree stump made with solid white marble is covered by a bronze plate to give the impression that it has a metal core. Several large slabs of bronze lie on the floor, each an imperfect reproduction of a perfect mirror surface.

Explaining his choice of materials, he lists practical and artistic reasons. "I've always made outdoor sculptures and permanence is important because you need to give people time to see the work. It has to be stable," the artist says.

"Also, I choose bronze because I need a material that can support the heavy stone that I've put on top of the branches, and it has a patina that is very much alive and reacts to external elements.

"From the beginning, I've been interested in man and nature, the energy of life. There is one work here where I have used acacia thorns to create an image of a mouth. I've placed pieces of stone capital I found in an antique shop on top of the bronze tree branches to give the feeling that they are growing together," he says.

Perched on top of the branches, the stones also appear deceptively light. He says that and the fake tree branches do bring a degree of "excitement" to the artworks at the moment when the audience realise their eyes have been deceived.

However, the trompe-l'œil is just the side effect of picking the materials he uses and not the justification, he says.

Penone is a highly conceptual artist who had the fortune of starting out at a time when kindred spirits from both sides of the Atlantic worked together to forge new ways of making art.

"Arte Povera was not an isolated movement. It was closely related to what was happening in the US, such as minimalism and pop art. When I went to New York in 1970, I met everyone. I went to Robert Rauschenberg's studio. Cy Twombly was there," he recalls.

He believes that perhaps it was easier for new ideas to gain momentum quickly because the art world was so much smaller back then and everybody knew everybody.

“There wasn’t so much about and there was no sense of competition between artists. If you saw someone expressing the same spirit as you, you would support them,” Penone says.

“At the same time, Arte Povera artists made works that were very different from each other. Labels are a problem for art critics, not for artists.”

Today, Italy is only just beginning to emerge from a devastating economic crisis and the world seems more divided than ever. Penone has to acknowledge that his youthful optimism was perhaps misplaced.

“We thought the future would have no war, that the future would be more free, and global travel would become easier. That hasn’t happened. The world is less free, more divided,” he says.

Still, his work hasn’t changed because he cannot shake off the ideas he formed as a younger man. “I continue to produce work on the basis of that thinking, that one should have a positive way to think about life.”

He points out that it has been personally important for him to take on two new commissions from the Islamic world amid growing religious and cultural tension. One is for the royal family of Saudi Arabia and one is for the Louvre museum in Abu Dhabi.

“For me, it is important that we maintain communication with different cultures today,” he says.

Giuseppe Penone: Leaves of Stone, Gagosian Gallery, 7/F Pedder Building, 12 Pedder Street, Central, Tue-Sat 11am-7pm. Ends March 12