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how to spend it

Fendi salutes Giuseppe Penone in a new exhibition

A towering forest of works by Giuseppe Penone is taking root in Fendi's historic Rome HQ as a prelude to the Italian fashion house's donation of a monumental commission to the city. Francesca Gavin has an exclusive audience with the artist. Photographs by Valentina Sommariva

Francesca Gavin



Penone in his studio with Cedro de Versailles | Image: Valentina Sommariva

One of the tallest trees in the world is the sequoia, which reaches up to 90m in the forests of California. Standing in front of the sculptures by Italian artist Giuseppe Penone – who excavates the tender centres of fallen trees, then transforms them into amalgams of bronze and marble – can be just as awe-inspiring. Penone's work sits somewhere between the grand spectacle of nature and the wonder of civilisation. Soon it is to be the subject of an exhibition at Fendi's headquarters in Rome, with a further piece donated by the fashion house to the Italian capital in the form of a public sculpture.

Among Italy's best-known artists, Penone came to prominence as the youngest member of the arte povera movement that started in Italy in the 1960s, and created art with a focus on the conceptual, together with earthy materials and poetic simplicity. Fifty years on and Penone is one of the world's most admired living sculptors who has had major solo exhibitions at Versailles and Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum. His prices begin at a few hundred thousand euros, but auction results have hit up to seven figures.

Today the artist looks similar to how he did in his youth, with the same shaggy hair – so recognisable from his early self-portrait with mirrored contact lenses – framing his face. What is

surprising about him is his humility. His decision to remain in Turin reflects a lack of bombast. Penone came to study in the city in 1967 after growing up in the Maritime Alps. “Turin offers many opportunities, especially its industrial spaces. Work is easier here,” he explains from his studio close to the Po river. The front of the space is a beautifully minimalist oasis of calm: three white floors united by a concrete staircase – a neutral backdrop to the accents of wood, bronze and marble in his artworks.

At the back of his atelier is a cavernous workshop where much of the intense labour takes place. Unusually for an artist working on his scale and using traditional methods such as wax moulding, wood carving and bronze casting, Penone has only one assistant. “I’m personally involved in producing all my work. I’m not able to do otherwise,” he says. “I think the physical realisation of an object with your hands allows you to understand the possibilities of the material, and thought cannot give you that.”

The pairing of the artist and one of the country’s best-known fashion brands sees the union of two icons of contemporary Italian creativity. Fendi approached Penone in 2014 to commission a public work that it wanted to donate to the city of Rome. The capital has something of a reputation for being resistant to public works of contemporary art, but Fendi CEO Pietro Beccari is confident the artwork will triumph. “We believe that Via dei Condotti, with the Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi on one side and the Spanish Steps on the other, should have the perfect complement on the other side – another artwork, a contemporary one.”

Full details of the piece, which will be on Largo Goldoni outside the Palazzo Fendi, are still under wraps. But what is known is that it will be a combination of bronze and marble. “Something that changes and develops in response to the elements,” says Penone, “like a three-dimensional drawing, with nature as the ultimate draughtsman. The oxidised bronze will eventually colour the white marble, which is like a blank sheet of paper waiting to be written on over time.”

The exhibition (January 27-July 15) will take over the entire ground floor of the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, Fendi’s headquarters. Massimiliano Gioni, artistic director of New York’s New Museum and curator of the 55th Venice Biennale, worked with Penone on curating it. “It’s certainly not a complete retrospective, because obviously the space wouldn’t fully allow it,” Gioni explains. “However, it is a notable occasion. He is an artist who is crucial in the history of contemporary Italian art. We felt it was important to give him the recognition he deserves in Italy and in Rome.”

The weight of antiquity, so evident in the capital, recontextualises Penone’s oeuvre in an interesting way. Here, in a “place of different forms of civilisation” where the modern and the ancient are interwoven, “the pieces become more evocative,” says Gioni. Penone sees his work as part of a continuum leading from ancient Rome. “In a country that doesn’t have Italy’s cultural heritage, it might be easier to imagine something detached,” he observes. “Although my work can stand on its own, I don’t want to create a conflict, a contrast, simply to affirm the present.”

“Rome’s art-loving local and visiting community will no doubt appreciate the opportunity to learn more about Penone’s work,” adds Pepi Marchetti Franchi, director of the Gagosian gallery in Rome, where it will be possible to buy some of the new works in this exhibition. “And

the relationship between the sculptures themselves, set within the extraordinary architecture of the Palazzo della Civiltà del Lavoro, will undoubtedly heighten the impact of this event.”

Penone approached Fendi’s exhibition space with an awareness of its history – it was built during the time of Mussolini’s fascist regime. “The building dates back to the late 1930s and has a strong rhetoric,” says Penone, in reference to its striking cube of arches. His pieces aim to soften the architecture and explore questions around humanity, the body and nature. The exhibition will include some of Penone’s older works such as *Soffio di Foglie*, a huge pile of leaves on which the artist has left an imprint of his body, *Abete* and *Ripetere Il Bosco*, and *Spine d’Acacia*, made entirely of thorns and which resembles the lines of the artist’s mouth. There will also be two new pieces, including a 30m-long horizontal sculpture, formed from a tree that has been excavated and the interior filled with a bronze mould, and which will occupy an entire wing of the building. Even the outside space is being reinvented, with a momentous sculpture of two bronze and marble trees.

Indeed, it is impossible to speak of Penone and not talk about trees. His art examines how we change the world and the world changes us, expressed through the structures of nature. One of his first pieces, created in 1968, consists of a bronze mould of his hand wrapped around a young tree. “When you take a piece of clay in your hands, you leave a mark, an imprint – this is the beginning of sculpture. But the hand, too, adapts to the object’s shape,” Penone explains. “All my work developed from that first sculpture.” Other significant pieces involved pulling away the layers of a tree trunk to reveal its delicate inner sapling. Penone describes this inner tree as a perfect sculpture, whose shape determines the tree’s entire existence. “The tree is a solid, living being that can be shaped. But you can also find the shape of the tree within it,” he says.

The artist’s work feels especially relevant in the context of climate change. But Penone’s take is complex. “I think the problem with preserving nature is that man is motivated by his need to survive,” he posits. Ego, he argues, is at the core. As he pulls away the rings of the tree, exposing its tender, spindly centre, the result is both strong and vulnerable. Both elements are vital to his work – even at its largest. “The fragility you have in the branch of a tree is the same fragility of our existence,” he says. “I don’t know if you’ve ever visited a park with monumental, extraordinary sculptures and seen a small flower nearby that holds your attention more strongly than the sculptures? Monumental things are impressive, but they become more interesting if there is also a fragile, sensitive element.”

Beauty is a word artists often veer away from, but with Penone’s work it is hard to avoid. As he says while sitting in his almost monastic workspace in Turin: “If you look for beauty as an end, you cannot produce an interesting work of art. Beauty is the consequence of a thought.”