

Giuseppe Penone (Garessio, IT 1947) was the youngest member of a group of Italian artists whose work was collectively named *arte povera* ('poor art') by the critic Germano Celant during the late sixties. One of the features of their art was the use of commonplace and inexpensive materials, such as rags, earth, branches and coal. The informal and lively looking artworks were indeed seen as a reaction to the increasing abstraction and dehumanization of particularly the American art of that period. The themes of *arte povera* involved the roots of culture and of life, various sources of energy, and especially energy as a primal force. Penone is the only artist of the group whose work was centered around nature. Even now, he continues to have an intense and obsessive interest in the vital forces of nature, in particular that of trees.

The *Alberi* (Trees), which Penone began producing in 1968, have become quite well known. Time and again, the irregular growth form of a tree is extracted from rectangular beams of wood or from thick, sawed-off tree trunks. By peeling away its rings and thereby following the knots, he arrives at the shape that a tree had at a certain point in its life. Once one has seen these works, the sight of an uprooted tree trunk or any wooden beam used in building will always be a reminder that many trees are actually contained in this. 'Every year it is born again, and it stores the memory of its tree-ness within itself,' writes Penone about the tree, and it is precisely this hidden memory which Penone is revealing.

In recent years Penone has also been working with marble. Just as he exposes the life structure hidden within wooden beams, he makes the dark veins in the marble visible by chiseling away the surrounding white stone. It is as though the cold marble possesses an organic inner life, as though the irregular black veins were the lifeblood of the stone. Unlike a scientific analyst or a pathologist, who makes a dead being even more dead, so to speak, by taking it apart, Penone brings dead matter to life. The irregular structures that are freed from the stone show a remarkable similarity to branches that have intertwined in their growth or to the anatomy of overlapping, interlacing tendons and muscles.

Penone's work deals with the desire for a union of man and nature, two entities that have become very remote from each other in western society. He continually endeavors to bring about physical, sensual and poetic contact between the two. In recent works, there is considerable reference to the fingers – the sense of touch at its most acute – and fingerprints. Penone suggests a relationship between his fingers and the branches of a tree or uses the lines of his fingerprints as the starting point for concentric, irregular line drawings that gradually begin to look like the growth rings of a tree. His fingerprint, the unique mark of his identity, thus becomes the center of ever-expanding lines of growth. It is a distinctly sensual gesture, which furthermore makes it clear that the artist,

and in fact every being, is the core of his environment – a world in which he is both creator and participant.

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