

**GIUSEPPE
PENONE**

**THOUGHTS
IN THE ROOTS**

**3 APRIL –
7 SEPTEMBER
2025**



'Every word for trees collects days of rain, sun and mist. It contains seasons, memories of places and time; it has a different meaning from person to person. These words fill the woods with their presence, invade the landscape and guide our care for nature.'

Giuseppe Penone

Born in Garessio, a village near Cuneo in Northern Italy, in 1947, Giuseppe Penone draws deep inspiration from the region's forested and mountainous landscapes. This environment has shaped his lifelong exploration of the intricate relationships between humans and nature. His first major work, *Alpi Marittime* (Maritime Alps), consists of a series of actions documented by black and white photographs that he carried out in the winter of 1968 in the woods around Garessio. In one image Penone's hand holds the trunk of a tree; in a later image it is replaced by a cast of his hand. As the tree continues to grow, its shape is altered by the pressure applied by the cast, embodying themes that define his work — forest life, the passage of time and the interplay between human and natural forces.

Penone is a leading figure in the movement termed *Arte Povera* in 1967 by art critic Germano Celant, which translates as 'Poor Art', referencing the artists' use of humble, everyday materials. Penone participated in international exhibitions dedicated to avant-garde research including *Konzeption / Conception* at Schloss Morsbroich in Leverkusen (1969), *Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, Land Art* at the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna in Turin, and *Information*, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1970).

Thoughts in the Roots brings together sculptures, installations and drawings from 1969 to today. Using materials like wood, leaves, resin, bronze, and marble, Penone's practice explores the synergy between artistic and organic processes. His imprints of human skin and tree bark investigate the impact of

human gestures and the interchangeability of bodies and plants. For Penone, breathing itself becomes a sculptural act, as he seeks to give form to air.

At the centre of the exhibition, *Respirare l'ombra* (To Breathe the Shadow) unfolds as a sensory installation made of laurel leaves. Penone likens breathing to the lost-wax casting process, where molten metal fills the mould while wax is expelled from reeds. Here, the dissipating scent of laurel leaves symbolise breath, highlighting the delicate symbiotic relationships in the natural world. By engaging the visual, tactile and olfactory aspects of his materials, Penone uncovers hidden structures, rhythms, gestures, and the interconnectedness of living things.

For Penone, trees embody the 'primal and most simple idea of vitality, culture and sculpture'. His *Alberi* (Trees) series, which began in 1969, are constructed through a process of carving away the outer rings of mature timber, peeling back the layers to reveal the tree's original form. Over time, the artist's practice has expanded to include casting trees in bronze, a material that, upon oxidation, develops a patina resembling tree bark.

Responding to Serpentine South's location in Kensington Gardens, Penone extends the exhibition beyond the gallery walls into the surrounding landscape. Three life-size bronze trees stand among their botanical counterparts, blurring the borders between human gestures and the organic world.



A OCCHI CHIUSI (WITH EYES CLOSED)

The exhibition opens with *A occhi chiusi* (With Eyes Closed), exploring the relationship between sight and the act of closing one's eyes — an enduring theme in Penone's work. *Rovesciare i propri occhi* (Reversing One's Eyes), a 1970 black-and-white photograph, captures Penone staring directly at the viewer while wearing mirrored contact lenses. By interrupting his vision and rendering him blind, these lenses reflect back what his eyes would have seen. Penone describes this as a process that 'defines the volume of my body as a sculpture'. The absence of sight, he suggests, 'creates space for imagination'. This imagery is further explored in *A occhi chiusi*, where numerous acacia thorns trace and represent closed eyes, synthesising our senses in connection with nature.

ALBERI LIBRO (BOOK TREES)

The vegetal world is central to Penone's work. He constructs his *Alberi* (Trees) by carving away the outer rings of mature timber layer by layer. This process reveals knots left by branches, exposing how the tree once appeared before it was felled. Penone describes this approach as an intimate exploration:

'To penetrate into the intimate history of the wood, carved by days of sunshine, rain, snow, frost and encounters with other living forms, contacts with insects, animals, accidents, shocks, incisions, wounds, and the caresses of other plants is an idea which only a thought close to the material can develop.'

At the centre back of the gallery stands *Alberi libro* (Book Trees), created using the same technique but with white fir, cedar and larch wood. The sculpture consists of twelve carved saplings placed side by side, serving as a tangible record of time. As Penone explains:

'To enter into the forest is to embark on a voyage in time, into the history of every single tree and every year of its life. The slowness with which a year in the life of a tree is traced and uncovered recalls its growth. The slower it is, the richer in details and little stories and consciousness it will be.'



RESPIRARE L'OMBRA (TO BREATHE THE SHADOW)

Respirare l'ombra (To Breathe the Shadow) is a sensory installation of laurel leaves that envelop the gallery walls. Since the 1970s, Penone has explored the concept of breath as sculpture through different materials. In this installation, a gold-cast sculpture of a human lung is mounted on the wall at average adult height, while the scent of laurel leaves permeates the gallery. To the artist, leaves perform the vital act of producing oxygen for all living beings while also providing shade:

'Nourishing our bodies with the shadow of the trees and uniting the shadow of the leaves with the shadow that we conceal in our body is "breathing the shadow".'

SOFFIO DI FOGLIE (BREATH OF LEAVES)

Further investigating the relationship between nature and the body, Penone uses organic materials to record his own breath. In *Soffio di foglie* (Breath of Leaves), the artist lies on a heap of boxwood leaves, breathing air into them. The imprint of his body and breath is left on the leaves, recording traces of his physical presence.





GESTI VEGETALI (VEGETAL GESTURES)

Gesti vegetali (Vegetal Gestures) is a series of sculptures exploring the symbiotic relationship between natural forms and the human body. Penone first conceived the series in the 1980s, creating drawings for *Gesti vegetali* by tracing movements of the human body with fluid brushstrokes. These shapes were then moulded in clay and finally cast in bronze — a material that, through oxidation, takes on the colour of tree bark.

In this installation, three bronze sculptures are placed amongst plant pots, intertwined with living vegetation such as pittosporum and star jasmine. Extending beyond the gallery, the work reaches into Kensington Gardens.





PRESSIONE **(PRESSURE)**

Pressione (Pressure), a large-scale graphite imprint created on-site by Penone, spans two walls of the gallery. The work builds on a process he first developed in 1970 with works from the series *Svolgere la propria pelle* (To Unroll One's Skin), in which he captured imprints of his skin by pressing ink- and charcoal-covered adhesive tape onto his body. This method preserved the fine lines and creases of his skin in almost photographic detail.

In *Pressione*, these imprints were enlarged, projected onto the gallery walls, and meticulously traced by hand in graphite. The resulting charcoal drawing reveals not only the intricate typography of the artist's skin, but also the varying pressures exerted — both in the original imprinting process and in the act of drawing itself. As Penone reflects:

'Skin, like the eye, is a boundary element, the end point capable of dividing and separating us from what surrounds us ... It is the point that allows me, still and after all, to recognise myself.'

VERDE DEL BOSCO **(FOREST GREEN)**

Penone's experimentation with 'unrolling one's skin' extends beyond the human body to the vegetal world. The lush forests depicted in the *Verde del bosco* (Forest Green) series are created by imprinting the surfaces of tree bark, branches and leaves. In the process, Penone wraps natural cotton fibres around the trunks of living trees and creates frottage rubbings using leaves. The distinctive furrows of the bark are transferred and recorded on the fabric, forming the foundation of the rich vegetation in the drawings. The vibrant greens of fresh spring leaves and the reddish browns of ageing autumn foliage reflect the different seasons.



OUTDOOR SCULPTURES

Penone began casting trees in bronze in the late 1980s, often integrating his public sculptures within a matrix of real trees to create a dialogue with the wider environment. *Albero folgorato* (Thunderstruck Tree) and *Idee di pietra* (Ideas of Stone) are installed in Kensington Gardens for *Thoughts in the Roots*.

Standing adjacent to Serpentine South, *Albero folgorato* is based on a hundred-year-old willow tree that grew in Grand-Hornu, Belgium. After being struck by lightning, its trunk split at the centre, laying bare the internal material of the wood. Penone cast the tree in bronze and lined its pulp with gold leaf, capturing the invisible force of nature that sculpted its splintered shape and complex internal structure.

Idee di pietra explores the relationship between river stones and human thought. In these sculptures, river stones of varying shapes and sizes are placed on the forks of the bronze tree branches. Penone describes the work as:

'An idea that is formed summing up innumerable previous thoughts, polished by the passage of time, compacted by the weight of memories, cracked by doubts and by the uncertainties that situate themselves between the thoughts separating them. It is a river stone that appears amid the branches of a tree.'

EXHIBITION CREDITS

Exhibition curated by:
Claude Adjil, Curator at Large,
and Hans Ulrich Obrist, Artistic
Director, with Alexa Chow,
Assistant Exhibitions Curator

Production team:
Richard Install, Head of Production;
Mike Gaughan, Gallery Manager;
Zsuzsa Benke, Production Manager;
Alice Houghton, Registrar

Design: Atelier Dyakova

Print: Impress Print Services Ltd

SATURDAY TALKS

26 APRIL, 12 PM

Claude Adjil, Curator at Large,
leads a tour on *Giuseppe Penone:
Thoughts in the Roots*.

2 AUGUST, 12 PM

Alexa Chow, Assistant Exhibitions
Curator, leads a tour on *Giuseppe
Penone: Thoughts in the Roots*.

BSL interpretation is available on
request for all our Saturday Talks.

IMAGE CREDITS

Giuseppe Penone working
on *Alberi Libro* (Book Trees).
Photo © Salvatore Mazza

A occhi chiusi
(With Eyes Closed), 2009
Acrylic, glass microspheres,
acacia thorns on canvas
and white Carrara marble
150 × 510 × 8 cm
Photo © Archivio Penone

Alberi libro (Book Trees), 2017
White fir wood, cedar wood
and larch wood
443.5 × 513 × 41 cm
Photo © Archivio Penone

Respirare l'ombra
(To Breathe the Shadow), 2000
Metal grids, laurel leaves,
and bronze
Dimensions determined by the site
Photo © Archivio Penone

Soffio di foglie
(Breath of Leaves), 1979
Boxwood leaves
Dimensions determined by the site
Photo © Archivio Penone

Gesti vegetali
(Vegetal Gestures), 1983–1985
Bronze and vegetation
Installation view Galleria
Borghese, Rome, 2023
Photo © Sebastiano
Pellion di Persano

Pressione (Pressure), 1980
Charcoal on wall
220 × 2500 cm
Installation view Stedelijk
Museum, Amsterdam, 1980
Photo © Paolo Mussat Sartor

Verde del bosco
(Forest Green), 1986
Leaf frottage and vegetable
colour on cotton canvas
264 × 583 cm
Photo © Archivio Penone

Giuseppe Penone working
on *Verde del bosco* (Forest Green).
Photo © Nanda Lanfranco

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