

GIUSEPPE PENONE

interview by ALEXIS DAHAN

At 69, Giuseppe Penone still works as intensely as he did when he started his artistic career in the late sixties. Originally associated with his fellow Italian artists of this generation under the convenient label of Arte Povera, Penone has grown into a tireless sculptor who uses wood, brass and marble to convey his obsessions with natural and human “imprints”.

He has had as many exhibitions as there are leaves on the trees and endless publications have demonstrated why his work *matters*. So why do one more interview? Why now? Perhaps because we believe the wisdom of someone who never stopped working during more than 40 years for what he believes will always have the potential to enlighten current and future generations. For Purple, Penone talks about technology, imprints, matter and sex.

ALEXIS DAHAN – As an Italian artist, you are coming from a culture of image and representation. However, except for the use of photography as a medium to document your interventions of the late 60’s, image as representation is nowhere to be found in your practice. Why this refusal of the image?

GIUSEPPE PENONE – It’s not a refusal of the image per se. It’s rather a reflection on the meaning of representation. In the 60’s and in the 70’s, my work was about language and materiality. What might be missing throughout my work as an artist is the image of mankind because I believe creating anthropomorphic images is not necessary. That being said there is humanity in most of my works through a tactile presence. And this presence mostly manifests itself with the image of the imprint. Imprints are an animal type of image, not an image produced by culture.

AD – You have said: “photography records images without creating them.” The technic of molding/casting that is at the center of your practice is somewhat a way to record volumes like photography records images. What links do you see between sculpture and photography?

GP – Just like a photograph, by essence, a sculpture can be reproduced. You cannot reproduce a painting but the potential of being reproduced belongs to the nature of sculpture as a mean of expression. You may start with a mold and then you make a cast with plaster. Traditionally, a model is being reproduced depending on the final medium you want to use. It is very similar to the possibility of reproducing silver prints.

AD – That being said, as opposed to the photographic medium, it seems like the technics you are using are not affected by the evolution of technology.

GP – There is a technological evolution in sculpture like the invention of 3D printing. However it is really not the same. If for example you are molding an imprint on the floor, you are conserving its *freshness* within the matter you use. I believe this freshness is not possible to achieve with a computer.

AD – Do you mean it is more “alive”?

GP – Molding records to the millimeter and saves the micro-fractures that makes matter alive.

AD – Looking at your work in the past decades, we learn that an artistic idea can be used and explored continuously without loosing its aesthetic and intellectual potential. There is something in your practice that seems impossible to exhaust.

GP – This is possible precisely because the reflection is not centered on images but rather on language itself. If you work on sculpture’s language (and this is what I believe to be doing since the beginning) and on sculpture’s capacity to translate sensations that belong to life itself, then there is something that cannot be exhausted. I am saying with sculpture the perception I have of reality during my existence.

AD – Are you influenced by the world?

GP – In which sense?

AD – In a political sense. Because Nature is eternal and its perception is the principal subject of your sculptures, your work does not seem to be affected by what is happening in the world of men. It is difficult to see any political content

GP – I disagree because my perception of reality changes depending on the political, economical and social situation. My work does not address directly the problems of the world because they may very well be addressed by the existing means of information. Today the largest social tragedy is the political immigration of millions of people. Everybody is affected by it and it could very well enter an indirect reflection using sculpture in a new way.

AD – Has it ever interested you to include this political reality inside of your work?

GP – I believe I already do. If you are interested in sculpture *as language*, you must consider the reality that surrounds you beyond conventions. I do not directly translate a political or social subject in my works but the position from which I work acknowledges this reality. Consider for example the political and social situation of the late 19th century. Consider the massive changes induced by industrial and technological evolutions. And now look at an artistic movement such as Impressionism, whose main subject was light, you could think that these artists were completely outside of the reality of their time. However, when one analyzes a painting, one must also consider its context. We have to go beyond the image and consider the reasons that produced this particular way of making a painting. It is a question of reality awareness.

AD – Nowadays many are confusing the evolution of technology with the evolution of art and we find ourselves surrounded with artists feeling the necessity to include the latest technology in their medium or use the latest cultural trend as their subject.

GP – Indeed, what we must understand is that technological evolution is always bound with a need. Matters produced by men are bound with the market. As soon as the market does not need a particular thing anymore or needs to sell something else, it immediately abandons its production.

Therefore, an artistic practice that is based on technological matter becomes inevitably old. But if you use a leaf of paper and a pencil, you are doing something that exists for thousands of year and will always be contemporary. There is an atemporal quality belonging to some mediums that technology will never allow.

AD – What about the City? It is very hard to understand your relationship with the urban phenomenon.

GP – What interests me before all are “imprints”. If I think of the City, I immediately think of it as a context where a large density of people is located in a limited space. And this must produce an enormous amount of imprints! If you just imagine the amount of imprints created in a city every day, it’s huge!

It’s also stunning how erasing and cleaning these imprints is a constant worry. It’s as if we were cleaning their identity in order to create free space for new ones. This kind of behavior is way less tangible in a rural context.

AD – I believe there is an action of sedimentation inside cities as well. Successive coats of urbanizations exist on top of each other like in nature and are often hidden by the most recent one.

GP – Yes, absolutely. In my researches I find that cleaning or covering imprints is in contradiction with mankind because that is what represent our identity in the most direct way.

AD – Is there an autobiographical intention when you use your own imprints into your sculptures?

GP – No, my work is a reflection on what is an imprint in general and the fact that you can identify my own person through my fingerprints is not central to the work.

AD – Tell us about the “Cedar of Versailles”.

GP – When there was the great storm of 1999, I was preparing the piece “L’Arbre des Voyelles” (The Tree of Vowels) for the Tuileries garden in Paris. Someone who worked with the domain of Versailles told me about an auction organized by Les Amis de Versailles to sell the trees that were brought down by the heavy winds in order to finance the garden’s repairs. So I went and bought two specimens and used one that was over 200 years old to create the sculpture: “Cedar of Versailles”.

AD – How long did it take?

GP – About a year.

AD – Do you usually do the work yourself?

GP – Yes I do. I also have one assistant.

AD – It sounds like slow and tedious work, what part does pleasure play in that process?

GP – An essential part! When you work with wood, there is a perfume, a physicality, it's an action that relaxes me and that I associate with meditation. It's actually quite pleasant! You have to be very focused because I am not creating a shape but rather uncovering a shape that pre-exist inside the matter wood.

AD – This way of making art seems to be foreign to the acceleration of contemporary society.

GP – There is a time for everything. Technology has brought us speed that allows us to do many things at the same time; however, the physical time of our body still remains the same. If the possibility of communication and travel has accelerated and gives us the illusion of living more, we still have to eat and sleep at certain times. I believe these experiences of speed are very superficial and do not affect deeply who we are.

AD – The limits of the body is also a theme inherent to artworks such as “Spazio di Luce” (Space of light). It feels like your sculptures have their own body.

GP – If an artwork does not have a physical autonomy, if it does not have its own body and necessitates a definition and the defense of its author, then it is a bad artwork and its life is very limited.

However, if an artwork becomes something else that what we had imagined, if an artwork acquires its own identity, that means that it is alive, that it has the possibility and the capacity to survive, that is a better artwork. I am always delighted to discover an artwork I just made because it allows me to do something else.

AD – Do you believe in a kind of creative dialectic between the artwork and the artist?

GP – Yes, especially with drawings. You start a drawing with a feeling, an intention and an idea but then the drawing becomes something else. It suggests a different interpretation of itself. And in this possibility of another interpretation of what you have done, there is room for reflection and for creation a new artwork.

AD – A little bit like a writer reading himself.

GP – We write and then we read ourselves. Within the moment of reading, we have feelings and a different understanding of what we wrote. It is within the space created by the moment of this experience that resides the possibility to create new things.

Sometimes you write or make something that you don't like but a few years later, you realize that the work was right as it became thoroughly autonomous.

AD – To go back to the bodily quality of your sculptures, there is an undeniable sensuality there. They have their own skin and you want to touch them. Would you qualify them as sexual or sensual?

GP – Yes. I believe sculpture as a medium is entirely based on sensuality and sexuality. Look at wet clay for example. This type of matter is so much like flesh. It's not an accident if God created men with earth and water!

And regarding the sexual aspect, it is even more obvious because of the negative and the positive. The action of sculpting is necessarily an action of either positive on negative or negative on positive.

We spoke about the Cedar of Versailles. In this case matter was fixed and my action came to reveal it. My work is the negative of the tree shape. This shape is brought to light through numerous gestures and the sum of all these actions becomes the negative of the actual sculpture.

AD – It sounds like the classical concept of sculpture since Michelangelo where the artist frees a form that preexisted in the matter.

Have you had actions that would work the other way around? Actions where the positive is predominant?

GP – Yes I made the sculptures “Gesti Vegetali” with an anthropomorphic gesture in the early 80's for example. In that case it was the matter that grew inside a bronze bark. My action was fixed and it was the plant that grew and filled the emptiness of the sculpture with its own matter.

AD – Let's end with the presence (or absence) of love in your work.

GP – If love is respect for the loved one, then in sculpture it is respect for the matter, which means working the matter without violence. I knew an old blacksmith who would go through serious drama each time he saw a worker hit the iron with a hammer. He told me that one has to “follow” and “understand” the iron when it's red and taken out of the fire. The love between an individual and the matter (he or she works with) is the type of love I have in my practice.