

FRICK MADISON

Propagazioni: Giuseppe Penone at Sèvres

Giulio Dalvit, Assistant Curator of Sculpture

Rewarding close and prolonged viewing, Giuseppe Penone's series of eleven porcelain disks—on view publicly for the first time since their creation—is the result of a 2013 collaboration between the artist and the famed Sèvres porcelain manufactory in France. The disks synthesize broad themes from Penone's body of work, notably his investigation of nature as the ultimate source of artistic inspiration and his explorations of more mutable definitions of sculpture. The beautifully subtle disks are shown in proximity to the Frick's finest examples of European and Asian porcelain, which provide context for the long, transcultural history of the medium. Visually unassuming yet conceptually dense, the disks and their hand-drawn decoration evoke ripples in water, the rings that mark a tree's years of growth, or even some body parts, such as breasts or eyes.

Born in 1947 in Garessio, in the Piedmont region of Italy, Penone has employed a wide range of unconventional materials, forms, and processes over his fifty-year career to challenge the fundamental language of sculpture. A leader of the Italian movement *Arte Povera* of the late 1960s and early 1970s, he investigates the relationship between nature and art by utilizing humble materials such as tree trunks, thorns, water, rocks, and leaves, although other, more traditional media including bronze and clay are also present in his works.

The eleven disks on display at Frick Madison belong to a broader, ongoing series of works initiated by the artist in 1995 and collectively titled *Propagazioni* (propagations). All made by hand and often created over long periods of time, the *Propagazioni* comprise many different media; the disks are Penone's first creations in porcelain.

Among the largest pieces ever produced at Sèvres, the disks—each measuring more than two feet in diameter—are made by slip casting, wherein liquid clay is poured into a plaster mold. The process accommodates the large size of the disks, which would be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve on a wheel. Because large porcelain objects are more prone to crack during the firing process, the disks are a technical tour de force and an impressive achievement, even for the storied manufactory.

Each disk features at its center one of the artist's fingerprints, applied in metal-oxide paint, from which concentric circles radiate across the surface, stopping just of the outer edge. Penone drew the thin rings by hand, using a specially manufactured pen to ensure the even distribution of paint. The eleventh disk, in gold, is a variation of the disk with a print of the artist's right index finger.

By combining sculpture and drawing, the disks transcend traditional boundaries between the two art forms, blurring the distinction between the two- and three-dimensional and the visual and the tactile. Like many sculptures, they also seem to make time itself visible. The concentric rings, circling perpetually around a central point, evoke the revolutions of the hands of a clock or the progression of a sundial, and thus in a way measure their own creation. The laborious process of drawing the fine lines records even the most minute hesitation of the artist's hand and change in breath, manifested by a slight pooling of the paint or a thickening of the line. This time-consuming exercise is juxtaposed with a very different measure of time: the momentary instant when the artist's finger touches the disk's center to leave its mark. Further obscuring the boundaries between drawing and sculpture, the concentric pattern alters the viewer's perception of each disk's shallow form by creating the illusion of greater depth.

The disks also confront the division between nature and art, two historically opposing categories. Penone's fingerprints serve as a metaphor for the act of creation—a record of the sculptor's "touch"—while the radiating lines chart the effects of creation on the artist's sensory experience. As much as the artist's hand shapes the material, it also is shaped by it. Penone's work thereby seeks to highlight touch as the site of this reciprocal relationship between human and material, between nature

and art. By foregrounding this metaphysical give-and-take, Penone suggests a redefinition of sculpture that is at once literal and abstract.

Penone's choice of an inverted dish-like form for his creations carries many associations—not least the centuries-long European obsession with porcelain following its discovery in Asia and the luxury tableware produced at Sèvres, Meissen, and other manufactories. Through their material relationship with porcelain and evocation of creative processes at large, the disks suggest far-reaching artistic connections across time and place, made more dramatic when considered alongside the Frick's porcelain holdings. As such—and well aligned with the thought-provoking new encounters on offer at Frick Madison—the *Propagazioni* are works of both here and there, past and present, tradition and modernity.

Propagazioni: Giuseppe Penone at Sèvres is on view at Frick Madison through August 28, 2022. The installation was organized by Giulio Dalvit. Principal support is provided by Gagosian. Additional funding is generously provided by Agnes Gund, Jane Richards, Kathleen Feldstein, and an anonymous gift.