

# ***Giacometti / not-Giacometti***

Two exhibitions in New York City of the work of Alberto Giacometti — one absolutely wonderful and one very bad. Let's get the bad one out of the way first — quickly. Then move on to the extraordinary exhibit at the Guggenheim Museum.

Michael O'Rourke, 11/29/18

***Alberto Giacometti, Intimate Immensity.* Luxembourg & Dayan Gallery, NYC – Nov 11 - Jan 18, 2018**

This uptown gallery is *very* discreet. Housed in a 77<sup>th</sup> Street townhouse, there are no windows through which the artwork can be seen from the street. There is not even the word “gallery” in their small sign on the door. I had to ring the bell and ask to be let in.

On entering one sees a long white pedestal with three small bronzes. They immediately looked odd. What was it? Ah, they are all of a uniform gold color — both the tiny figure and the base. How unlike Giacometti! How unlike him to cast both the base and the figure uniformly. And how unlike him to use gold! I cannot recall ever seeing him use such a gold color. His colors are more earthen, more natural — blacks, browns, tans.... I



look more carefully. The tiny human figures have very little detail. Giacometti had a terrific eye for tiny details. His plaster figures are scratched and gouged. His wax figures as well. These have a certain globby quality. They've been cast badly. I wonder....

Then it occurs to. Did Giacometti cast these or were they done after his death? I inquire. Sure enough, they were produced posthumously.

I go upstairs. More of the same. Groan!

These works were *not* produced by Giacometti. They are casts made by his estate after his death. Giacometti did *not* make a decision to cast these. He did make bronze casts of some of his small works during his lifetime, but they are much, much more sophisticated visually than these clunkers. These are like brass paperweights.

What a disappointment. Fortunately, I had previously had the exhilarating experience of the Giacometti retrospective at the Guggenheim. See below.

***Alberto Giacometti, Guggenheim, NYC*** – June 8 - Sept 12, 2018

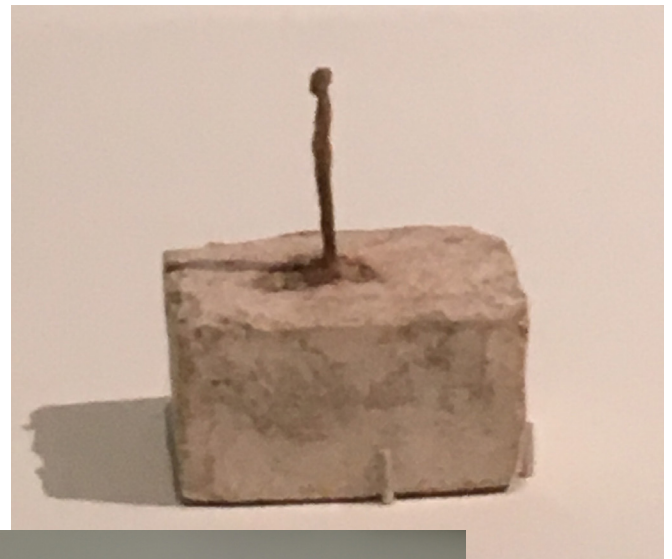
Two visits to this huge and wonderful Guggenheim exhibition of Giacometti's work.

Giacometti's best work, strongest, most powerful work was in the 1940s and '50s, when he was in his own 40s and 50s. Previously he was doing pretty much what everyone else was doing at that time. None of it had any feeling. It was "making art" as opposed to thinking or feeling.

But when stuck in Geneva at the start of the the first World War, he began. Forced by his living arrangements (a small hotel room in which he both lived and worked) he started working very small — tiny sometimes. This in itself had a power. As he did so, he found his forms. And continued developing them for almost fifteen years.

The figure here is about 1 inch tall.

Wax on plaster.



The small head in the composition below is about 2 inches tall. The entire square it sits on is about 14 inches. Bronze cast, probably from wax and plaster.



This one is about 9 inches long.  
Plaster.



Working in plaster (and occasionally casting in bronze from the plasters) worked well for him because of the natural roughness of the plaster surface as you cut it. You have to work very, very hard *not* to have a rough surface when working with plaster. Giacometti used this natural tendency of the material to capture the roughness, crudeness, irregularities of the human/human figure/human face. We are rough, crude — and we are small.

And then the introduction of space — in the previous images, the tiny head isolated on its block, the isolated figures like trees on their empty square, the head floating alone in the air on a stake.

And this famous piece, floating in air and caged. Such lonely, broken people!





Later in his life, his work weakened. Repeating himself? A common danger for those who achieve acclaim and fame. I am not sure what happened here, but the work drastically weakens.

And his drawings/paintings! His two-dimensional work is as powerful as his more famous sculptures, just as distinctive. There was one triplet of blue pen (looks like it was done with a simple ballpoint pen) drawings of an eye – just the eye. The Guggenheim placed them almost out of sight. The three drawings were hidden off in a passage behind one of the Guggenheim's columns. The drawings are stunning, almost impossible to decipher at first, they are so abstracted. And then you see (!) that they are eyes, only eyes.

This relatively early painting – I think it was in the early '40s? – is very powerful. Oil paint on paper, small. Part of the strength of it is the color – the blood red, the muted blue-grays. And the irregularities – the offkilter shoulder, echoed by the offkilter frame within the frame, echoed again by the irregularly cut border of the paper. This is not a happy image, which is exactly what Giacometti was dealing with, wrestling with – the unhappiness of us.



And it appears that his two-dimensional work helped him very much to figure out what to do three dimensionally. There is so much similarity between the two! The roughness of the faces, the emaciation, the scratched lines and marks,....





His paintings are in a way drawings with paint. They are very linear. He scratches lines into the paint, he uses a thin brush with white paint to draw thin lines.

One of his most powerful paintings is his full-length seated portrait of the Japanese existentialist philosopher, Isaku Yuraihara. The figure and ostensible subject occupies only a fraction of the painting. The top 50% of the canvas is “empty”, and of the lower half, the figure occupies only maybe a third. The sub-

ject's face is almost in total darkness. The clearest portions are the legs and hands. What a powerful, powerful portrait/non-portrait!





And then, later in life, a portrait painting of his wife, Annette, twenty years his junior. She is beautiful, he clearly thinks she is beautiful — the clean facial features, the thin, elegant neck, the composure, self-confidence, looking right back at him. But the most striking thing is the eyes, her wide open eyes. She is looking, looking, looking — just as Giacometti spent his life looking, looking, looking. (Too bad he couldn't/didn't give her fidelity. She deserved it.)



And this quote from Mr. Giacometti: “I am very interested in art but I am instinctively more interested in truth... The more I work, the more I see differently.” Art as a cognitive activity, art as an attempt to understand. I believe we could change Mr. Giacometti's last sentence to “The more I work, the more I understand.” or even, “The more I look, the more I understand.” and he would not object.

And finally, these drawings, done on the subway, from memory, after leaving the exhibition.

