

Press release
Zurich, 10 March 2011

Kunsthaus Zürich presents 'Alberto Giacometti: The Art of Seeing'

From 11 March to 22 May the Kunsthaus Zürich presents an exhibition entitled 'Alberto Giacometti: The Art of Seeing'. Sight is the foundation of all visual art, and no artist has focused so centrally on the process of seeing as Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966), the Swiss sculptor, painter and graphic artist. The exhibition offers some 90 sculptures, paintings and drawings from all phases of his creative life to demonstrate the way Giacometti lends the psychological process of seeing a material presence.

It begins with the brilliantly premature confidence of the young Giacometti, reared in the Bregaglia valley, as he transmutes what he sees into artistic form. At the Academy in Paris, however, as he becomes conscious of the problems of perception, he gradually grows less sure of himself, and the profound creative crisis that ensues leads him in 1925 to abstraction and Surrealism. Charged with the psychologizing interpretations of Surrealist writers and their oscillations between Eros and Thanatos, seeing as rendered in symbolic and metaphorical motifs becomes a central topos of his art. Such constructions of the process of perception continue following Giacometti's return to the study of modeling in 1935 to open an internal space of the imagination in which he is able to carry out his phenomenological investigations. An initial protracted phase leads to the surrender of form and the creation of ever smaller figures; it is only in his second phase, beginning in 1947, that Giacometti can capture his internal view of humanity by means of his attenuated striding forms. As of 1951 he intensifies his encounter with his object and is able to project its presence into corporeality and real space as well.

A precise selection and configuration of evocative pieces and brief texts allows the viewer to experience the artist's inscription of the psychological process of seeing in his work by means of particular formulations and procedures.

FROM UNMEDIATED SEEING TO CONSCIOUS PERCEPTION

At the outset of the exhibition-cum-essay curated by Christian Klemm are early drawings and aquarelles, astonishing testimony to the intensity with which Alberto already saw his surroundings as a young man, and captured them in unreflected immediacy. Even at this early phase, the eyes and the gaze of his self-portraits and likenesses of his parents and brothers are predominant. As he becomes a professional artist, he grows conscious of problems of perception and artistic implementation: questions of scale, of various means of stylization, of the tensions between surfaces and depths, between the optic and the tactile.

Giacometti's analytical process renders these issues palpable to the viewers of his works, especially in the nude studies of his Academy days and in a series of heads modeled on his father.

FROM ABSTRACTION TO SURREALISM

In 1925 Giacometti is plunged into a profound creative crisis: he turns away from visualization to a modern style influenced by Cubism and tribal art. What remains, however, is seeing, now central as a form-giving substantive motif in his key works above all. His emblematic 'Tête qui regarde', with which Giacometti advanced to the fore of the innovative artists of the Avant-garde, is at once his entrée to Surrealism. Here the eye and the gaze map out psychologically highly charged terrain, as Giacometti designs symbolist constructions to contain vexing metaphors for the insoluble tensions between erotic aggression and fatal fixation.

THE QUEST FOR PHENOMENOLOGICAL REALISM

His encounter with the Surrealists and their campaign to render visible "surreal" psychological processes and inner visions has taught Giacometti that seeing is primarily a mental procedure, and accordingly, after he has left their circle in 1934 and is once again committed to visible reality, he attempts to capture the internal image built upon external stimulations of the optic nerve. In the virtual realm of the painting he is first able to do this in his 1937 picture of his mother; it proves far more difficult to achieve the same in sculpture, as his dismantling of traditional modes of stylization threatens to dissolve his figures into amorphousness. His attempt to capture the sudden appearance of a person seen at a great distance leads to tiny figurines on oversized pedestals, sculptures that address the optic phenomenon of drastic diminution at increasing distance.

It is not until after the war that his vision-like, overly detailed experiences of reality produce attenuated figures in which Giacometti discovers the external correlatives for his internal images. 'La cage' and other compositions in which little figures appear before a large head are exemplary of this subject-object relationship.

THE LIVING PRESENCE OF THE OTHER

In the early 1950s Giacometti returns to modeling, and his phantasmal images drawn from memory cede to more corporeal busts and figures, inscribed upon them the dialogue of seeing with seen, of eye with object. Their undulating lines trace the restless movements of the regard, as it steadily makes and unmakes their form. The design of pedestal and inner frame, the treatment of surface and perspective – now expressive, now phenomenologically reasoned deformation – trigger the process of perception, by means of which in turn the viewer relives the artist's creative process; and this in turn leads inexorably back to the eye, for

Giacometti the seat of life, until his subject gazes back at us from the late heads, indisputably alive.

And finally, the ceaselessly circling regard inscribed by Giacometti on his art and mimicked by the observer with a rare intensity demonstrates the proposition that being alive is mainly a matter of seeing, that life is manifest in the eyes.

The exhibition, which includes works from the holdings of the Alberto Giacometti Foundation and the Kunsthaus collection as well as temporary loans from third parties, is on show exclusively in Zurich.

Supported by the Truus and Gerrit van Riemsdijk Foundation.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Kunsthaus Zürich, Heimplatz 1, CH-8001 Zurich, tel. +41 (0)44 253 84 84, www.kunsthaus.ch

Open Sat, Sun, Tues 10 a.m.–6 p.m., Wed, Thurs, Fri 10 a.m.–8 p.m. Easter 22–25 April, 1 May 2011: 10 a.m.–6 p.m. Admission CHF 16.- / 11.- (concessions). Visitors 16 and younger free of charge. Registration required for schools and groups.

Public Guided Tours: Saturday 12/19/26 March and 2 April from 3 to 4 p.m. (registration required).

Advance sales: SBB RailAway-Kombi, discount on rail travel and admission: available at local stations and by phoning Rail Service: 0900 300 300 (CHF 1.19 per min. by ground line), www.sbb.ch. Magasins Fnac, sales points Switzerland: Rives, Balexert, Lausanne, Fribourg, Pathé Kino Basel, www.fnac.ch; F: Carrefour, Géant, Magasins U, 0 892 68 36 22 (EUR 0.34/min.), www.fnac.com; BE: www.fnac.be.

NOTE TO MEDIA

To download visual material go to www.kunsthaus.ch > Information > Press

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