Thinking of Sculpture
As Shaped by Space

By CHARLES RAY

I think Giacometti's sculptures somehow carry that space with them. To me, it's a kind of world space that we exist in. We can look at it in different ways. Ideally we were cast into it. Architects talk about public and private space. Physicists connect space to time. Some scholars even see it as a construct. But when you look at Giacometti's "Hands Holding the Void" (Invisible Object), you realize that you will never know what space is, even though, just as you can touch the rectangular slab resting on the figure's feet, you can touch it, hold it and get lost in your relationship to it.

Smaller works like "City Square," "The Cage (Woman and Head)" and some of the various small figures and busts are fantastic for their sculptural use of scale. Medium sculptures all have scale. They're really big, life-size, small or miniature. Good sculptures use a psychological yardstick rather than a physical one to measure scale. Great sculptures, like some of Giacometti's, have no scale. Rather, scale becomes one of the tools he uses to carve his work into our present space and time. When you look at a small Giacometti you never say, "Oh! Look at the little guy, what a wonderful minia-
ture." No. You say, "This guy can sculpt!" It's never big or small, it's always simply the right scale.

This sounds elementary, but it's not. It's one of the essential ways he imbues his work with the life and breath of our real world. These works are not images you can read or understand — they are alive, breathing, waiting for you to come and meet them. Check out "The Palace at 4 A.M." (the wooden version), 1932, above, and "Hands Holding the Void" (Invisible Object), bronze, 1934, will be on view in the Alberto Giacometti retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art.

A retrospective of Charles Ray's sculptures was shown at the Whitney Museum in 1998.

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wire in the mind. Giacometti's use of armature was conventional until you understand that several bronzes were born from the clay on one twisted metal rod. After working for a day, a week or maybe a month, he would reach a point of satisfaction. Down the hall from his studio, his brother Diego worked as a furniture maker. Diego would take a plaster mold of the clay original and then use the mold to make a plaster duplicate while Giacometti returned to working on the clay original.

At a certain point, Diego would make another mold and later another and perhaps another and another. The sculpture was in flux, and the plaster became a way to see it in time. Giacometti wasn't interested in the fact that the plasterers freeze the form but in the way the play of light on the surface of the plaster gave him alternative positions from which to view his work. I think this process is beautiful and can serve as an entrance into the work itself. It's a physical yet ephemeral spread out in time, like a thought growing in the mind.

When Giacometti worked, he could never articulate only one section of a piece. It was the whole or nothing. If he lost control of an arm, head or some other part, he could never fix it or work from there. He had to start again, bring it up from the ground as one whole form, just as he saw the completeness of a human figure from across a vista of college.

He was once confronted with the fact that these figures across the street or on the far side of a cafe often come toward us, up to us and break down into their component parts of hands, noses, mouths and feet. Why didn't he deal with this most intimate aspect of figuration? His answer was something along these lines: "Yes, people do come across the street to say hi, but as they approach and get near, my perception of space begins to dissolve, and a new interest takes over that is primarily emotional, and with it comes a desire to touch, which may be a human interest, but not the interest of my work."

That's a powerful thought. Even the bust of Diego in Einsteinian, thin, as a pancake when viewed from the front and squeezed out into space as you are drawn around it. The roughness of the surface never draws you in the way a blemish on your friend's face does. Look at the form and surface of all his mature figurative sculptures. They're simple and pulled, rough but somehow never ragged or torn. In the end, all his figures, like the buildings on that dilapidated street he walked with Picasso, seem to stand by force of habit. Somehow with Giacometti, habit and other aspects of human psychology are embedded in his work the way the gravitational field is embedded in space.