

Thinking of Sculpture As Shaped by Space

By CHARLES RAY

IN college I heard a story about Giacometti and Picasso walking down a decrepit street in Paris. Picasso, looking up at the ramshackle buildings, asked, "How can these buildings possibly continue to stand?"

"Force of habit," Giacometti replied. I found the comment hilarious, but as I grew older and began to struggle to get my own sculptures to stand, I started to wonder, "What does the guy know that I don't?"

Since then I've kept coming back to Giacometti's work. With each return I get a new insight, a fresh experience, but also something harder to articulate: a sense that over time Giacometti began to convince space itself to shape and model his sculptures. That's an amazing feat. You can see what I mean starting on Thursday, when the Museum of Modern Art opens an exhibition of sculptures, drawings and paintings by Alberto Giacometti (1901-66). The show will include nearly 200 works from 1919 to 1965.

I first encountered Giacometti's sculpture on the cover of a paperback anthology of existentialist writing. It seemed appropriate. Here was an elongated burnt stick of a man pointing his bony finger at what I thought could only be the establishment that had dropped the bomb. This was in high school. In college I read the anthology, and then my art history teacher told me to note the figure's large heavy feet. This guy is earthbound, alone; he's not going to fly. He must be existentialist man.

I was told that Sartre and Giacometti were friends. One day I picked up an interview with Giacometti in which he was asked about an existential reading of his work. He replied, no, actually he was trying to make his figures as realistic as possible. What? To me, these figures were walking out of Dresden or Hiroshima.

He went on to explain that when he looks at you he can't see all of you. He scans you, looking at your nose, then your lips, over your shoulder, then at your breast, belly and knees, all the way down the leg past your foot to the toes. As I recall, he said something like this:

"We see parts of each other and we put them together. But if I want to see you in totality, you need to move away; we need space between us. Across the street I can see all of you at once, but then I also see this huge vista of space surrounding you, coming in and compressing you."

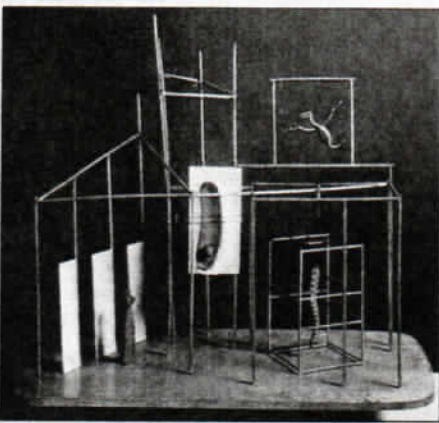
This thought has never left me. And through it I began to see that rather than thinking about sculpture, one might be able to learn to think sculpturally.

Other interviews with Giacometti were equally confounding and enlightening. Once while looking at his "Four Women on a Base" I remembered reading an interview that took place in a hotel lobby. Giacometti was saying to a critic that the four beautiful women who had just entered the lobby could not be seen separately from the space the shiny marble floor generated between him and them.

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

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. Biblically 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. Mediocre 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 miniature." 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." Physically, this small work fits on the top of a pedestal, but later it grows and fills your mind. You can move through it and feel each and every bit of the urgency of its construction. It was made in 1932, but it feels as if it were made moments ago.

Giacometti shows us how to see from a sculptural point of view. A sculpture needs an armature the way a body needs its skeleton. Perhaps everything has an armature, thought being built around a kind of

"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.



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 plasters became a way to see it in time. Giacometti wasn't interested in the fact that the plasters froze 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 so physical yet ephemerally 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 space.

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 more 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

Giacometti's sculptures are not passive; they're alive, waiting for you to come meet them.

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 is 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 stretched 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. □