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Solitary struggle of Giacometti

ALBERTO Giacometti is one of several members of a talented family of artists hailing from the Grisons. His father, Giovanni, was a brilliant post-impressionist (1868-1933) and his uncle Augusto an early member of the abstractionist school. His younger brother Bruno was an architect.

Both Giovanni and Augusto are well known, and the "Times" fine art critic, Thomas Gibson, regretted their absence at the Royal Academy's post-impressionists exhibitions last year of the former and at the Tate's Abstraction show in 1980 of the latter.

Alberto Giacometti, the sculptor, is no doubt the best-known of the family, and the exhibition of his works at the Serpentine Gallery in London was a great success. That a complementary show of his paintings was held at a Bond Street Gallery at roughly the same time was unfortunately not well known, although some of his paintings, mainly portraits, were at the Serpentine Gallery.

The Anglo-Swiss Society organised a private view and reception at the gallery, which was attended by 70 members. The president, Lord Sandford, welcomed the Swiss Ambassador and Madame Caillat and introduced Sir Roland Penrose, founder, chairman and then president of the Institute of Contemporary Art, who gave a talk on Giacometti's work, having known him personally.

"The problem is to find the real through external appearances", said the artist, and Sir Roland explained how Giacometti had been a very solitary person and had been struggling all his life to find the reality in his work. He was one of the most troubled

artists and was compelled to find a way of dematerializing the human form and thus liberating the spirit. This explains his gaunt, often stick-like figures, whether they are the sylph-like "Walking Woman" (1932), the tiny figures in "The Forest" (painted bronze 1950), or the vague passers-by in "The Square" (of a year earlier).

They were all at the Serpentine, as were five of his ten "Venice Women", two lovely heads of the Thirties, "Isabel" and "Rita", the statue of a woman, "Invisible Object", which marked the end of his surrealist period.

From his "Spoon Woman" (1926), the "Disagreeable Object" (1931) to his famous "Standing Woman" (1960), huge in height but diminutive in width and depth, it was a remarkably representative show of the artist's development.

There were pencil sketches of people and objects, strangely without shadows, uncompromisingly direct, his portraits in oil full of greys and a stillness which is compelling, not pictures with which one could easily live, a possible exception being the "Garden at Stampa", which has a haunting quality.

Only one or two exhibits came from Switzerland, some from the Tate Gallery and a large number from the Sir Robert and Lady Lisa Sainsbury Collection at the University of East Anglia and the Fondation Maeght.

Alberto Giacometti was born at Stampa (Grisons) in 1901. He

went to art school in Geneva but from 1922 he lived in Paris and devoted himself to sculpture as a student of Bourdelle. In 1927 he moved to the studio at 46 rue Hippolyte-Maindron, where he was to remain for the rest of his life.

From 1930 he and his brother Diego supported themselves by making articles like table-lamp bases and chandeliers. Diego served his brother as model and helped him casting his sculptures.

Giacometti became known in surrealist circles and exhibited with Jean Arp and joined Dali and Breton. But then he realised that he had to go back to working from life, and from then onward, his sculptures were almost entirely concerned with the human form. In the Forties, his

figures began to be more and more elongated and shrank in size and substance.

From 1942 to 1946 he again lived in Geneva, and his work from that period could be put into a small suitcase. In the late Forties, the sculptures increased in height but became ever thinner, contained more and more pent-up energy and dominated the space around them.

In 1946 he resumed painting. His brother Diego and Annette Arm, whom he married in 1949, became his main models. In 1954 he returned to making sculpture from life, forlorn human figures lost in space, intellectually captivating. Alberto Giacometti died at his birthplace in Switzerland in 1966.

Mariann Meier



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