

SEEING, FEELING, BEING :

Alberto

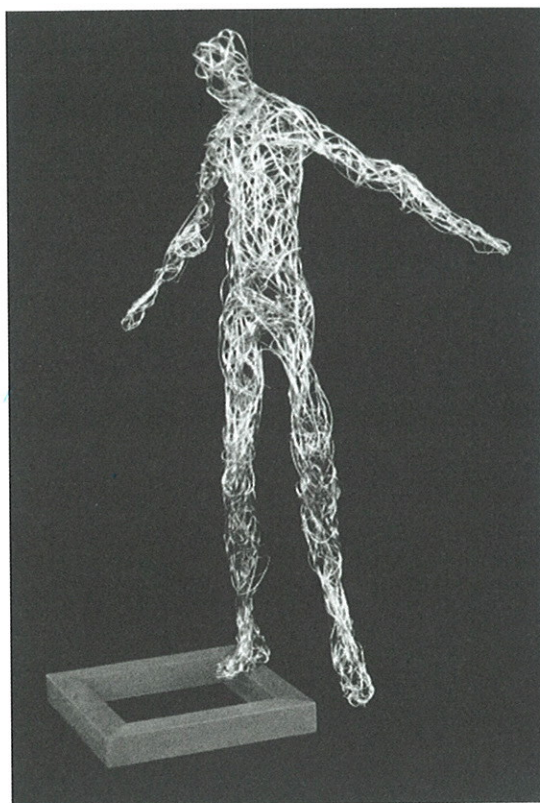
Giacometti

The Singapore artist Victor Tan once participated in a Giacometti exhibition in 2006. He was paying homage to the artist he admired most. Tan's works in stainless steel wire are his drawings in the three-dimension. The affinity with Giacometti is unmistakable. In terms of philosophical affiliation, Tan speaks of Buddhism and the philosophy of Laozi. In Tan's interview with Michelle Ho, curator of *"Seeing, Feeling, Being : Alberto Giacometti"*, a major showing of Giacometti in Asia, Tan cites the famed line in *Daodejing (Tao Te Ching)*, "the Way that may be spoken of is not the eternal Way" and understands this in terms of the flux of consciousness, which he captures through his sculptures. Tan differentiates between ego and consciousness : Whereas the former is a certain fixation in the projection of the self, which Tan questions if it can ever be captured in the experience of the moment, which is about consciousness, the latter, and the object of Tan's art. It is the *moment* that reveals consciousness, at a pre-egocentric state.

Scholars have linked phenomenology with Laozi's philosophy. Zhang Zailin proposes that the phrase "the Way that may be spoken of", may be read in conjunction with Edmund Husserl's "principle of all principles", which mutually suggests that intuition is a source of rightness for knowledge. Zhang cites many passages of Laozi to substantiate this reading such as in Laozi's explications on *zuowang* "to empty oneself of knowledge", *yingning* "to flow along with Nature", and *xinzhai* "to take refuge in emptiness".<sup>1</sup> All these point to the parallel concern in phenomenology in suspending our knowledge of the world and to take it from the very point of phenomenon, or what our eyes see. Likewise, philosophers of phenomenology like Jean Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty tried to show that exteriority distorts both human consciousness and the world. As

such, art begins with seeing, and as Giacometti puts it, "in the course of history perception has been mentally transposed into concept". Giacometti argued that the early sculptures of the Egyptians, Sumerians or Chinese and much of the "primitive" art reflect more the way objects were actually perceived.<sup>2</sup>

Merleau-Ponty once said that only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees. Art is able to draw upon a "fabric of



*The Moment of Step II, 2005*

- 1 Sun Zhouxing and Gao Shirong (eds), *Shijue de Sixiang (The Thoughts of Visuality)*, China Art Academy Press, 2003, p248-9.
- 2 Cited in Richard H. Bell, "Giacometti's Art as a Judgement on Culture", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* vol 47 no 1 (1989), p17.
- 3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, Northwestern University Press, 1964, p161 (original publication in French 1955).
- 4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Ibid.*, p166.

brute meaning which activism and operationalism (instrumentalism) would prefer to ignore".<sup>3</sup> Merleau-Ponty further said, "it is the mountain itself which from out there makes itself seen by the painter".<sup>4</sup> A line like this looks like it could come right out of ancient Chinese text on art, such as the fourth-century *Treatise on Landscape Painting* by Zong Bing (375-443): "Sages, possessing the *Dao*, respond to things; the virtuous, purifying their thoughts, savour images... Landscapes display the beauty of the *Dao* through their forms, and humane men delight in this".<sup>5</sup> As commented by Richard Bell, Giacometti's art, in the end, is about a judgment on culture, one that critiqued the Newtonian science, perspectival painting, and the "sterile, geometric cage of our scientific world".<sup>6</sup>

We can think of Giacometti, Victor Tan and innumerable artists who truly believe in art being what they see. This faith in seeing takes precedence to all thoughts and ideas. Such an approach treats consciousness as the object, as what is perceived as a manifestation of the same, unmediated by intentions, purposes, ideas and concepts. There is great affinity among cultures in the world that place paramount importance on intuition, consciousness and what we see. The art critic Michel Gilson relates Giacometti's art to ritual tracing, like the repetitive circling of the eyes, and the stress on the vertical lines of the nose, as in the face and body paintings practices by the inhabitants of New Guinea.<sup>7</sup> "Art is only a way of seeing", as Giacometti had it, which

certainly allowed the viewer to grasp the unnamable enormity of historical experience as Gilson further pointed out.<sup>8</sup>

In realizing this exhibition project, we have many to thank: the exhibiton's presenting sponsor Credit Suisse, our partner the Embassy of Switzerland and His Excellency Mr Daniel Woker, the ambassador of Switzerland, and co-organiser the Alberto Giacometti Foundation. We would also like to thank our supporters Pro Helvetia Swiss Arts Council, Felix A. Bauman, Christian Klemm and Franziska Lentzsch from the Alberto Giacometti Foundation, Christian Dettwiler, photographer Ernst Scheidegger, artist victor Tan, Reinold Hohl, Tobias Bezzola and many other organizations and individuals who have made invaluable contributions. We would also like to thank deeply, the lenders of Giacometti works for this show. They are the Alberto Giacometti Foundation, Eberhard W. Kornfeld and the Neue Zürcher Zeitung.

It is not inappropriate to regard Giacometti's exhibition in Singapore as a "return" to Asia, and to the broader global art history that is not confined within the familiarity of the western mainstream. Giacometti's art touches the very consciousness of human beings, and as we infer from Victor Tan, Giacometti's *moments* as we experience in his works, will link up with our *moments*, in generating human exchanges that are truly meaningful.

**Kwok Kian Chow**

Director, Singapore Art Museum

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5 Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1985, p36.

6 Richard H. Bell, *Ibid.*, p17.

7 Michel Gibson, "Giacometti's High Anxiety", *International Herald Tribune*, 17 Feb 2001.

8 Michel Gibson, *Ibid.*

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