

Known for his sculptures of solitary human forms in stainless steel wire, the practice of Singapore artist Victor Tan has often been linked to that of Giacometti's. Tan's representation of human forms in wire sculptures is a medium and motif which he has been engaging in and investigating for the past 10 years in Singapore. In this interview dialogue, curator Michelle Ho looks into the parallels of Tan's practice and the relevance of Giacometti's legacy in art-making today.

Michelle Ho: The human figure is a subject that has captivated artists from across all ages and art movements, and across different cultures. In today's climate of contemporary art practices in new media, this investigation of the self and humanity as a whole, in terms of the physical, the psychological and the metaphysical, continues.

Victor Tan: Artists from different cultures and time periods throughout history have depicted the human figure in many diverse ways, whether in realism or abstraction. Even more so in today's context, the human figure in art gives the most direct means by which human conditions can be addressed. I don't think the moving of times can remove or reduce the significance that human figure carries in art.

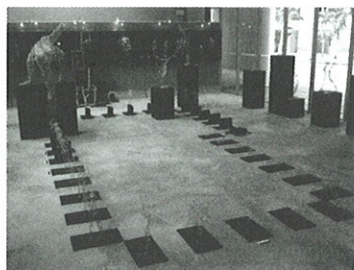
MH: In year 2006, you took part in an exhibition of Giacometti photographs where you showcased your works. In what way is Giacometti a source of inspiration to your practice, and what are some the ideas that both of share?

VT: My first encounter with Giacometti happened in 2000 when I was in London doing a residency. I had requested for a guided "touch" tour with Tate Gallery. The guide picked out a few works which I could lay my hands on. And Giacometti's "The Walking Woman" was one of them. Unlike his other elongated, slender human figures, this graceful, calm sculpture, with its body slightly inflected by the projections of breasts, belly and thighs

and its long, thin legs which are smooth and solid, does remind me somewhat of my own works. Either that or because it was the first time I was exposed to his work in such close proximity, that "touch" kind of gave me a deep lasting impression of Giacometti.

I learned that at one stage, a head and feather-arms were added to the original plaster version of this work. Giacometti removed them in recognition of the greater power of the simplified form. In its simplicity, his works evokes emotions and thoughts; the same attributes I would like my works to have. I certainly loved the idea of being minimal. Even back in school, despite the popularity of using varied multi mediums and found objects, it just wasn't me to "add" onto my simple, minimal sculptures.

What struck me about Giacometti was that he was able to focus his attention so acutely on a few simple subjects. For the majority of his later life, Giacometti concentrated on depicting three themes: a portrait of a head, a woman standing, and a man walking. In my own practice, I have had many people asking me when I am going to move on to another medium, or another object matter, or perhaps stop making humans. Giacometti's strong determination in going against noises gives me confidence in continuing with my practice in depicting life's issues using mainly human forms. Compared to the more than 30 years that Giacometti spent on the meditation of human form, I certainly have a lot more to explore and discover from my human forms.



Awareness of Being, an installation at the Gallery Evason Hotel, 2001

MH: Volume and void shares an interesting paradoxical relationship, and it is one that has often been raised with regard to Giacometti's sculptures. How does this resonate with your own philosophy in your practice?

VT: To me, space is created by objects. Unlike traditional concepts of sculpture as a solid block of mass, carved down or built up, my line works actually carve into the spaces, transforming the mass of void, creating form and giving the body its volume, drawing weight from the space itself.



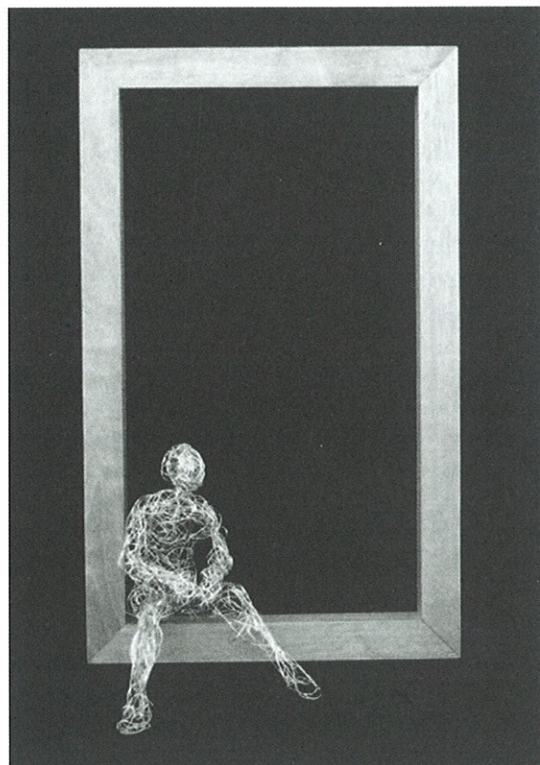
Joy, 2002

MH: Your three exhibitions in the recent years *Between "Two and Three"* (2001), *"Dawn"* (2002), and *"Moment to Moment of Awareness"* (2005) reveal an expression of consciousness in different stages, from the awareness of nature and kinesis, to rebirth and new beginnings. Could you elaborate more about this process?

VT: *"Between Two and Three"* presented a series of works which portrayed an animation of figures of men, revealing the processes of transiting from lying down to waking up and then to standing up. This was inspired by my experiences during meditation retreats in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand. During those times, being away from modern luxuries, I was able to experience the body purely as it is, from its waking to its conscious moments. We often take for granted our consciousness even as we wake up from sleep. Experiencing the moments of being aware of our minds is something people often tend to forget.

The moment of awareness, each breath that we take; this awareness of being was a crucial component in that exhibition. With *"Dawn"*, I was interested in the nature of consciousness of something pure and untainted. This was how the works charted the motions of a newborn child from waking up to learning to crawl, or stand. This is a process that comes spontaneous, without being instructed or taught. I wanted to capture and document these moments in sequences.

And with *"Moment to Moment of Awareness"*, it was the capturing of the notion of here and now, the experience of consciousness in the present that I wanted to portray. Hence there were figures of the individual in everyday situations at a given point of day, such as a work called *"Waiting at 11.30am"*, where I recalled my consciousness at a MRT station. Through all these works, consciousness was in the present.



Waiting at 11.30 am, 2005

MH: Do you witness a sense of consciousness manifesting in Giacometti's works?

For Giacometti, drawing and sculpting did not represent what he saw; instead he sought, through his art, to understand what he saw. That is also consciousness manifesting.

MH: When one speaks of consciousness of being, the idea of the self and identity is most certainly a domain of inquiry that runs in parallel. How does the concept of the ego come into the equation in your works?

VT: What I seek to question in my works is, when we speak of a pure experience of the moment, does the ego exist? When I examine a child moving, is there ego when he crawls or cry? I'm not into examining the origins of ego, but rather, how it builds up. Ego comes with the adding on of elements in our lives. My sculptures do not seek to embellish the identity, but rather to explore how we can deal with states of "being".

MH: Your works allude to a sense of impending solitariness, which Western discourses on art and philosophy would interpret as a signification of the isolation and alienation of the human existential condition. Would you agree to such a reading of your work and can we perhaps speak of a manner of Existential thought in Asian art practice?

VT: My works were not created with the intention of highlighting isolation. But I cannot say it is not about alone-ness, because the works are created when I am alone in the studio, and besides, consciousness is mostly experienced stronger when one is alone. We

are indeed fully responsible for creating the meanings of our own lives, but then again, we do not live independently. There are inter-connections between us and the external world. Recognizing this brings about the awareness of the notions of self or non-self, and the relationship between one-self and others.

MH: It is interesting that you speak of existence in such terms. Conceptions of consciousness and selfhood in Eastern and Western philosophies have tended to move towards different trajectories. For example, Husserlian phenomenology began with an "inquiry of essences" or *eidōs*; and within Asian non-dualistic thought are the Buddhist and Indian doctrines of *anatta* (no-self) and *atman* (universal soul).

VT: There is a saying by Laozi in the *Daodejing* which is also the fundamental in Buddhist philosophy. It says "*Dao ke dao, fei chang dao. Ming ke*

ming, fei chang ming": The Way that can be expressed is not the everlasting way and the names that can be named are not changeless names. Change is constant. In today's context, can one really draw boundaries of philosophies? To me, consciousness is not something we can really define as a single or affixed subject matter.

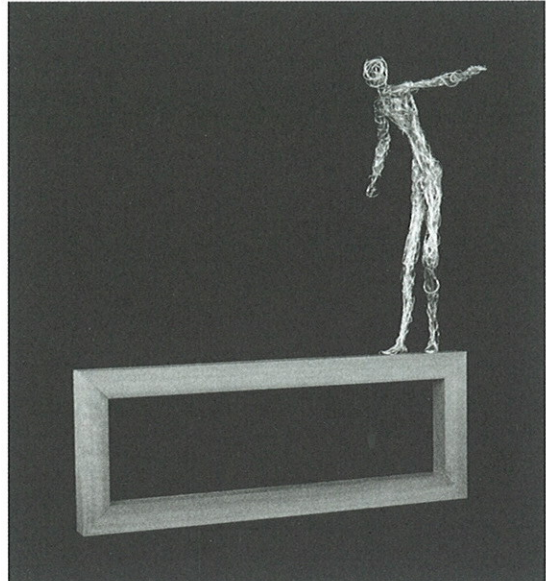
Giacometti went through periods of creations. At one point, each of his sculptures was the result of a frenzy of repeated creations and destruction... One tends to think that a work of art has a start and end, but for some artists, such as myself, other possibilities always emerge. You may think a work is done, but truly, it can never be complete.

MH: Likewise, art-making is never a static process. In fact, the domains of Art and Consciousness are not so exclusive to each other; one cannot separate these two acts of making and thinking because they are mutually dependent upon one another, whether a work is analytic, contemplative or spontaneous. These ideas seem to resonate in Giacometti's works. And like Giacometti who often continued working on his sculptures as if they were never complete, your works also exhibit this certain "unfinished" quality...

VT: Giacometti went through periods of creations. At one point, each of his sculptures was the result of a frenzy of repeated creations and destruction. For me, I haven't really destroy my works per se, but at different periods, different feelings arose, and I can pick up a sculpture which I might have deemed as completed before, and start working on it again. Sometimes, even though it seems unfinished, it actually is. One tends to think that a work of art has a start and end, but for some artists, such as myself, other possibilities always emerge. You may think a work is done, but truly, it can never be complete.

MH: ... Because trying to represent being in its totality -

VT: - is always a work in progress.



Walking Across, 2005