

ArtAsiaPacific Magazine Multimedia News Blog Countries About Shop

From Current Issue

[EDITOR'S LETTER](#) New Emperors, Old Clothes

[REPORTS](#) Teppei Kaneuji on Ey

[ESSAYS](#) Rising Above

[PROFILES](#) Chiharu Shiota

[FEATURES](#) Hale Tenger

[REVIEWS](#) Olafur Eliasson

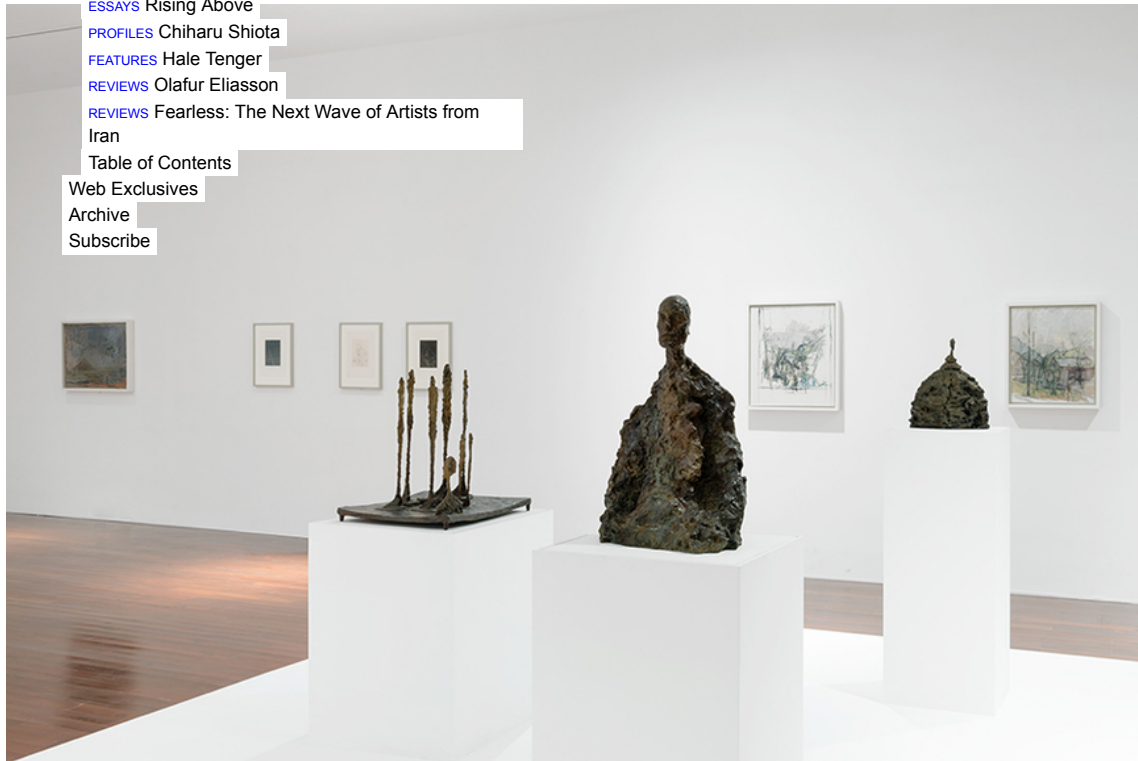
[REVIEWS](#) Fearless: The Next Wave of Artists from Iran

[Table of Contents](#)

[Web Exclusives](#)

[Archive](#)

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Installation view of "Alberto Giacometti Retrospective" at Yuz Museum Shanghai, 2016. Courtesy Yuz Museum Shanghai.

ALBERTO GIACOMETTI RETROSPECTIVE

ARTHUR SOLWAY
YUZ MUSEUM SHANGHAI

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With 250 works on view and covering 3,000 square meters of gallery space, the Alberto Giacometti show at the Yuz Museum Shanghai is one of the largest exhibitions devoted to the artist on a grand and comprehensive scale. It is also the first time the artist's work has ever been shown in China, and is also notable for having engaged a design firm, the Paris-based Studio Adrien Gardère, to orchestrate the layout of the exhibition. The survey is nothing short of heroic, if not galvanizing, as it raises the bar for blockbuster shows in Shanghai. Major sculptures, paintings, drawings and prints are presented chronologically and thematically in this retrospective, illuminating the legendary story of Giacometti's development, vision and career of over 40 years. Curators Catherine Grenier and Christian Alandete—the former being the director and chief curator at Paris's Fondation Giacometti, and the latter its head of publications, cultural events and special projects—tell this story flawlessly, allowing ample room for the uninitiated to learn, while also placing the work in the context of modernism and the late artist's indelible place within the postwar period.

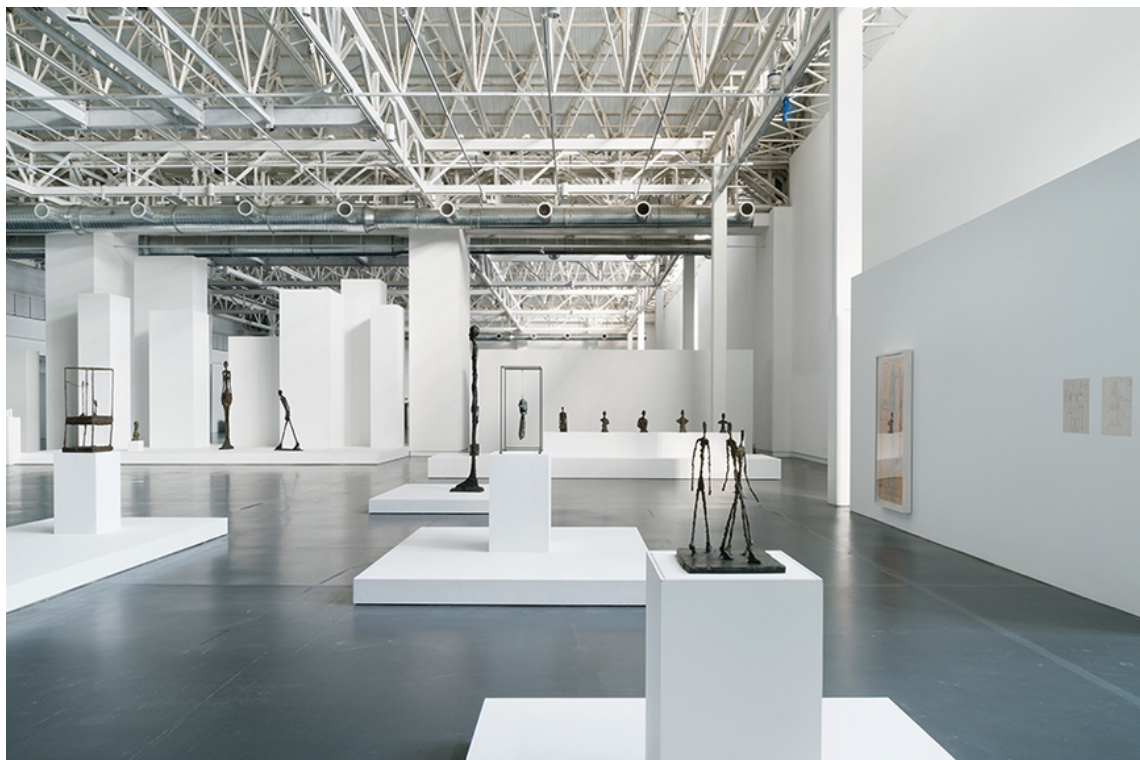
Entering the exhibition from the second floor mezzanine of the museum at first seems a little odd or unorthodox. Once inside, however, one begins to quickly understand the logic. Chapter one of the exhibition starts with Giacometti's family, which is one of artists. The eldest son of the distinguished Neo-Impressionist painter Giovanni Giacometti, and godson to Symbolist painter Cuno Amiet, Alberto grew up in his father's studio in Stampa, Switzerland. In this introductory gallery at Yuz, one encounters a group of portraits of Alberto from infancy through adolescence, painted by both his father and Amiet. Here, there are also sculptures by the young Alberto, already showing signs of compression and flattening. One of these is the melon-sized, plaster-coated *Head of Father, Flat 1* (1927), in which the face is sheared off and then redrawn rather than sculpted into the plaster compound. There is also the small oil-on-canvas painting *Alberto Giacometti* (1918), where the subject nearly occupies the entire surface and the background has been reduced to a chromatic, pointillist and neo-impressionist style. These works would lay the foundation for what would come only a few years later in Alberto's practice. And, indeed, things developed at lightning speed.

By 1922, Giacometti had moved to Paris to study formally and, while entranced by styles such as Neo-Cubism and tribal art, he quickly fell into the circle of Surrealist artists. In the adjoining introductory gallery at Yuz, visitors encounter “From Cubism to Surrealism,” where they immediately see how the artist transcended these movements, taking exactly what he needed in order to advance his work and vision. This is evident in the medium-sized plaster totem *Cubist Figure I* (c. 1926), consisting of stacked geometric blocks, and the nearly life-sized plaster *Spoon Woman* that he made a year later, whose central feature is her torso as a concave, tribal shield. The artist once wrote how Cycladic and Melanesian sculptures, with their flat, geometric representations of the human form, were more realistic than a Roman bust, which were lauded for its accuracy and authority. Also in this gallery, viewers see *Point to the Eye* (1931–32), one of the earliest tabletop dioramas, and *A Disagreeable Object* (1931), a primitive, sardonic, sexually charged phallus—both clearly works inspired by the Surrealists.



ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Cubist Figure I*, c. 1926, plaster coated with a parting compound, 63.5 × 28 × 25.4 cm. Courtesy Yuz Museum Shanghai and Fondation Giacometti, Paris.

Moving to the next second-floor gallery, designated “Obsessed with Heads,” one enters a period of the artist’s career dating from 1935 through to the 1940s. The room is filled with disembodied heads. This is the period in which Giacometti began to distance himself from the Surrealists, wanting to, in his words, “go back to nature” and to “remake a head.” From here the subject of the head would increasingly become a lifelong obsession for the artist. For Giacometti it wasn’t a question of “representing someone as one knows them but as one sees them.” It was a quest for a deeper visual perception beyond one’s actual facial features. A minuscule 1946 bronze piece of French writer and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, a contemporary of Giacometti’s, is no larger than a pack of cigarettes and rests on a two-tiered bronze ziggurat, its head and facial features delicately pinched to the size of a thumb. Scale, mass and volume—these were all central preoccupations for Giacometti. Space, too, would become an integral element, taking his works into a different dimension, as Giacometti began to think about the settings for his sculptures.



Installation view of "Alberto Giacometti Retrospective" at Yuz Museum Shanghai, 2016. Courtesy Yuz Museum Shanghai.



Installation view of "Alberto Giacometti Retrospective" at Yuz Museum Shanghai, 2016. Courtesy Yuz Museum Shanghai.

Space at the Yuz Museum, as it turns out, was superbly utilized by Studio Adrien Gardère as well. This becomes strongly apparent when leaving the upper mezzanine galleries and peering down from the balcony to the main exhibition hall below. The layout and installation have been impeccably executed: the plinths and pedestals for the sculptures not only demarcate specific areas, themes or subjects, but are built in such a way as to give a sense of intimacy, where viewers are in close proximity to each work. Throughout the exhibition, archival black-and-white photographs have been enlarged and quite literally turned into wallpaper—showing the artist's 23-square-meter Paris studio, which he maintained throughout his life—to further recreate a sense of historical time and place.

At one end of the main hall there is a small area that is designated "The Human Condition: Meeting Beckett." The eponymous Irish playwright, Samuel Beckett, and Giacometti met in Paris in 1937 and became close friends, carousing the nightlife of the city's Montparnasse. Beckett greatly admired Giacometti's work. By the 1950s and early 1960s, the existential angst of the era would lead to further rumination in both Giacometti's sculptures and Beckett's theatrical characters, in what the latter defined as the "theater of the absurd," and would become more akin to an ongoing theater of the human condition. At Beckett's request, Giacometti designed the anemic, solitary and nearly leafless tree that comprised the stage set for the 1961 production of Beckett's classic tragicomedy *Waiting for Godot*. The artist conjured such notions of the theater in other earlier diorama-like sculptures, such as *The Nose* (1947), where a bronze head with its sword-like beak is suspended in an open box, or *The Cage* (1950), containing a small bust and a slender figure seemingly engaged in conversation.



ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *The Nose*, 1947, bronze, 80.9 × 70.5 × 40.6 cm. Collection Fondation Giacometti, Paris. Copyright and courtesy Estate Giacometti (Fondation Giacometti + ADAGP) Paris, 2015.



ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *Walking Man I*, 1960, bronze, 182.25 × 96.52 × 26.67 cm. Copyright and courtesy Estate Giacometti (Fondation Giacometti + ADAGP) Paris, 2015.

At the other end of the main hall is *Project for the Chase Manhattan Plaza, New York* (1959), a proposal for public sculptures that group together three familiar motifs in Giacometti's work: a monumental single bust of a man; a gigantic woman; and the larger-than-life, iconic *Walking Man I* (1960). Although the project was never realized, an installation at the Yuz included the group in maquette form, as well as the three sculptures positioned on a central stage, with tall rectangular white columns as a backdrop, suggesting a cityscape of skyscrapers. A sense of the project's intention and power was clear, and one wondered how it might have felt being surrounded in

Giacometti's mise-en-scène. The project remains one of the most important works of the artist's later years. As stated by curator Alandete, it is "a synthesis of his research into the essence of humanity and its difficult condition, both fragile and resolute, anchored to the earth but moving forward. A figure of humanity in motion."

The exhibition "Alberto Giacometti Retrospective" is on view at Yuz Musuem Shanghai until July 31, 2016.

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ArtAsiaPacific

GPO Box 10084

Hong Kong

info@aapmag.com