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Visual art: Giacometti at Tate Modern, SE1

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Rachel Campbell-Johnston

★★★★

We spotted the talent of Alberto Giacometti early. In 1955 the Swiss artist made his debut in London and our flourishing art scene was fascinated. While the French were still obsessing about bygone “isms” — movements into which Giacometti did not quite fit — British pioneers such as Bomberg, Bacon and Paolozzi were making pilgrimages to meet him in Paris. They wanted to talk to the creator of the phantasmagorical striding figures that have subsequently become so very famous.

In 1965 the Tate staged a significant show of his work. He died the next year at the age of 64. Now, that work returns to London, with another massive retrospective. And, although shows of his work crop up in this country with comparative frequency, this is the most comprehensive for about two decades. You will not have the chance to see a Giacometti exhibition of this calibre again.

What marks this show out is less its range and scale — although it incorporates about 250 pieces and ranges from sketchpads through jewellery to those etiolated figures — but its intensity. You notice it as soon as you enter: rank upon rank of portrait heads. Sculpted in all sizes and materials, their eyes drill into the distance, as fierce and as fixed as they must have been when the living models sat immobile in the artist’s scruffy studio. This ferocity of focus is transfixing. It bores tunnels into psychological depths.

Art historically, this show follows Giacometti’s development chronologically. It looks at his experiments with cubism, surrealism and abstraction. It emphasises his interest in the decorative arts, explaining

that he did not see his design work as secondary. It shows us his engagement with African, Egyptian and Etruscan art. It puts a strong focus on the key people in his life.

Yet it is the totemic figures that most strike and unsettle: those strange, gangling striders that stalk the realms of our psyche, ranked in rows, stripped to their essence — to some fundamental humanity that has outlasted everything, even a Holocaust. And it is the fact that we see so many of these figures in their plaster originals that makes this exhibition a one-off.

These meant far more to their maker than the myriad bronze casts with which we are more familiar. And finding them now in this show — one of its highlights is his fantastically fragile 1956 *Women of Venice* series made for the biennale at the height of his fame — you can see why. They speak of his vision with a haunting intensity. You can almost feel the touch of his fingers as he squeezes and squashes, scratches and pinches, trying to capture not physical facts, but his innermost sense of the fragility of existence. Many of these pieces are making their first and last trip to Britain. Make the most of your chance to see them now.

From May 10 to September 10; tickets: 020 7887 8888