There have been big Giacometti exhibitions in recent years—the retrospective at the Kunsthaus in Zurich, Giacometti, the Egyptian in Berlin, Giacometti and Cézanne at the Louisiana. Is there anything more of Giacometti’s oeuvre which has not yet been seen?

Well, Giacometti is, after all, a very special part of the Foundation’s collection. Ernst Beyeler knew the artist; he initiated the organization of the Giacometti Foundation, and together we began discussing plans for an exhibition years ago. From the start, the idea was to show the work of the sculptor/painter within a context that included the family members who were also artists. That’s also been done already. It’s just that earlier attempts failed because they all tried to put equal emphasis on Diego, Alberto, Giovanni, and Augusto. However, if one studies the works, one quickly realizes that nobody else can really measure up to the central figure of Alberto, and one does not do any favors for his brother Diego, in particular, by trying to put him on a par with Alberto. What has always fascinated me about Alberto Giacometti is his notion of being at the center of a system, as he formulated it in his late, Surrealist text Le rêve, le Sphinx et la mort de T.—of being a focal point for all of the events occurring around him. I think that this is a very important key to understanding his work. That’s why I suggested that we build the exhibition around Alberto—as the ego center, in the best sense of the term—and in the context of the family history, concentrate primarily on Alberto’s relationship to his father, Giovanni. That doesn’t mean that Diego won’t appear—he will, but in a way that underscores the differences. It is clear that the focus is on Alberto. We show him as an extremely gifted child, who also dominated his family in a certain way. And we show him in the midst of the people who were important to him, without whom he could not exist. Especially his father, with whom he had a very close relationship, much closer than with his mother.
Yet compared to his father, too, aren’t there marked differences in their importance to art? His father is a very interesting artist, who was somehow tripped up by the problem of modernism, if one thinks of his late-period mountain landscapes. But this is precisely what is very important for the son, who, after all, was always thinking about the problem of failure and concerned himself with the experience of failure.

What was the relationship like between father and son and son and father? Could one consider Alberto’s figural theme a kind of emancipation from his father’s landscape painting, an attempt to escape from his father’s shadow and hold his own?

I don’t know if he developed this way in order to go against his father. Looking at it more precisely, the opposite is true—the father introduced the son to the areas in which he could develop. For instance, when he bought him some plasticine, Alberto began making models with it and automatically discovered the figure. And his father Giovanni was more than just a landscape painter, anyway. There is, for example, a self-portrait by the father, in which he painted himself as a bust in a frame. One can’t say for certain that Alberto directly took over this theme of the image-within-an-image, but these problems concerning the portrayal of reality in painting do exist, and he discussed them with his father. And there are other issues, such as how to distribute mass in a painting, the relationship between foreground and background, dimensionality, spatial proportions—they must have played a part in each artist’s exploration. When one sees how the father painted a hillside with goats, then one also sees where the son got his theme of near and far, or big and little. I don’t think that the relationship between the son and father was really about one having to distinguish himself from the other.

How much did the father and son agree in their attitudes toward modernism? His father had good reason to test his identity as a modernist on landscapes, because Cézanne’s example showed that the figure could not be so readily declined, as it were, in a modern way. It was the son who first realized that the figure could be a suitable modern theme.

That is certainly true, although there is the question of how much of a modernist Alberto actually was. He very deliberately never completed the final step toward abstraction. On the other hand, his series and serial images—this business of never wanting to end, never being able to end—definitely correspond to the fundamental concept of modernism. This is just one of the things that make his work so interesting in our day and age.

As a painter, Giacometti seems, in general, somewhat rougher in comparison to Giacometti the sculptor, whose work almost approached a level of broad popularity. How is this balanced in your exhibition?

In terms of pure numbers, more sculptures than paintings will be shown. However, I don’t think that it makes much sense to separate them so strictly. Giacometti looked at painting and sculpture in very similar ways. This kind of density and push—the physical effort one sees when looking at the paintings, is, after all, the way the sculptures were made. The fact that Alberto basically came to sculpture through painting can hardly be disputed. If we think about
the rough surfaces of the late sculptures, the avoidance of hard and fast outlines, the deliberate, intended motion, we could indeed describe it as a kind of “painterly” technique. And it would not be wrong to perceive the distant influence of his father here, either. That’s why, in this exhibition, it should be possible to experience the painter and the sculptor in equal measures.

To return once more to the father, Giovanni Giacometti: how closely did he follow his son’s development?

From the letters that he wrote to Alberto, we know that he not only let his son do as he pleased, but that he recognized his great talent and abilities, which he himself did not possess. Doubtless, he did not understand everything that his son did, and he didn’t want to understand, either. Still, he followed his development with great curiosity. In Alberto he saw his own dream realized, as it were: I wanted to conquer Paris, I didn’t succeed, but he will. On the whole, the father didn’t hesitate to support the son—something the son also acknowledged. Very probably, he was aware that he would surpass his father. In the entire surviving history of the family’s art, there was only one conflict: when Alberto began drawing his figures increasingly smaller and thinner, and his father said, draw things the way you see them, and the answer he received was, I am drawing things the way I see them.

The father died in 1933, but how would he have reacted to his son’s Surrealist world, if he had lived to see it?

He did see the beginnings of it. But he didn’t comment on it after Alberto confessed that he could no longer depict reality the way it had always been depicted; he had to move toward the reality of his emotional world. For the father, this was probably hard to imagine. And I also think that his father’s decline in creativity had to do with the fact that he came up against boundaries he could not overcome. In Paris Alberto took him to the cinema. Later, he wrote that he now wanted to paint cinematographic landscapes. Whatever he meant by that. One can see that the modern experience—which was not possible in Bergell, and which his son was first able to show him in Paris—also created problems that were very difficult to solve.

Did the father collect his son’s work?

Almost all of the early works in the Giacometti Foundation in Zurich come from the parents’ collection, but they were there simply because many of Alberto’s early works were left at his parents’ house in Stampa. It’s hard to say if the father actually collected them. However, the reverse is true: Alberto collected his father’s works—specifically, Giovanni Giacometti’s non-Segantini-type works. This is an interesting aspect that only becomes clear through a comparison. There are, indeed, still some questions that were not answered by the big Giacometti exhibitions of recent years. It’s not just about showing the work again. I think our exhibition will also give the reception of Giacometti a strong impetus.
Can you reveal a little about the structure of the exhibition?
The concept for our exhibition met with a great deal of encouragement, and we were loaned all of the important works necessary. After an introduction featuring selected works by Giovanni, Alberto’s work will take over. Next to and around his work there are smaller rooms—with Diego's furniture sculptures, for instance. This time, the whole thing will be far more open, and the visitor can experience the Foundation's home in a completely new way. That is our goal.

March 31, 2009

(Interview: Hans-Joachim Müller)