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Alberto Giacometti, Herbert Matter, Matthew Monahan, Jonathan Silver

Nicole Klagsbrun is pleased to present an exhibition featuring Alberto Giacometti (1901–66), Herbert Matter (1907–84), Jonathan Silver (1937–92), and Matthew Monahan (1972–), who together share a clear set of existential interests in the human figure, ambiguity, and visual play.

On view are photographs from Matter’s early-1960s black-and-white series documenting Giacometti’s celebrated, exceedingly tall and thin statues. After 1945, Giacometti ceased producing small experimental figures and began to focus on over-lifesize works. The surfaces of these sculptures are fractured and rough, never smooth like a Rodin. By 1947, three main themes had emerged in Giacometti’s art: the walking man, the standing woman, and the bust or head—which are all present in these haunting images.

Matter and Giacometti became fast friends after meeting in 1950, when Pierre Matisse commissioned Matter to document Giacometti’s work in exhibition at Matisse’s gallery in New York. In a letter to Matter from 1961, Giacometti wrote:

I think about [the photographs] every day and now I am impatient to tell you how elated and happy I have been to see the whole series of marvelous photographs. I could not stop looking at them, picking them up one by one and starting all over again, remarking at the great joy they have given me. They are by far the most beautiful photographs that have been made of my things, and, most important, at the same time they have a reality in themselves; each one is a creation in itself, one more beautiful than the other.¹

A designer and a photographer, Matter left his position at Knoll to concentrate on publishing a book of these photographs. While neither he nor Giacometti lived to see this publication, their widows—Mercedes Matter and Annette Giacometti—completed its production in 1987.

Jonathan Silver, a New York-based sculptor, art historian, and member of the New York Studio School faculty (which Mercedes Matter founded in 1964) was an artist who stayed true to the clarity of his vision, a steadfastness he likely gleaned from Giacometti, the subject of Silver’s Ph.D. dissertation, written under Meyer Schapiro while Silver attended Columbia University. Silver remained fascinated with Giacometti’s attentiveness to frontality and to the distressed psychological tension he imbued in his sculpture’s faces, at times through Cubist and Surrealist approaches. In the 1970s, Silver began producing his first works, and, akin to the beginnings of Giacometti’s sculptural practice in the 1930s, Silver focused on heads and skulls. However, he replaced Giacometti’s symmetry with a fragmented equilibrium as with the bronze *Diana*, 1987.

¹ Claire Lui, “‘Reality in Themselves:’ Herbert Matter’s Photographs of Alberto Giacometti’s Art,” Checklist Blog, Guggenheim.org, July 31, 2018: <https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/reality-in-themselves-herbert-matters-photographs-of-alberto-giacomettis-art>.

As if to pick up where Giacometti and then Silver left off, the Los Angeles-based artist Matthew Monahan began to produce variously abstracted sculptures of heads in the 1990s. His work in this exhibition, such as *Column III (The Two-Step)*, 2014, shares the same concern with frontality evident in Giacometti's art, through a pose that echoes ancient Egyptian statues. More broadly, the work of all three artists evinces a deeply held interest in the ancients—Silver's art draws on the Hellenistic period, and while he (and Giacometti) preferred a patina that looks as if it has withstood centuries of a harsh climate, Monahan's sculptures advance a more futuristic take on the ruin. Monahan's Minimalistic *Black and Blue / Us and Them*, 2017, for instance, evokes the prison as our contemporary ruin, a site of total wreckage.

The artists are also all skilled draftsmen. Monahan has even remarked that drawing is at the “core” of his work, which is apparent in his heavily worked-over, oil-on-paper *Body Electric (dagger dance)*, 2014. Silver was also known for constantly drawing from both life and the model, and often left a tangle of horizontal and vertical lines visible on the page, to give a sculptural sense of depth and motion to each work, as with *Untitled Figure*, 1978.

Pushing the expressive potential of the human form in their studios through similar materials and techniques, Giacometti, Silver, and Monahan's works are neither straightforward portraits nor monuments. Rather, their drawings and sculptures are meditations on being. While together their art is marked by a strong verticality, which emphasizes a rigid inanimateness and the influence of ancient sculpture and related mythology, instead of heroisms there is the feeling of a state of diminishment, even as the sculptures are defiantly indissoluble. Moreover, the shifting patches of light that falls on their carefully produced patinas seem to eat away at the surfaces of the figures. Instead of bringing life, light here seems to desiccate. For all three artists, the figure always carries more than its weight.

Hours: Wednesday - Friday, 12-5 pm and by appointment

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