

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Alberto Giacometti / Yves Klein review – one master, one mad genius
Giacometti's expressive sculpture captures the modern condition, but in this provocative pairing, it's Klein's fiery alchemy that takes your breath away

Jonathan Jones



A detail from Yves Klein's Peinture de feu sans titre (1961) © Yves Klein, ADAGP, Paris/DACS, London.



I've seen enough of Alberto Giacometti's art for a while. That is a shame, because there is a lot of it about – and more coming. The Swiss sculptor who gave visual form to Parisian existentialism after the second world war has a big exhibition at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts in Norwich and an even bigger one planned by Tate Modern in 2017. It is hard not to respect this anguished artist of the modern condition, but you can get sick of his dry funereal austerity. It's tiring to put on the required philosophical frown in front of yet another spindly homage to Etruscan tomb statuary.

This, anyway, is what I felt seeing his overwrought bronzes and drawings alongside the joyously playful, mysteriously visionary work of Yves Klein in Gagosian's provocative pairing of two stars of the Paris art scene of the 1950s and 60s. It is Klein who takes my breath away. What a mad genius he was.

Such pairings are more dangerous than galleries appear to realise. You cannot put two artists side by side and expect them to play off one another in a polite cooperative way. Comparisons will be drawn, weaknesses shown up, old rivalries reopened. Alberto Giacometti was certainly aware of Klein, his junior by 27 years. The mature hero of modern art even sketched over a review of his latest sensational exhibition, headlined "Sharks and Vampires".

And in theory, Giacometti should make easy work of Klein. The former has been reverently praised for his intense portrayals of the modern condition. Klein, by contrast, has always been controversial. This exhibition includes his Anthropometries, paintings he made by imprinting the bodies of naked women on to canvas in his patented International Klein Blue. Shocking to serious modernists when they were made in 1960, these works seem in incredibly bad taste today for their apparent sexism. Klein was a showman, a vulgarist, the French godfather of every sensation-seeking contemporary art star. He was also, this excellent showing reveals, a creative volcano.

Klein's cheap gesture-art ought to look puny and shallow compared with Giacometti's authoritative sobriety and expressive craft. But no. The Anthropometries are incredibly beautiful. This is partly down to the magic of the deep, yet luminous blue that Klein made his own. It also has to do with the scale of the white spaces in which blue breasts, tummies and legs cavort. Far from dated, these paintings are utterly contemporary; far from sexist, they seem acutely honest records of the human body.

Giacometti's art feels dull and staid among these gorgeous paintings. Klein, I realised looking at these delirious experiments, was the first European artist who understood the freedom of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings. And it is freedom that makes his own art so beguiling. Since Giacometti is an artist of enclosed, isolated, unmoving figures, he loses out cruelly to such bold liberations of colour and space.

Genius in art is more difficult to explain than critics care to admit. Klein is an alchemist, and I don't use that word lightly. A sponge painted in International Klein Blue glows like an alien entity and is more moving, for me, than all the hard-won figures by Giacometti in the same case.

Strangest and most confounding of all are Klein's fire paintings. He made them by setting fire to cardboard then framing the charred brown results. Enigmatic patterns of shadow and light seem to speak of apocalyptic disasters and the formation of faraway stars. These paintings made by nature suggest the grandeur of the cosmos. The fire tells its ancient story.

It should be Giacometti with his archaeological allusions and first-hand knowledge of the horror of his age who leaves you with a sense of the vastness of time and the sufferings of history. Instead I saw aeons and multitudes in Klein's fire shadows and dream dances. It is Klein who emerges here as a 20th-century genius with something new and vital to say in the 21st.

Alberto Giacometti / Yves Klein: In Search of the Absolute is at Gagosian Gallery, Grosvenor Hill, London, from 27 April until 11 June.