

The Human Figure between Presence and Absence: Giacometti and Hatoum

Oana Maria POPESCU¹

Abstract: *The present paper examines the representation of the human figure in the works of Alberto Giacometti and Mona Hatoum through the concepts of presence, absence, and spatial isolation. Although belonging to different historical and artistic contexts, both artists explore the concept that portrays the fragility of the body and the tension between the visible and the absent. Giacometti's elongated sculptures reflect inner solitude and the effects of postwar, while Hatoum's installations investigate displacement, confinement, and vulnerability in contemporary society. By comparatively analyzing selected works, the paper highlights the ways in which both artists transform space into a common ground, focusing on psychological and emotional structure. The study argues that the human figure becomes, in both cases, a fragile presence shaped by alienation and spatial tension.*

Keywords: *human figure; presence and absence; spatial isolation; existentialism; contemporary art; sculpture; Mona Hatoum; Alberto Giacometti;*

Introduction

Modern and contemporary art uses the human figure as its main artistic element to highlight the permanent changing of perceptions regarding identity, existence, and the body's relation to space. In the historical period of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, artists abandoned the ideal depiction of the body in favor of exploring rather fragmented, vulnerable, and unstable forms. The newly explored forms express a sense of psychological tension and social detachment. Giacometti's artwork and Hatoum's artistic expression provide important insights regarding human existence in this particular situation because their work is based on two distinct artistic and historical backgrounds.

Associated with the postwar existentialism and modern sculpture, Alberto Giacometti developed a visual language characterized by a specific approach towards sculptural elements, including elongated and fragile figures that evoke themes of solitude, distance, and the uncertainty of human presence. His sculptures reflect emotional subjects, a solitary experience that is translated through art and marks the existential anxieties that marked Europe after the Second World War, emphasizing the isolation of the individual within space when „his work could only signify the presence of the human figure by sacrificing individual characteristics.”². Mona Hatoum uses art installations and sculptural elements to investigate the concept of femininity and the way it is portrayed in a time and place where it is perceived as being fragile. Themes such as displacement, confinement, and vulnerability are explored. Influenced by her experience of exile and political instability, Mona Hatoum transforms familiar spaces and personal objects into environments that portray the inner self, charged with tension and emotion. This drives the viewer to experience the artwork. Each artwork „begins with the painful awareness of solitude, a desire to communicate with others, with the world”³.

The two artists mentioned in the reference work show their differences towards their choice of artistic medium, their respective historical periods, and artistic practices. Giacometti

¹ Faculty of Arts and Design, West University of Timișoara, maria.popescu@e-uvv.ro.

² Bonnefoy, Yves. 2001. *Alberto Giacometti*. New York: Assouline Publishing, p. 14.

³ Dupin, Jacques. 2003. *Giacometti: Three Essays*. New York: Black Square Editions, p. 10.

and Hatoum use spatial installations together with their control of physical shapes to create new ways of showing human form, which reveal the deep connection between human belonging and vulnerability. The present research aims to examine the ways in which both referenced artists shape the relationship between figure and space, proving that their works reveal a shared motif of creation that investigates the instability of human presence in modern and contemporary art.

1. Methodology

1.1. Context and methods of the research

The present study focuses on a comparative and interpretive analysis regarding the representation of the human figure in the works of Alberto Giacometti and Mona Hatoum. The study will analyze visual language developed by both artists through sculptural form, spatial tension, and bodily representation. The elements of interest are materiality, spatial relationships, fragmentation, and the treatment of the body. Thus, it will be explored how Giacometti and Hatoum express themes of isolation, vulnerability, presence, and absence. The research will present the ways in which both artists construct the human figure as an unstable and fragile presence shaped by psychological, existential, and social conditions. The artworks mentioned as references will not be analyzed as singular pieces; rather, this paper will examine three works by each artist in order to identify elements of dialogue that emerge between their practices. Elements such as materials used, space, and memory constitute recurring themes within the creative universes of both artists and are exposed through the sculptural works and installations discussed in this study.

Although the two artists belong to different periods in the history of art – Alberto Giacometti being associated with Surrealism and later Existentialist art, and Mona Hatoum with Contemporary and Conceptual art – their approaches to similar themes reveal a possible dialogue of creation. The hidden meanings present in the works hold vast historical, socio-cultural, and personal differences.

The research aims to reflect on the interpretation of meaning, context, and artistic intention rather than quantitative analysis or statistical evaluation. This will be achieved through a comparative examination of the selected works. The study investigates the possible connections and divergences between the artists' visual languages, symbolic structures, and formal strategies. This approach offers a more nuanced understanding of how sculptural and installation practices communicate, shaping a complex emotional, spatial, and conceptual dialogue, while also revealing the distinct ways in which each artist constructs and imbues meaning and emotion, whilst giving a distinct aesthetic form attributed to their art.

2. The Human Figure and Existential Presence

José Antonio Maravall argues that visual culture can function as a mechanism of social and political control, a concept that may also be extended to modern and contemporary art, where the human figure often expresses fragmentation, vulnerability, and absence rather than stable presence⁴. This point is relevant regarding Alberto Giacometti because his attenuated figures are often interpreted as embodiments of existential precarity, postwar alienation, and the crisis of presence. As well as towards Mona Hatoum because her work frequently addresses displacement, bodily vulnerability, loss, and the politicization of space and the body.

In this section three artworks by the artist will be studied, the mentioned are: *Figurine entre deux maisons* (1950) – the sculptural approach explores human fragility and existential

⁴ Foster, Hal (ed.). 1988. *Vision and Visuality* (Dia Art Foundation: Discussions in Contemporary Culture, No. 2). First edition. Seattle: Bay Press, p. 16.

isolation through an elongated, reduced figure in motion, *The Nose* (1947–49) an artwork which expresses psychological tension and confinement, with the figure suspended in an enclosed space composed of metal bars welded together, and *Standing Woman* (1948) which portrays a vision of a simplified body emphasizing presence, absence, and spatial vulnerability.

The first referenced work, *Figurine entre deux maisons* (1950), portrays one of Giacometti's silhouette figures confined inside an enclosed metal space. The title of the work, translated as *Figurine Between Two Houses*, may suggest a condition of in-betweenness, reflecting notions of belonging situated between past and present, and between temporal states of “now” and “then”. The representation of man through the form of a figurine, which is reduced to a minimal form, references the idea of a reduced human presence placed between two structural forms, as named by the artist “houses”, which can be read less as literal buildings and more as symbols of space, belonging, or thresholds of existence. The figure is situated between the two spaces, suggesting a vague space that cannot be determined. The positioning of the silhouette is rather uncertain; it is in a state of neither fully inside nor outside of a confined space. This artwork evokes themes of displacement, transition, and uncertainty, where the human body is confined between two spaces but does not seem belong to any of them.



Fig. 1. Alberto Giacometti, *Figurine entre deux maisons* (1950), installation from the exhibition *Mona Hatoum: Encounters – Giacometti* at the Barbican Centre, London. Photograph taken by the author, October 3, 2025.

In Giacometti's work, spatial arrangements often reflect a postwar sense of isolation, where the human figure remains detached even in familiar environments. Rather than fully belonging to space, it appears suspended, vulnerable, and caught between presence and absence.

The second referenced work, named *The Nose*, represents a sculpture that suspends a head within a rectangular cage from a crossbar, with the nose extending beyond its confinement and the form evoking both movement and threat through its weapon-like resemblance and the open mouth suggesting anguish, building on this the piece can be understood within the context of postwar existential anxiety associated with Jean-Paul Sartre, a close friend of the artist⁵. Alberto Giacometti's universe is in a constant search to immortalize and shape the human form, persistently exploring its fragility, presence, and existential condition through a continuous process of reduction and refinement. „Whether the outcome of observation or recollection, figures and faces are a recurrent, practically continuous theme that carries the insistent force of obsession”⁶.

⁵ Jennifer Blessing. 2023. “Alberto Giacometti: The Nose (Le nez), 1949 (cast 1964)”. *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum*. Retrieved May 10, 2026, from <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/1425>.

⁶ Paul Moorhouse. 2015. *Giacometti: Pure Presence*. London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, p. 14.

The third referenced work, *Standing Woman* (1948), represents an elongated figure in the characteristic of the artist's sculptural style, portraying a woman in a vertical position in which the body is reduced to an almost linear form. The figure stands in an upright position, almost statuary form, creating an antithesis between the heroic sculptural pose, associated with righteousness and bravery, and the fragility of the female body. The sculpture portrays a thin, and rather translucent and elongated shape. The piece evokes emotional strength through its combination of powerful force and delicate beauty, which enables its presence to maintain its existence. The body undergoes an abstract transformation that removes all individual traits to produce a universal depiction of human resilience and vulnerability.

3. Mona Hatoum and the Vulnerable Body

Hatoum consistently emphasizes the uncanny within the familiar and the unsettling within domestic spaces across both her studio practice and residencies, pairing the strange with the ordinary in ways that are reinforced by a process of visual reduction that paradoxically generates an expansion rather than a limitation of meaning⁷.

In this section three artworks by the artist will be studied, the mentioned are: *Measures of Distance* (1988) – an approach that combines personal narrative, displacement, and fragmented bodily representation through video and text, *Remains of the day* – an approach that transforms domestic space into a site of tension and restriction, memory and loss and *Interior Landscape* (2008) – which represents a sculptural installation that evokes bodily threat, fragility, enclosure and spatial instability through modified functions of everyday items that seem to lose their initial means of use. Mona Hatoum's creative universe explores themes of family history, exile, displacement, and identity through the relationship between mother and daughter, highlighting the experience of living between cultures and reflecting on the emotional impact of migration, loss, and separation from one's homeland⁸.

By the late 1980s, the artist had adopted videotape as her main medium, with *Measures of Distance* (1988) portraying images of her mother, handwritten letters, and voice-over to explore themes of displacement, memory, and identity by intertwining personal family correspondence with the political realities of separation and exile⁹.

In the referenced work, the artist presents a video installation that portrays a dialogue between the artist and her mother. The dialogue is present throughout the video and is presented as a rather layered monologue which is superimposed over the combined voices of Mona Hatoum and her mother. This creates a deeply personal auditory experience. The voices read the written correspondence between mother and daughter. Hatoum explores themes of familial unity, sacrifice, and emotional connection. The mother emerges as a symbol of devotion and resilience towards embodying the sacrifices often made for the well-being of one's children. The human figure is portrayed within this artwork as a vessel of memory, belonging, and identity, carrying the emotional and cultural traces of personal and collective experience.

⁷ Site Santa Fe (Gallery) and Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. 2001. *Mona Hatoum: Domestic Disturbance*. Edited by Laura Steward Heon. North Adams, MA: MASS MoCA; Pownal, VT: Storey Books, p. 7.

⁸ Zelevansky, Lynn. 1994. *Sense and Sensibility: Women Artists and Minimalism in the Nineties*. New York: Museum of Modern Art; distributed by Harry N. Abrams, p. 17.

⁹ Benezra, Neal David; Viso, Olga M. 1996. *Dissonant Themes in the Art of the 1990s*. Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, p. 50.

Remains of the Day (2017) is a sculptural installation that continues the artist's exploration of fragility and displacement. Thus, showing the unsettling transformation of domestic space into a hostile environment. The work is composed of charred and burnt furniture and domestic elements. They create an empty space that shows destruction's effects through its arrangement. Hatoum uses these damaged household items to create her artistic work contributing towards exploring human memory, loss and the fragile nature of daily life.



Fig. 2. Mona Hatoum, *Remains of the Day* (2017), from the exhibition *Mona Hatoum: Encounters – Giacometti at the Barbican Centre, London*. Photograph taken by the author, October 3, 2025.

The installation *Remains of the Day* (2017) evokes a rather profound sense of absence, as the human figure is physically unseen, yet it is still present through the remains left behind as a result of the destructive force of fire. The scene shows an interior room space, but everything inside it has fallen into a state of complete disrepair. The installation displays burnt furniture to show traces of people that used to live there, which now serves as proof of the events that unfolded and have forced the residents to leave their regular lives behind. The artwork shows how war, exile, and personal trauma create hidden impacts on people. The artist uses everyday domestic items such as chairs and tables to create personal meaning, causing them to become psychologically charged and politically significant.

The title itself, *Remains of the Day*, reinforces the idea of loss and material remnants. It suggests both the physical remains of the contents found inside the domestic interior and the fading imprint of lived experience, memory, or security that a home would rather offer. Hatoum transforms familiar household objects into rather haunting relics. These items are imbued with memory and emotion, drawing the viewers deep into the presented scene. Thus, making them part of the retelling of the memory displayed into an artistic narrative. The presence of domestic remnants evokes absence, suggesting the lack of human presence and a possible interpretation of childhood as a disrupted or lost dimension of domestic life. Through the analysis of this artwork, the human form is reflected as an imprint of lived experience within a space, with only traces of its presence remaining.

The last referenced artwork is *Interior Landscape* (2008), which presents the interior of a bedroom containing objects that portray the fragility and potential harm of the elements.



Fig. 3. Mona Hatoum, *Interior Landscape* (2008), from the exhibition *Mona Hatoum: Encounters – Giacometti* at the Barbican Centre, London. Photograph taken by the author, October 3, 2025.

The bed is composed of barbed wire instead of a comforting mattress, thus underlining the harmful aspect of this item. Rather than offering comfort and rest, it is represented as a place of harm and discomfort. The pillow bears an emotional and physical connection with the artist, representing an embroidery made of her own hair, which in my opinion, represents a powerful yet personal symbol of the feminine beauty. The recreated interior portrays a scene of decay, a place that was meant to offer rest and protection, which is progressing towards becoming a fading memory, thus meeting its final state of existence.

4. Presence and Absence: A Comparative Reading

The dialogue between the two artists is poignant. The presence and the absence are underlined in the artistic creations of both referenced artists, although they use different mediums and techniques, they both reflect on similar subjects.

Both Giacometti and Hatoum shift the representation of the human figure away from the physical body toward a trace of existence, where presence is no longer fully visible but instead suggested through reduction, absence, and material remnants. In Giacometti's art, the figure remains present *per se* yet it holds the characteristics of a fragile, elongated form, emphasising towards vulnerability of human life. In Mona Hatoum's multidisciplinary practice, whether in video art or installation form, the figure is often entirely absent yet still implied through remaining traces of elements such as domestic objects, habitual spaces, and memory, which carry emotional weight and resemble a fragile attempt to preserve memory.

Space could be seen as a psychological presence in Giacometti's artworks; empty space isolates the figure, making it feel exposed and distant, while in Hatoum's practice, domestic or architectural space becomes unstable, charged, and even threatening. Absence could be interpreted as a form of presence. Giacometti's figures give the illusion that they are fading into space, creating a temporal space where the form becomes delicate and almost fades. In Hatoum's works, what remains is portrayed as a result and exhaustion of presence (burnt furniture, disturbed interiors, objects that decay or lose their function). Both Giacometti and Hatoum construct the human figure through absence and reduction, where presence is no longer physically portrayed but resembles a fragile trace shaped and molded by space, memory, and displacement.

One example that supports the presented ideas, is an installation, as shown in Fig.4, which resembles an photographic image taken within the joint exhibition named *Mona Hatoum: Encounters – Giacometti* which took place at the Barbican Centre, London. The installation

combines the work of Alberto Giacometti, *The Nose*, and Mona Hatoum's *Cube*. By placing *The Nose* inside the *Cube*, the expression of horror on the sculpture's face is intensified, emphasising the effects of confinement and isolation, while rather than leaving the interior space open to interpretation, the artist deliberately uses the figure's anguished expression to heighten its emotional impact¹⁰.



Fig. 4. Alberto Giacometti, *The nose*(1947–49) encased in Mona Hatoum's *Cube*(2006) from the exhibition *Mona Hatoum: Encounters – Giacometti* at the Barbican Centre, London. Photograph taken by the author, October 3, 2025.

5. Conclusions

Although the two artists come from different times and artistic backgrounds, they use different visual languages, both exploring vulnerability, absence, displacement, and spatial tension. With pieces like *The Nose* and *Standing Woman*, Giacometti simplifies the body down to an elongated, almost isolated silhouette that echoes postwar angst and the fragility of human life. By contrast, Hatoum treats the body in an indirect way through installations and staged household objects where presence is a rather suggested element taking the shape of memory and traces left behind as a result of a lived-in space, these elements can be found within the works *Remains of the Day* and *Measures of Distance*.

Both artists avoid portraying the figure as a straightforward and physical depiction. The figure takes the shape of a form, thus resembling a mark of existence that is formed by space, memory and loss. Their works set up ground open for a generational conversation, where the human condition appears vulnerable, fragmented and emotionally charged. Thus, sometimes the scene appears to have a sense of continuity, of an extended dialogue that could reach out beyond the seen image.

6. References

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¹⁰ Ina Cole. 2025, October 13. "Mona Hatoum on Giacometti's 'Heightened Sense of Isolation'". *Frieze London, Frieze Week Magazine*. Retrieved May 10, 2026, from <https://www.frieze.com/article/heightened-sense-isolation-mona-hatoum-giacometti-frieze-week-magazine-london-2025>.

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