

Scored with anxiety

Unlike his more celebrated sculptures, Giacometti's furiously executed paintings – especially those of his prostitute girlfriend – reveal an inner torment, says Serena Davies

In 1961, the Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti, by then world famous, threw a tantrum. He was being awarded the prize for sculpture at the Venice Biennale but insisted he wouldn't accept it unless it were given for both sculpture and painting. His demand was refused.

He took the outcome with good enough grace, but the incident is a token of how integral he perceived painting to be to his professional identity. His disappointment would be great if he knew he is now largely associated only with his spindly statues.

An exhibition in a new space near Cork Street seeks to help rectify the balance. It is the first staged in England to offer the chance to examine examples of Giacometti's paintings, and some drawings, alone.

It is a small show, only 21 works from the last 20 years of his life, hung in the airy upper rooms of Thomas Gibson Fine Art and Lefevre Fine Art, two leading modern-art dealerships who recently formed a partnership.

The show begins with three paintings of Caroline, a prostitute and Giacometti's mistress in his final years. Her surname is uncertain; they met when she was 21, he 58.

In the pictures she looms like an Egyptian goddess, solitary and timeless, the furniture around her having dwindled to the occasional line. Although undoubtedly in her thrall, Giacometti would claim his preoccupation was an artistic one. His aim, as in most of his post-war art, was to convey the visual experience of a figure seen rooted in space.

A sculpture may be much reworked but always, because of its medium, looks finite and certain. Giacometti's paintings, on the other hand, betray the anxiety with which they were created. In every picture of her, Caroline's head has visibly been repainted.

It is a process we have insight into thanks to Giacometti's biographer James Lord, who wrote a book about having his portrait painted. Apart from recounting the artist's constant announcements that it was all a

disaster and he should never paint again, Lord described the way, each day, Giacometti would rapidly redo the head and the space around it.

In so doing he built up a head so monumental-looking, so hollow-eyed, it appears to exist in its own three dimensions, enclosed by its weird halo of encrusted space. The portrait took 18 sittings, rather than the initially planned single afternoon, and several hundred cigarettes.

When it comes to his drawings, Giacometti's anxiety is also apparent. In the dozen or so here, his lines zoom and loop across the paper, so furiously that, at first, they look uncontrolled. Then you notice the sure structure of vertical and horizontal strokes that hold the images.

These are particularly noticeable in a loosely worked *Standing Nude* done with a Biro in 1958. It is held to arresting attention and perfectly proportioned thanks to a line shooting up the centre of the figure, and others slicing across at the

stomach, breasts and pubic bone.

It was this ability to convey natural structure that was surely one of Giacometti's greatest skills, and reminds one of an artist he hugely admired, Cézanne.

In one drawing here, Giacometti's feverishness seems in blissful abeyance, giving way to a Cézanne-like grasp of the essence of form. In *A Vase of Zinnias* (1959), he has drawn flowers at once completely delicate and perfectly solid. With sweeping yet careful marks he makes leaves that almost quiver, petals that begin, ever so slightly, to wilt. Their definite indefiniteness recalls the merging blocks of a Cézanne still life, conjuring a sense of substance that few artists can evoke.

In moments such as this, when he allows himself a moment of lightness, his genius shines through effortlessly. One is tempted to suggest he didn't always have to try so hard.

'Alberto Giacometti: Paintings and Drawings from Private Collections' is at Lefevre Fine Art & Thomas Gibson Fine Art, Bruton Street, London W1 (020 7493 2107), until Dec 16.

