

Calder: The Paris Years 1926 – 1933

The Whitney Museum of American Art, October 16, 2008 - February 15, 2009
Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2009

“Just as one can compose colors or forms, so one can compose motions”¹

Alexander Calder is a natural great, and one of the most joyfully inspired creative geniuses of the 20th century. In light of the wonderful works on display from the Whitney and the Pompidou museums, which hold the two largest bodies of the artist’s work in public collections, no one will be disappointed. A quality of over-cautious linearity in the installations and uninspired lighting are the main flaws in this show, which travels to the Pompidou before it closes. It may be necessary and inevitable to be protective and to treat the works in a discursive manner, it is also germane for an exhibition focused on presenting the artist’s transition from engineer, illustrator, toy designer and painter to, Calder.

In 1926 he moved to Paris from New York, after taking a degree in engineering, designing toys (which were mass produced), and working as an illustrator for *The New Yorker*, among other publications. He had studied painting and drawing at the Art Student’s League under John Sloan, mingling with practitioners of the Ash Can School, a realistic and dominant American movement, both idealistically and politically charged. Sloan and that downtown crowd, and the Arensberg circle, an outstanding group of creatives that included the poet Wallace Stevens, were both friends and associates of young Marcel Duchamp, when he lived in New York in 1917.

To fully grasp the timeframe of this exhibition, European and American cultural matrices must be understood in light of what French history refers to as, *les années folles*, and American as, *the roaring twenties*. Each markedly different but similarly triggered by the explosive effect of female emancipation in definitive ways, and the immensely powerful technological developments that electricity brought; the telephone and the automobile among them. Sympathetic and inter-acting communities of artists, poets, writers, dancers, musicians, filmmakers, inventors, and marvelous people lived, worked, influenced and knew each other in those interwar years. It is simultaneously crucial to acknowledge that the fabric of human society throughout Europe, was hideously disfigured by the phenomenon of the First World War, 1914-1918. It was still in early stages of mending when Calder moved to Paris in 1926. In 1929 the Great Depression hit, followed by World War II, 1939-1945, which devastated Europe again less than 20 years later, and involved the entire world. No part of human culture was not drastically shaken or devastated by the foul de-civilization that was, and is a consequence of war itself.

For Calder an overnight transformation into abstraction occurred after the shock of recognition he received from a visit to Mondrian’s studio in 1930. A loose association of

¹ Berkshire Museum, A.C. catalog statement, 1933.

artists formed Abstraction-Création whose associates included Mondrian, Jean Arp, Marlow Moss, Naum Gabo, Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson, Kurt Schwitters, Wassily Kandinsky, Taro Okamoto, Paule Vézelay, Hans Erni, Bart van der Leck, Leon Tutundjian, John Wardell Power and Mary Cassat; in part to distinguish their approaches from the dominant Surrealists. Marcel Duchamp was taken by his longtime companion Mary Reynolds to Calder's studio to see his new works in the fall of 1931, and he suggested that the moving works be called "mobiles" which word carries several ideas. Both moving and changing as in mobility, but also the word is used in the sense of motivation, or cause. When in 1932, Calder showed his work at the Vignon Gallery, he used a title Duchamp suggested for the show, "Calder c'est mobiles."

The Whitney's show risks misinterpretation because of its emphasis on *The Circus*, which is darkly lit in the middle of a space surrounded by lighted cases which cut the viewer off from the works, many of them toys; preventing a flow of light and air which give a sense of vitality that is essential to Calder's invention and mastery. The cases protect the fragile and delightful toys and wire sculptures, but they are lighted so that no shadows fall which is a mistake. Calder's shadows are remarkable in the way they impart a living presence to their subjects. This is especially true of the portrait busts, that are hung like decapitated trophies at the opening of the show. Many are dangling without apparent orientation, so that the viewer cannot see them in front view or in the round, both of which are necessary for a full reception of the work. Most astonishing is the veracity of their shadows, which seem to bring them to life in a startling way.

The curators must be commended for arranging to have, *Small Sphere and Heavy Sphere*, and *Cone d'ebone*, set in motion every 20 minutes. The former is believed to be the first of Calder's hanging mobiles, and his friend the composer, Edgar Varèse's favorite piece. Its elegant little brass gong and color-shaped glass bottles are eloquent in their simplicity, and in the subtle modernist-fantastic music they improvise each time they play. Two black and white news reel clips are superlative material, *Sculptor Discards Clay*, and a newly discovered silent newsreel from 1929, *Montparnasse: Where the Muses Hold Sway*. The latter, which despite its diminishing treatment of Calder as a kind of performing animal, allows us to witness the ephemeral magic of his supreme ability with wire. And to see him with Kiki, in a clip that includes footage of Foujita among others, is a really marvelous thrill.