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ALEXANDER CALDER

Performing sculpture

Tate Modern, until April 3, 2016

Meeting Piet Mondrian in Paris in 1930, Alexander Calder had a revelatory idea: what if the Dutchman's cut-out coloured rectangles, designed to formulate ideas about space for his canvases, could be made to "oscillate"? Mondrian was unimpressed, thinking of his flat surfaces as already in motion; but for Calder, confining these shapes to the canvas was to render them forever "constipated". The effect on Calder's work was immediate, launching it into abstraction, and initiating the experiments with ways of inhabiting space that had never before been seen by either painting or sculpture.

One of the great strengths of Tate Modern's survey of Calder's sculpture, the largest ever to be seen in the UK, is that it gives prominence to the little-known workings-out of these projections into space that culminate in the graceful balancing acts of the mature mobiles. It was one of Calder's motorized works that Duchamp first christened "Mobile" in 1931. In the end, it was not rectangles that Calder set in motion, but spheres, circles and organic shapes, the visual vocabulary of Joan Miro, Hans Arp, Constantin Brancuși and Fernand Leger. Those same monochrome flat forms, which had done away with traditional perspective in painting, now revolutionized sculpture's relationship with space. Nonetheless, this was still a period of in-betweenness for Calder, in which he was reluctant to do away with framing devices altogether.

The final flourishing of this interaction is a sequence of panel paintings from 1937-8, in which the shapes are now suspended by wires, free-floating without the motors, against monochrome painted boards: the effect is at once of performers before a backdrop, and of a canvas come to life. An ambiguous relationship with figuration comes into play here too. The starkly reduced shapes of "Form Against Yellow" evoke a gesturing torso, prefiguring Matisse's cut-outs; in "Blue Panel", the suspended figure suggests, at one point in its revolution, a bowed artist carrying a palette. The palette form in particular carries over into many of the later mobiles, together with the often wafer-thin slivers of the discs which seem to deny their three-dimensionality, and direct a lasting nod to the modernist painters.

*Performing Sculpture* traces Calder's interest in theatricality back further still, showing that before he had invented sculpture that performs autonomously, he was creating sculpture that both depicts performers, and can be made to perform by hand. There is a selection of the miniature, fully-functioning circus works of recycled materials, which formed the Cirque Calder in the 1920s, which he performed on both sides of the Atlantic. Shown alongside are his larger-scale wire sculptures, many of which depict the

performances of acrobats, animals, and dancers. They are so immediately entertaining that it's easy to overlook their modernist innovation: in drawing lines with wire in space, Calder is completely rethinking sculpture's relationship between volume and void, creating works that are transparent yet three-dimensional, and that do away with frontal presentation, to lead us into and around them.

The subversive spirit of these early works brought a playful yet serious challenge to high art and gallery culture. Among Calder's animal sculptures were a defecating cow and a urinating dog. His portraits of dancers include Josephine Baker in several provocative poses; particular attention is given to the genitalia of his acrobats. In an excellent catalogue essay Alex J. Taylor shows how some of the circus performances explicitly lampooned artistic tradition: four clothes pegs on a merry-go-round were introduced as "The Four Seasons", transforming into "The Three Graces" when one was removed. Such early provocations invite us to consider the later works afresh: "The Orange Panel", a motorized work from 1936, includes a pendulous appendage that, in an endless cycle, springs into action, only gradually to detumescence. It's unsurprising that the Surrealists tried to claim Calder for their own; but equally unsurprising that he would have none of it, preferring to think of himself as a "sewer-realist".

The carnivalesque spirit becomes less bawdy in the free-floating mobiles, but nonetheless persists with some of the later works returning to the theme of acrobats and tightrope-walkers. Much has been made of the supposed self-reflexivity of Calder's mobiles. Jean-Paul Sartre, who was entranced by Calder's work, was the first to offer this reading, arguing that the mobiles "signify nothing, refer to nothing other than themselves. They simply are: they are absolutes". Nonetheless, Sartre acknowledges their allusive potential, comparing their motions to aquatic plants, petals and airborne threads. Their balancing acts extend to their wider relations: they are solitary performers, yet depend on their environment for movement. They are poised between abstraction and figuration, and between physical laws and poetic expression.

The greatest of the mobiles manage to be many things simultaneously. "Snow Flurry I", for example, one of the most graceful and yet complex, both suggests the natural world, and comprises a world of its own. It sends its white discs out in every direction, masking its structure in an infinite play of rotations. "Untitled (Mobile with N Degrees of Freedom)" is a fantasia on freedom and dependency: its vast number of interconnected horizontal spindles, that somehow never become entangled, make calculations impossible; the primary colours of its support point to scientific principles, but equally they take us back to the big top and its aerial acrobatics. Reference to the body also recurs, and is reconfigured: "Descending Spines", in a rendering of Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2", extends the dance not just into real time, but into the simultaneous shimmying of a chain of wires in three dimensions. Many of the later works encompass both micro and macro. "Black Spot on Gimbals" might refer to both

the structure of atoms and that of the cosmos. While creating the motorized works, Calder began to think of his sculptures as universes. "A Universe", from 1934, which was reported to have mesmerized Einstein, pushed the motorized works as far as they could go, with ninety stages of movement before the sequence repeated. The conceit is expanded in the free mobiles, with their greater range of both movement and association.

Uniquely for an art exhibition, the busier the galleries, the more rewarding the experience can be: Calder designed his mobiles to respond to the air currents created by bodies in motion (and even to respond to the viewer's touch, sadly unthinkable today). The exhibition spaces here never quite fulfil their potential to become stages, and this is not wholly the curators' fault: the motorized works are too delicate to be switched on, and a silent film has been installed to give glimpses of their proper workings. The circus works understandably can't be handled, but they are sensitively displayed from floor to ceiling, giving some sense of the intended simultaneous drama. Saddest of all, the hybrid installation work "Small Sphere and Heavy Sphere", in which the balancing acts lead to the random striking of gongs and bottles, has fallen still and silent, to become no more than a relic.

Despite the formality of the galleries, the performances by the Guildhall Percussion Ensemble, staged fittingly in the Turbine Hall, revive Calder's true spirit of dynamism. They give the full meaning to the exhibition's title in staging the British premiere of Earle Brown's Calder Piece, which includes the striking of Calder's purpose-designed 1963 mobile "Chef d'orchestre". This is the antidote to gallery preciousness; at the Paris premiere in 1967 Calder was reportedly disappointed that his work wasn't struck more forcefully, with hammers. The mobile is so melodious, and the music so conditioned by the unpredictable revolutions, which give the performers both their cues and their gestural motifs, that what emerges is a unified whole; although different every time, it is collaborative in every aspect. The virtuosic percussionists bring the work to life not just musically but visually too, in moving the mobile, and in their rapid flights between the hundred-odd instruments employed.

Richard Bernas, the absent chef d'orchestre, has created an illuminating programme. Calder Piece is paired with November 1952, which marks the start of the influence of Calder on Brown's music, and demonstrates the simultaneously fixed and flexible form that is common to both: Brown called it "mobile form". The score asks the performers to respond exclusively to visual stimuli, and this results here in an ever-changing yet recognizably related series of fragmented gestures from the pitched percussion, and some especially beautiful bowing on the vibraphones. Finally, to coincide with Calder's interest in both fragments and the stars, Bernas has included a cross-section of the vast Atlas Eclipticalis by John Cage, who first introduced Brown to Calder. Cage generated his notes by mapping star charts of the Southern Hemisphere onto staves; the

relationship between order and chance, and between sound and silence fits perfectly with Calder's work: both transcend their discrete parts to transport us into an infinite continuum.