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ART REVIEW

Relics of a Sculptor's Bronze Age

'Calder: The Complete Bronzes' at L&M Arts



Calder: The Complete Bronzes, at L&M Arts in Manhattan, includes the artist's bronze "Dancer" (1944).

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#)

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The American sculptor Alexander Calder (1898-1976) was blessed with several kinds of genius. He was brilliant at the hands-on part, able to think incisively in several materials. He was innately cosmopolitan, a natural stylist and a bit of a sponge, swift to absorb and make his own the best of both the past and the present. He was an entertainer who aimed to please without pandering, to

reconcile modernism and popular art, with assists from folk and what was then called primitive art.

Calder's favored materials were wire, sheet metal and wood, which he bent, cut and carved into attenuated, levitating forms that banished sculpture's ages-old weight and bulk. He used bright, flat colors in new ways and invented at least two genres: his hanging mobiles and his equally pared-down stabiles, as well as works that combined aspects of both.

He didn't have much use for the dark, inert tradition-bound sculptural staple of bronze; he had just two brief encounters with it, in 1930 and in 1943-44. Still, it is quite amazing to see nearly all his forays into bronze brought together in one place, as they are by "Calder: The Complete Bronzes" at [L&M Arts](#). A collaboration with the Calder Foundation, the show doesn't quite live up to its title, since a loan or two fell through at the last minute, but it is the first exhibition to concentrate almost exclusively on these works. There were just six in the [National Gallery of Art's](#) sprawling 1998 Calder retrospective and only one in the [Whitney's](#) recent examination of his Paris years (1926-33). L&M is presenting 35 bronzes as well as plaster models for 13, and one cast-aluminum work.

While not quite as original as his mobiles or stabiles, Calder's bronzes are shot through with his irrepressible spirit and talent for insouciant distillation. The ancient medium enabled him to move deeper into art history; to keep pace with and borrow from other more traditional strands of modernist sculpture and to use his hands and amazing tactile sense in a different way. The exhibition sheds new light on his complex sensibility while also showing him pursuing some of his characteristic interests — like levitation — in an unlikely material. In addition the

play between the white plasters, which are so responsive to light, and their nearly identical twins in the dark, more matte bronze is fascinating.

In 1930, when he made his first bronzes, Calder was 32. He had a degree in engineering, had studied painting for three years at the [Art Students League](#) and was living in Paris. The son and grandson of sculptors, he had dabbled precociously in the medium in his youth but had returned to it only in 1926, when he started to make his famous miniaturized “Circus,” the teeming rendition of life under the big top executed in wire, wood, paint and bits of fabric that became a hit in avant-garde circles on both sides of the Atlantic.

The show opens with a dozen bronzes (and plasters for six of them) that Calder made, possibly in the summer of 1930, working with a foundry not far from his studio. Arranged on three shelves, they are toy size and to some extent toylike. A weight lifter and a pair of acrobats — one balanced above the other in a one-hand stand — recall figures from the “Circus.” A host of wonderfully lumpy animals includes a swaybacked cow, a slinky cat, a perky horse and a perturbed elephant. Calder challenged himself by modeling in fast-drying plaster rather than wax; the pieces are all so emphatically squeezed, prodded and gouged that they seem to be nothing but surface, to have no interior volumes. They combine the energy of small, ancient figurines with that of the modern cartoon.

At one end of the bottom shelf two female nudes strike a different note. One lies on her side, seeming to cleave to the earth; the other sits, leaning back on her hands. Their subtle distortions and quieter surfaces may indicate attention to Matisse’s bronzes from two decades earlier, but their everyday poses seem more typical of Degas. They are sentient beings.

Calder returned to bronze in 1943, partly to disrupt his facility with his more habitual materials and partly in response to a suggestion by the architect [Wallace K. Harrison](#) that he try to make some abstract works that could be greatly enlarged in concrete, since metal was in short supply during [World War II](#).

The bronzes of this second stint are all over the place, in a good way. They reflect a restless urge to see what a given material can do, wobbling from figurative to abstract to Surrealistic combinations of the two. As with Calder's stabiles and mobiles, several pieces borrow from the plant and insect worlds, which can become a bit macabre in bronze.

Tools are used as much a fingers and thumbs. Some forms and surfaces feel spiked and dangerous, others are quite smooth. Here you may find your mind swerving all over the place: archaic sculpture to 1950s biomorphism to Edward Gorey (as with a scrawny three-legged, three-pronged form called "Three Fingers" and its witchlike digits).

Sometimes several suggestions coalesce in a single piece. One of the best works in the show is "Still Life (The Chicken)," which suggests a modern chair, again three-legged, sprouting delicate mushrooms, with a perforated back that also implies the head of an alert, if not alarmed, chicken in profile.

There are more pairs of acrobats, but this time the two bodies are separate sculptures that actually balance one atop the other, sometimes in fairly suggestive ways. These combinations seem to lead to even odder, more inventive feats of engineering in which single figures are broken down into several separate pieces hinged together with hooks or little posts that fit into holes. Calder acknowledges this unusual structure with the title of a seated nude made from five separate

pieces, “A Detached Person (Seated Woman).”

It is hard to know if the frequent figurative distortions or abbreviations are a matter of balance or aesthetics, but a precarious, lurching body language results, along with distinctive spatial effects. The standing leg and foot of “Dancer” — a four-part figure that seems more like a skater — is much larger than the one she lifts and points behind her. Her head and arms and the wishbone form that connote her breast are small again. She seems to loom over an immense space, starting out and ending up small, like one of the nudes in Bill Brandt’s photographs.

“Dancer,” “A Detached Person” and the subtly desperate cast-aluminum “On One Knee” — a figure that seems to be pleading — are all credible elaborations on Giacometti’s “Woman With Her Throat Cut” of 1932. Like the small nudes from 1930, only more extreme, they have an inner complexity and emotional delicacy that is uncommon to Calder’s figures.

Part of this may be the literal balancing acts performed by the sculptures’ combined parts. They are visibly precarious, structurally Existentialist you might say, which seems appropriate to the time in which they were made.

“Calder: The Complete Bronzes” is on view through Dec. 8 at L&M Arts, 45 East 78th Street, Manhattan, (212) 861-0020, lmgallery.com.