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Conflict of mass at Peabody Essex Museum

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Zoom
The work of Alexander Calder is on view through the end of the year in an airy exhibition at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem. COURTESY PHOTO



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By Keith Powers
Posted Oct. 30, 2014 @ 5:59 pm

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Hardly any artist could be more easily recognizable than Alexander Calder. Using the conflict of mass and balance to create his own visual language, Calder fabricated enormous public sculptures and lighter-than-air mobiles and stabiles, all carrying a grace that defies their steel and wood materials, and their welded and riveted construction. Calder's work, on view through the end of the year in an airy exhibition at the Peabody Essex Museum, comes from nature, and in some respects, belongs there. "Calder and Abstraction: From Avant-Garde to Iconic," makes a strong case for Calder as a major artist, a continuation of the modern tradition stretching from Duchamp to Kandinsky to Miró. The exhibition is beautifully curated, and includes mobiles, Calder's hanging kinetic sculptures; stabiles, his fixed abstractions; and multiple fascinating moquettes—models, most about five or six feet tall—of his outdoor installations. Spread throughout several large galleries, the works have room to gently move and cast shadows along the walls. The entire exhibition, curated by Stephanie Barron of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, invites contemplation. Balance, delicacy and whimsy characterize almost all the work. None of Calder's circus creations—his elaborate diorama-like assemblages of movable circus characters and props—are on view here, but his fascination with the interaction and shapes of the circus informs almost all his creations. Calder was also an artist of his time, and it comes as no surprise that he took ideas from the shape-changing work of abstract painters and sculptors. His strength comes in how he created his own voice and style, never wavering from it through hundreds of

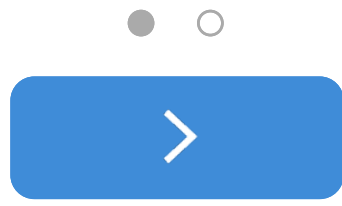


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commissions (some incredible varied, like his out-sized design work that appeared on McDonnell Douglas DC-8 aircraft in the 1960s). That consistency also points out the shortcomings in Calder's work. No single work stands out. No sense of growth emerges. No changes, not social, political or personal, can be investigated in these pieces. Calder was Calder. His inspiration came from nature, in the largest sense—nature including the cosmos. His mobiles could be any planetary system, and his stables and public sculptures could be any enormous tree, dinosaur or mountainside. With so many cluttered and

over-explained exhibitions on view these days, the quiet and expanse of this show makes for a welcome antidote. The work is simple, the exhibition likewise. (One quibble: fix the music. Perfectly appropriate piped-in scores from Eric Satie and Morton Feldman become a preposterous overlap of sound in some places.) Calder's outdoor sculptures, spread throughout the world, are the gold standard for public art: sturdy enough to belong in the elements, but proportionate and appealing to the eye. The moquettes that represent these works are a fascinating glimpse into the artist's feel for the work and its intended environment. So too are the works that show Calder in his most daring—the balancing brinkmanship of "Orange Under Table," or "Fake Snake." But of the mobiles and stables, it must be noted, if you see one, you've seen them all. Color and line vary little; subject matter rarely stimulates. But if you have seen one, you've seen the genuine Alexander Calder. "Calder and Abstraction: From Avant-Garde to Iconic" runs through January 4 at the Peabody Essex Museum, East India Square, Salem. The exhibition is free with museum admission. For more information, and a listing of exhibition related programming, visit www.pem.org or call [978-745-9500](tel:978-745-9500).

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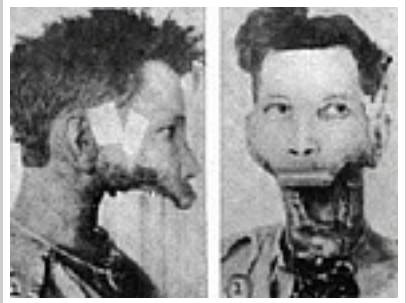
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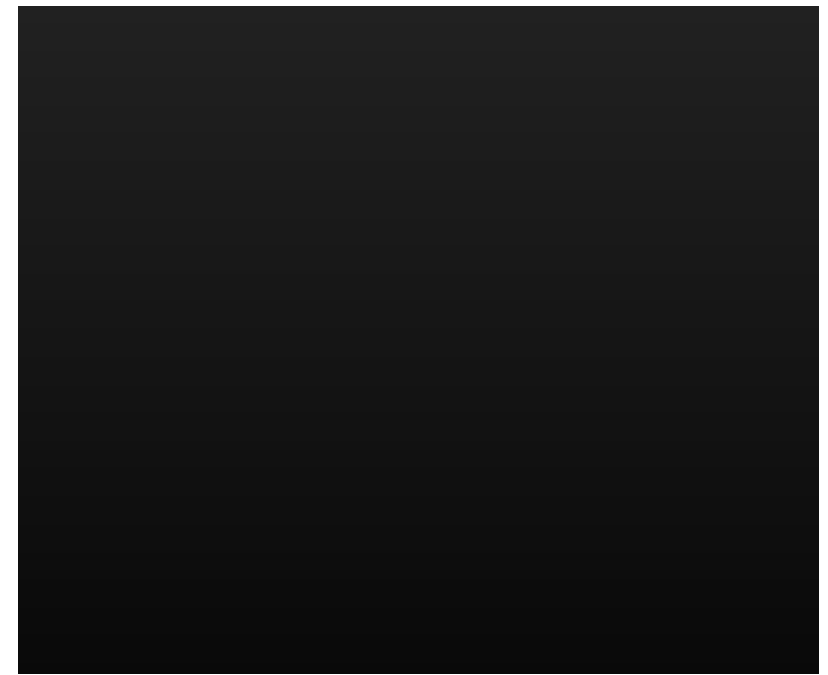
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