A celebration of harmony and elegance

ALEXANDER CALDER: ARTIST AS ENGINEER
Bakalar Sculpture Gallery, Wiesner Building (E13), through April 15.

By MICHELA BOS

Gentle whispering fills the Bakalar Sculpture Gallery, as Alexander Calder's Mobiles slowly and graciously dance to the currents of the air. Shadows on the walls reflect their movements in perfect counterpoint. Playful shapes and vivid primary colors enliven the subdued radience.

The author of this beautiful ballet was one of the main sculptors of this century, hence his inclusion in a series of exhibitions which have already honored Henry Moore and Jacques Lipchitz. As an engineer by education, Calder displayed great innovative skills in the constructional aspects of his output. This applies in particular to the kinetic sculptures which form the body (though by no means all) of his work.

The idea of introducing movement in sculpture did not originate with Calder. It was just one among countless new pathways being investigated in the cauldron of creativity that was Europe in the 'twenties, as well as in Bauhaus circles. But it was Calder who first made it the animating principle of a complete and compelling oeuvre. It was he, moreover, who developed the kinetic sculptures which form the body of his output. This applies in particular to the Torpedo Shape; a motor-driven moving construction of spherical, square and tubular objects connected by metal rods, it is reminiscent of the 18th-century conception of the Universe as a giant clock (with God as the supreme watchmaker).

But Calder's development soon abandoned astronomical metaphors, and drew closer to the living world. Rather than a stability based on mathematical or physical laws, it turned to what might be called the organic form of order — the sense of a collection of disparate parts working together toward a single goal. The animating principle here is teleological, rather than geometrical in nature. It manifests itself most dramatically in those structures in which coherence is most tenuous, the balance of forces most subtle. Thus, paradoxically, the constrained harmony of Calder's earliest art metamorphoses into an evocation of elegance and play.

It is in this domain that Calder was most at his ease. Works like Horizontal Spines (1937-8), Rouge Ondulé (1969) or Balancing Whales (1970) suggest flying birds, swimming fish, rustling leaves or crawling snakes. Delicate but never pretentious devices, they swirl, sway or undulate in eloquent testimony to Nature's rhythm and beauty.

In his later years Calder invented considerable efforts in his monumental Stabiles, of which MITS-Great Sail is a good example. There is of course nothing of the sort in this exhibition — a fact somewhat detrimental to the overall picture emerging from it. Instead, Calder tended to make his most dramatic, grandiose statements from it, as Calder tended to make his more extroverted, grandiose statements precisely in this field. But the 1938 Ruffled-Crested Tower with its airy frame of colored metal rods reflects the Stabiles' eclectic exploration of static equilibrium.

Indeed, it is fortunate for the current show that most of Calder's designs (contrary to those of Henry Moore, the previous subject at the Sculpture Gallery) achieve their aims irrespective of the scale at which they are realized. Rather communicative among each other, they are well-integrated here and well-displayed. Diverse yet united, the present ensemble is truly a section of being, a mirror of the world, a Microcosm.

Calder's Model for a Museum of Modern Art Mobile (1937-8)

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