

Style

Calder's whimsy shows up in wire

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By Jason Edward Kaufman

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There was no decree naming Alexander Calder (1898-1976) the capital's official artist, but walking around the Mall, you'd think there had been. His abstract sheet-metal sculptures are in the National Gallery of Art Sculpture Garden and on the grounds of the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn and American History museums, and a mammoth mobile dominates the atrium of the National Gallery's East Building. An abundance of his works is on display in these museums as well as in the Phillips Collection.

In fact, the first notable modernist public sculpture in town was a Calder. That's the explosive mass of black metal on the corner of Constitution Avenue and 14th Street NW, named "The Gwenfritz" after patron Gwendolyn Cafritz. It was the centerpiece of a fountain created in 1969 outside the National Museum of History and Technology and later dismantled. Now the museum, renamed the National Museum of American History, intends to return the Calder to a reflecting pool planned for the original site, though no date has been set.

And one more bit of D.C. Calder trivia: His last trip was to Washington to fine-tune plans for the massive sculpture now in the atrium of the Hart Senate Office Building. When he returned to New York that evening in 1976, he suffered a heart attack and died.

What made him so popular? Those abstract sheet-metal sculptures from

the 1960s and '70s, and the kinetic mobiles he invented in the 1930s, were sophisticated but not aloof, whimsical but not silly. At a time when modernism was not entirely embraced, their mix of formal intelligence and accessibility appealed to nearly everyone.

It's not surprising to learn that earlier in his career, Calder had invented another sculptural medium: wire used to make three-dimensional drawings in space. Using pliers and his bare hands, he twisted wire and combined it with other materials to create "Calder's Circus," a miniature troupe of acrobats, lion tamers, elephants, clowns and strongmen that he animated in performances in New York and Paris, where he and his wife lived until moving to Connecticut in 1933.

All told, he made a few hundred wire figures before abandoning the medium for abstraction in the 1930s. Among them were several dozen celebrities, athletes and art-world friends that are the main focus of "Calder's Portraits: A New Language" at the National Portrait Gallery.

This exhibition — guest-curated by Barbara Zabel, a professor of art history at Connecticut College — includes some of Calder's portraits in other mediums as well as images of his sitters by other artists, but the main attraction is his wire portraits, most of which were lent by the artist's family foundation.

These radically new kinds of portraits are a breeze to understand and enjoy. Again, it's Calder's blend of invention with accessibility.

Among the subjects are Babe Ruth, Charles Lindbergh, Jimmy Durante, President Calvin Coolidge and other celebrities that the artist portrayed from publicity photographs. There are full-length figures of John D. Rockefeller in knickers swinging a golf club, and tennis star Helen Wills balancing on one leg reaching for a return.

But the majority are heads of artists, dealers and writers in Calder's social circle — Fernand Leger, John Graham and Vanity Fair editor Frank Crowninshield, to name a few. Many were given their portraits as tokens of Calder's friendship.

Some are strikingly accurate — a photograph shows Leger face to face with his portrait by Calder mirroring his profile perfectly. Others are more caricature than likeness, nailing the essentials with a touch of exaggeration that often amused but never was mean-spirited.

Calder's trick was to take a drawing whose lines describe volume in space and render the lines in three dimensions, thus restoring the volume the lines represent. The resulting "drawing in space" is perceptually fascinating because the mind fills in the volume and imagines the mass.

This effect is particularly pronounced in the portrait of composer Edgard Varese, which is suspended high up in the air where some unknown source, possibly an air vent, sends it into a slow spin. As it turns, every instant reveals a new composition, and what's remarkable is that the sense of volume never vanishes. That's true to varying degrees of all the wire sculptures — their contours imply solidity.

Calder's greatest wire portraits are five roughly four-foot-tall full-length figures of Josephine Baker, the exotic American dancer who was the toast of Paris while Calder was there in the late 1920s. The swaying line of her arms and torso, the spiral breasts and the legs crossed in a dance movement came to life when the artist suspended the figures from a string.

One of the four surviving versions was destined for the show but is represented instead by a black-and-white photograph. The label explains that the Calder Foundation pulled the loan in objection to the removal of

David Wojnarowicz's video "A Fire in My Belly" from a recent exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery. The president of the foundation, Alexander Rower, suggested in a letter to Smithsonian Secretary G. Wayne Clough that exhibiting an image of a nude, African American woman was too risky for an institution that "wishes to appease a fringe audience." Fortunately, the piece is a short walk away at the National Gallery, where it is part of an ongoing display of Calder's on long-term loan from the foundation.

Even without Baker, there's a lot to admire, though the selection of objects is confusing. Several sculptures are accompanied by Calder's preparatory line drawings, but most are juxtaposed with caricatures by other artists, taken from the gallery's collection. This desultory miscellany seems like a random assortment of alternative depictions of the sitters. What is needed is a systematic presentation of photographs showing us the faces that Calder translated into wire portraits, but what we get is only occasional photographic comparisons.

There are problems with the installation, as well. Works that would be more interesting activated by moving air are left static. Some are too high up — like a mobile featuring a wire figure of Saul Steinberg trailed by a cloud of black elements — or crammed against a wall, limiting our viewpoints. The pedestals are too low, making it necessary even for people of average height to stoop to see the subject straight on. (The height is not ideal for wheelchair viewing, either.)

But the larger issues have to do with the confused character of the National Portrait Gallery itself. This is an institution where the aesthetic properties of artworks take a back seat to their function as illustration of biography. The whimsical and inventive Calder's struggle in this straitjacket.

And if the gallery's focus is on the sitter, why do wall texts provide such

cursory information about the people Calder portrayed and his relationship to them? The catalogue provides a better overview, indicating that adequate research was available to mount a more colorful and informative exhibition.

We are left with an exhibition that waivers in its attention between Calder's portraits and the "new language" referred to in the title and winds up definitive about neither theme. It seems to reflect not only a lack of clarity on the part of the organizers, but also the schizophrenic character of the National Portrait Gallery, an institution that still needs work on shaping its identity.

Kaufman is an art critic and reporter whose In View blog is hosted by Artinfo.com.

Calder's Portraits: A New Language

through Aug. 14 at the National Portrait Gallery, Eighth and F streets NW. Visit www.npg.si.edu.

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