

The light fantastic

Works that Alexander Calder made during three weeks in India have been reunited. By Jan Dalley

When in 1954 the American sculptor Alexander Calder accepted an invitation from the Sarabhai family to spend some time in Ahmedabad, and to create some work during his stay, he sent a small gift ahead of his arrival. It was a miniature version of one of his constructions – a perfectly balanced abstract just a few inches high, jewel-like, light as gossamer, sure as steel. Its title, “Six Moons over a Mountain”, seems to promise the romance of a continent new to Calder, and it was an eloquent gesture: somewhere between a calling-card and a taste of things to come.

And there was indeed much to come, for during an intense three weeks that Calder and his wife spent in the Le Corbusier buildings of the Sarabhai family compound, where a studio had been set up for him, he created no fewer than nine of his finest sculptures, as well as some jewellery.

Eight of these nine have now been assembled again – with the tiny “Six Moons” at their centre, and a large untitled work from 1952, which the Sarabhai family had already bought – by Pilar Ordovas, in the Mayfair gallery she opened in 2011. After 13 years at Christie’s, where she was international director and deputy chairman, postwar and contemporary art in Europe, and two years as a director of Gagosian Gallery in London, Ordovas decided to go it alone in a venture that mixes curated shows with the commercial, and to work sourcing important pieces for clients. And although she launched her premises only last year, “It has taken me 10 years to do this exhibition,” she says of the current show, *Calder in India*. The works had been shown as a group in Bombay in March 1955, but no proper records

remained from the time, and Ordovas had to put in a decade of painstaking research to locate the works in the various private collections in which they are now held, and reassemble them for this gorgeous show. It is the first time the works have nodded to each other since 1955, and their first trip to the west.

Apart from the family’s patronage of Le Corbusier, they had welcomed visiting artists including Isamu Noguchi, John Cage, Charles Eames, Merce

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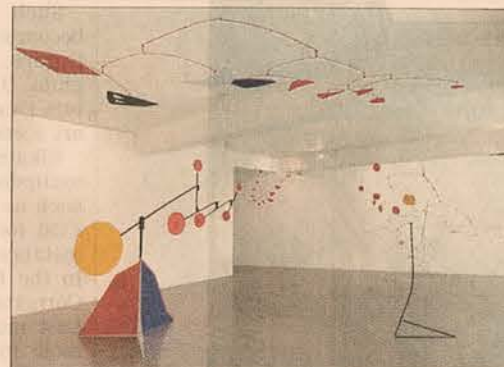
Cunningham, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Rauschenberg, several of whom were friends of Calder too. So the sculptor must have felt himself in a warm creative environment, and a photograph of his burly form with arms happily outstretched in front of a huge elephant gives a clue to how much he relished India.

As working tools for his trip, he said in a letter a few months before his departure, he would take only a single pair of pliers. Even if his temporary Indian studio was well-equipped for his visit, it makes the achievement of these stunning works – in such a short time – even more remarkable. As you enter the London gal-

lery now, the slight breeze from the door sets the delicate structures dancing with that beguiling combination of absolute airiness and absolute solidity that is the mark of the engineer-artist.

Calder’s marriage of elemental forms and playfulness, his brilliant kinetics and the way that his sculptures form and re-form themselves with the tiniest and surest of movements, flirting with their own shadows, mean that reproduction gives only a pale indication of the complexity of this work.

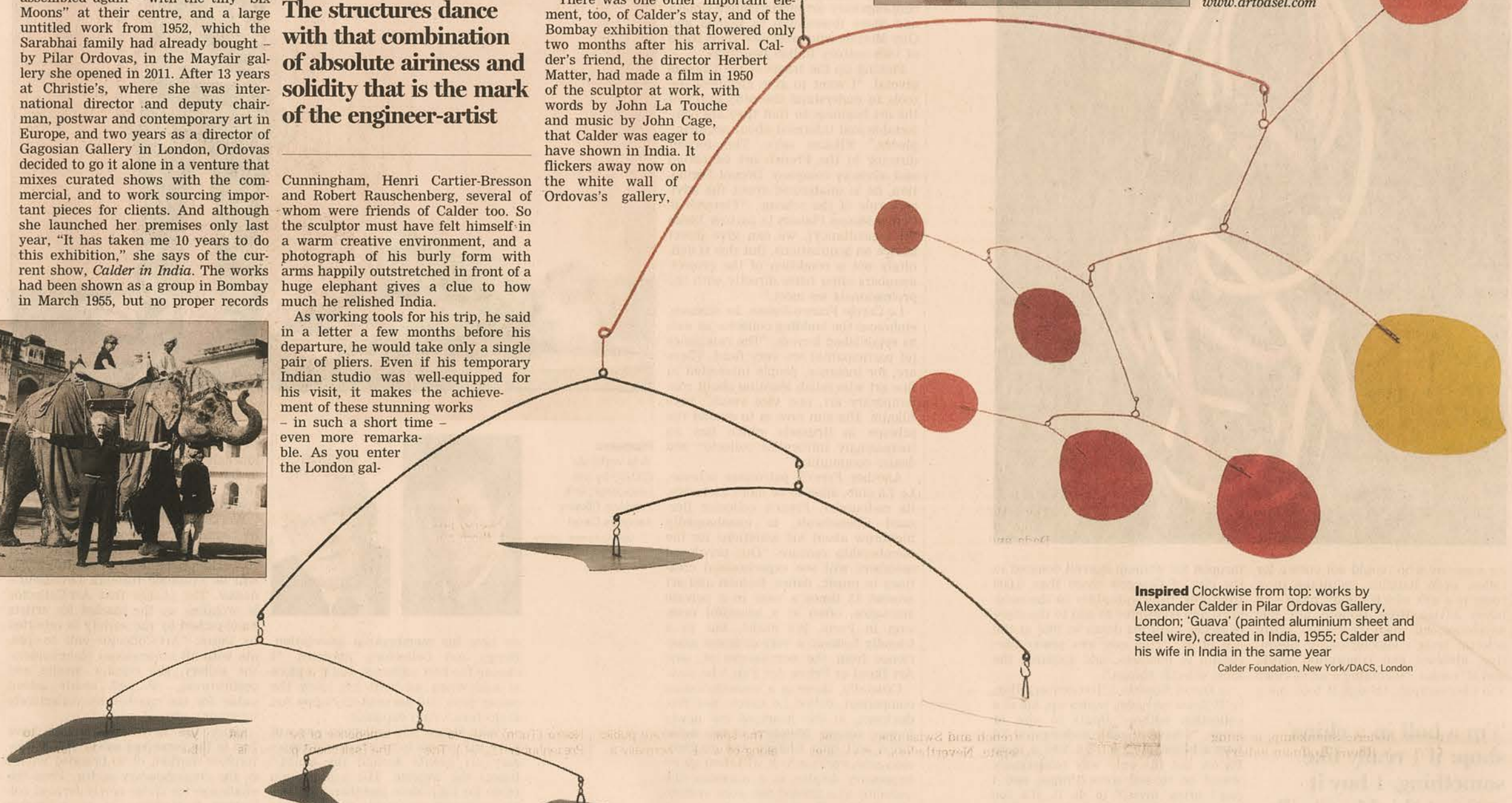
There was one other important element, too, of Calder’s stay, and of the Bombay exhibition that flowered only two months after his arrival. Calder’s friend, the director Herbert Matter, had made a film in 1950 of the sculptor at work, with words by John La Touche and music by John Cage, that Calder was eager to have shown in India. It flickers away now on the white wall of Ordovas’s gallery,



a mesmerising sequence of thick workmanlike hands clipping and bending the metal into the lightest of forms.

According to Ordovas, none of these pieces is for sale. But their magic might well send would-be collectors off in pursuit of this now very highly prized work. At Art Basel, maybe, where L&M Arts of New York is offering Calder’s “The Black Rocker” (1945).

www.ordovasart.com
www.artbasel.com



Inspired Clockwise from top: works by Alexander Calder in Pilar Ordovas Gallery, London; ‘Guava’ (painted aluminium sheet and steel wire), created in India, 1955; Calder and his wife in India in the same year

Calder Foundation, New York/DACS, London