



## ART

## Movers and shakers

Alastair Smart

CALDER IN INDIA | ★★★★★  
Ordovas, to Aug 3 | ordovasart.com; 020 7287 5013

Most reviews of Alexander Calder exhibitions – including, I’m sad to say, this one – begin with the cliché that his work appeals to the inner child in us all. The American’s trademark “mobile” sculptures – free-moving sheet-metal shapes, hanging by wires from the ceiling – have duly inspired the decoration of a zillion babies’ cribs.

The most appealing thing about Calder for me, though, was his response to the question of how he knew when a work of his was finished. “When it’s dinnertime,” he stressed, a man plainly with his priorities right and with none of the humourless, high-minded seriousness we associate with most abstract artists.

Always carrying pairs of pliers and small shears in his back pocket, Calder (1898-1976) was famous for knocking out work at will. And even though a big bear of a man himself, he had a levity of purpose reflected in the levity of his sculptures.

He might seem an unlikely figure, then, to have revolutionised sculpture as we know it, but that he undoubtedly did. For millennia, artists had been tantalised by the seeming impossibility

of making sculpture that moved: think of Myron’s *Discobolus* (Discus-Thrower) from ancient Greece, coiled like a spring and poised to swivel into action, yet ultimately still just a statue immobile.

Then along came Calder to, literally, get things moving – his sculptures rippling gently or shaking briskly, depending on the air current. A new exhibition at Ordovas Gallery on London’s Savile Row features all 10 pieces he made during a little-known trip to India in 1955, and so delicately do they hover over our heads, the mind boggles as to how ever they survived monsoon season.

At first glance, there’s little to link the works directly to where they were made, or to suggest any difference from Calder’s creations in his home studio back in Connecticut. Slowly, though, Indian connotations do present themselves. Firstly, the exotic-sounding titles like *Guava* and *Sumac*. The roundish shapes hanging from the former thus begin to suggest the fruits of an Indian guava tree. Likewise, the wire and leaf-shapes of the latter recall, in resplendent red, the stem and foliage of a local sumac tree.

In turn, *Happy Family* – eight white discs hanging amid the larger forms of a smiling sun and Indian elephant – is a tribute

to Calder’s hosts in the subcontinent, Ambalal and Saraladevi Sarabhai, and their eight children.

Once you start seeing Indian allusions in Calder’s work, suddenly it becomes hard to stop. Thus *Franji Pani*, one of his few “stable” sculptures here (hanging up from a base on the floor), reminded me – with its humanoid stem and two wavy “arms” – of Indian spin-bowling great, Subhash Gupte, delivering a deadly googly.

The cosmic shapes of mobiles like *White Moon*, meanwhile, set me wondering about the influence of Mughal astronomical devices at the Jantar Mantar observatories across north India.

The truth is, though, of course, that Calder had already made a series called *Constellations* long before his sojourn in India. And much as we do with those of his old pal Joan Miró, we freely interpret Calder’s playful, semi-abstract forms as whatsoever we wish.

The Sarabhai family lived in the Gujarati city of Ahmedabad, dubbed “the Manchester of the East” in the days of Empire for its thriving textiles industry. The Sarabhais, indeed, were a major textiles dynasty – as well as keen artistic patrons. After Partition in 1947, in a climate of new beginnings, fresh possibility and forging a whole nation’s future identity, they welcomed to Ahmedabad the likes of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Isamu Noguchi,

**HINT OF EXOTICISM** 1955’s ‘Guava’ suggests the hanging fruit of the Indian guava tree

Le Corbusier (who designed five buildings there), dance-maker Merce Cunningham and composer John Cage (whose infamous silent piece 4’33 was inspired by the Sarabhais’ musician daughter, Gita, who insisted music’s purpose was “to quiet the mind”).

Calder stayed on the Sarabhai estate for three weeks, and his diary entries from the period make for a cracklingly entertaining read. We find him coming to terms with the spicy food, prohibition of alcohol, and use of cow dung for home flooring.

On one embarrassing occasion, after the ravenous Calder had overindulged on Mrs Sarabhai’s pani puris, “the toilet paper that they had imported [especially for him] plugged the small-gauge Indian pipes and, finally, had to be dug out”. It’s strangely refreshing to see the vagaries of Indian living lay even a rich and famous artist low.

Gallery owner, Pilar Ordovas, scoured the world for these sculptures, and she’s arranged them to harmonious and seamless effect. With the combination of light air-con and visitors walking around, the sculptures move together as one, reminiscent of the Ganges rolling its holy way towards the Bay of Bengal.

OK, sorry, I’m at it again, with the spurious Indian connections. Go see this fine little show yourself and come up with some of your own.

Andrew Graham-Dixon is away

## ON NOW

**1 Summer Exhibition** Royal Academy, to Aug 12; royalacademy.org.uk 020 7300 8000/*World’s biggest open-submission art show, now in 244th year* **2 David Nash** Kew Gardens, to Apr 2013; kew.org 0208 332 5655/*The master of wood-sculpture is let loose in the Gardens* **3 Invisible** Hayward, Tues to Aug 5; southbankcentre.co.uk 0844 875 0073/*Art exploring the concept of invisibility. The best show you’ll never see*

Tickets from only £22

18 June – 8 July

ENGLISH NATIONAL OPERA  
LIVE AT THE LONDON COLISEUM  
www.eno.org · 020 7845 9300