Art of Our Time

Selections from the Ulrich Museum of Art

Wichita State University

Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey

With contributions by

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Photo-essay by Larry Schwarm

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Two critical leaders of modernism, Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, produced work at the end of their careers that elegantly encapsulated their individual aesthetic innovations. Similarly, The Big Wheel, made six years before the artist died, echoes Alexander Calder’s earlier work while also reflecting his creative evolution over time.

Calder’s initial fame depended largely upon his Cirque Calder, a traveling re-creation of a circus made of leather, wire, cloth, and other found materials. When he introduced the work, in Paris in 1926, the artist manipulated his fanciful figures so that they seemed to perform an impromptu big-top routine, which might last as long as two hours. Encouraged by this initial success, he made more wire sculptures, some of which represented celebrities such as the expatriated American entertainer Josephine Baker. These caricatures in wire are at once spontaneous and studied, witty and serious.

The bold colors and patterns of The Big Wheel vividly evoke the sense of standing inside a large circus tent and looking up. The white circle represents the hole at the top, and the swirled patterns in red, blue, gold, and black are the sewn-together tent sections. The black borders of the colored sections, reminiscent of the wire Calder used in numerous sculptures, animate the work, rather like spokes in a wheel.

Calder frequently incorporated actual motion into the kinetic sculptures he began fashioning in 1931. Initially, they moved in response to a hand crank or a small motor. By the time they were known as mobiles, Calder was constructing them so that their motion depended upon the circulation of air. Consisting of biomorphic, flat forms attached to wire and then to a metal spine, these randomly moving sculptures made no reference to the circus and seemed unrelated to the artist’s earlier subject matter. The abstract quality of The Big Wheel, as well as the evocation of movement implied by both the title and the swirling forms, recall his kinetic sculptures.

Calder also created several sculptures for public buildings and outdoor spaces; these were so large that neither architecture nor nature could overshadow his work. Typically, he welded boldly colored, unadorned simple shapes onto a metal framework. The same shapes and colors he favored for his mobiles and sculptures are the basis for the two-dimensional Big Wheel.

Timothy R. Rodgers
About the Contributors

Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s (2002), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. Nelson holds the Callen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, Living to Tell (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, Bound, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former New York Times photography critic Vicky Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series American Photography: A Century of Images.

Larry Schwarm is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, On Fire: Larry Schwarm, won the Honickman Book Award and Prize.


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