

THE ART OF CALDER: WHAT A LARK!

Modern art has become a sadly solemn affair. So solemn that when a sacred cow moos, we all applaud, but when a lark sings we wonder if it isn't being just a tiny bit frivolous.

Alexander Calder is definitely a lark. He is gay, carefree, spontaneous. He has no message and no pretensions. The present exhibition of his sculptures and mobiles at the Tate Gallery should give you the sort of kick you haven't had since your very first visit to a toy fair.

As a matter of fact, the earliest of all the exhibits are toys. In Paris around 1926 Calder was constructing the most engaging imaginable toys out of wire and corks and little bits of wood.

On the strength of these a friend suggested that he make a whole figure out of wire. The result was his marvellous, jiggling, jazzy figure of Josephine Baker, of which one could truly say: "La donna è un mobile."

Between 1926 and 1932 Calder gradually freed his art from figurative references.

RHYTHM

He began to make animated sculptures from spheres and discs, which he painted blue, red and black and which moved in a patterned rhythm controlled by simple mechanical devices.

Calder himself was not completely satisfied with them. Their movement was too rigid, too repetitive. He remembered the Chinese wind-bells he had known during his San Francisco childhood, and how a gust of air would set them tinkling.

Surely he could make sculp-

tures on the same principle, delicately balanced so that the slightest movement in the air would set them trembling or rotating?

All the skill which he had once lavished on toys and puppets was now harnessed to the creation of subtle floating patterns. With the nimbleness of the master craftsman he gave wire and shapes cut from sheet metal a life of their own.

SURREALIST

The titles which his mobiles bear are always perfectly appropriate, even when they sound most surrealist. Cockatoo catches exactly the movement of a proud crested bird. Shower-bath is humorously suggestive of the moment that the shower is turned on. Bleriot, a suspended construction based upon horizontal rods, looks like the ghost of an early bi-plane.

Unfortunately, his work does not show to advantage in the Tate Gallery. It needs space, strong light and open windows.

Many of his mobiles are very large, and it would not surprise me if during this exhibition a number of visitors get clocked on the back of the head by a wandering disc of sheet metal. (I wonder why he hasn't christened one of his mobiles Flying Saucer?) Crowded together in those bleak official galleries they induce anything but calm in the spectator.

It may be that serious sculptors should not aim to delight and amuse. It may be that there is really more to sacred cows than to skylarks. But contemplating the work of Calder, so pure and graceful and serene, I would rather believe, with Blake, that "the lark is a mighty angel."

David Carritt