

FRIEZE

Richard Tuttle's Ode to Alexander Calder

The artist discusses his recent exhibitions at Pace and David Kordansky in Los Angeles dedicated to and inspired by the late modernist sculptor

BY JONATHAN GRIFFIN IN INTERVIEWS | 08 FEB 23



Richard Tuttle's work in sculpture, drawing, installation and poetry is delicate and attenuated, rarely exceeding the bounds of carefully measured economy. Subtlety and ambivalence have long defined his oeuvre. This month in Los Angeles, however, he is the architect of something close to a grandiose gesture. 'Calder/Tuttle: Tentative' spans two neighbouring galleries, David Kordansky Gallery and Pace Gallery, and platforms a conversation between two artists and two bodies of work, over eight decades apart.

At Pace, Tuttle has curated an exhibition of works by Alexander Calder, all from 1939, creating sculptural 'pavilions' (as he terms them) for a selection of mobiles, stables and works on paper. At Kordansky, Tuttle presents two series, including a suite of drawings titled 'Calder Corrected' (2022) which respond critically to problems that Tuttle identifies in Calder's work. A series of joyous wall-mounted painted paper constructions, barely held together with tape, glue and T-pins, is titled 'Black Light' (2021).

Tuttle's pavilions at Pace are built from eight- by four-foot sheets of MDF, painted white and hinged to form polygonal bowers. They frame and shelter Calder's sculptures in large, almost ungainly structures that seem at odds with the late modernist's black-painted, organic outlines. Confluences slowly emerge, however. Both artists use the history and present of their work, the way it was assembled and the manner in which it is held together, to open up glimpses into its future – its stability and its potential for movement. I spoke to Tuttle, as we walked around these pavilions and, later, across La Brea Avenue in the galleries at Kordansky. We began by considering an untitled mobile – the only ceiling-hung work in the exhibition – in which three wire fish-like forms are suspended from horizontal rods.



Richard Tuttle, *Black Light #19*, 2021, paper, watercolour, tape, glue, graphite, and t-pins, 76.2 × 49.5 × 5.1 cm. Courtesy: Pace Gallery and David Kordansky Gallery; photograph: Richard Gary

Jonathan Griffin When did Calder enter the conversation around your work? Despite your early use of wire, I've never read a reference to him in any of the literature about you.

Richard Tuttle I dismissed Calder, early on. The reason, I think, was this whole question of the vertical. I mean, you can't do *that* sculpturally [*gesturing to the mobile*] without coming into the world of the vertical. What are you *saying* about the world of the vertical? For some reason, I knew from when I was a little kid that my life required a metaphor for nature. I finally did find that metaphor, and it involved the vertical line. What I found so important was that there is no way in this world you can make a perfect vertical line. But you can *imagine* a perfect vertical, in your mind. In Calder's case – and this is one of my objections – I think he took the cheap way out. My issue here is that what he wants to give us depends on a vertical that could go infinitely up and infinitely down. But it comes to a stop.

JG Did that problem inspire the 'Calder Corrected' drawings, which are structured by the meeting of two sheets of paper at their centre?

RT Yes. In those drawings, even though the paper comes to an end, the concept of the vertical that you see right in front of your eyes *does* extend infinitely up and down.

JG What's imperfect about Calder's verticals?

RT Well, look up there, and you see this eyelet, right?



Richard Tuttle, *Calder Corrected, 5*, 2022, watercolour and pencil on paper, 35.6 × 55.9 cm. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery; photograph: Elon Schoenholz

JG You see the beginning and the end of the string.

RT I don't know if you ever wondered, as a kid, when you looked up at the sky. You've been told that the universe is endless. How does the blue sky that you see connect with this endless universe? Does it blend? Does it stop? And then there's all our ideas of deity, of Zeus up on Olympus, and God in heaven. There's a lot of stuff up there, you know, that's important for people. You just can't put an eyelet in there and say, it's over. Calder's in this awkward position where he's very much a creator of modernism. He's in a position to tell us what modernism is. And then suddenly, he forgets, and he uses modernism how somebody who invented modernism would never have used it.

JG I've always thought one of Calder's strengths is the modernist way he uses rivets, using those engineering solutions as part of the final form, as the composition.

RT I would much rather look at the rivets on the Brooklyn Bridge than I would on a Calder piece. They're alive.

JG So did you choose these works because you had problems with them?

RT No. Mathematically speaking, the body of work is so good that you can't miss. I just went to the foundation, and said I want works from 1939, and they said this is what we have. 1939 was an incredibly creative year for Calder, as the world tumbled into war. One of the most important intentions of this show is to present it in a way that younger artists can be inspired. The Calder market is built as a dead end. As if there's nothing beyond Calder. That's not Calder in my opinion. He's a very generous artist. He's giving you everything he can. He would love it if his work could inspire other generations. These works are 84 years old, but they look absolutely fresh to me.



'Calder/Tuttle: Tentative', 2023, installation view. Courtesy: © 2023 Calder Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photograph: Pace Gallery

JG Last year, at the Bard Graduate Centre, you held an exhibition called 'What is the Object?', where you made furniture and display structures, and visitors could touch the objects on show. Was that informative here?

RT Maybe. I love the form of exhibitions. I think I've learned more from exhibitions than I have from all the books I've read and all the lectures I've attended. What's unique in this show is we can display and protect simultaneously. One of our rules was every Calder work had to be placed beyond an arm's length from the viewer.



'Calder/Tuttle: Tentative', 2023, installation view. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery; photograph: Fredrik Nilsen Studio

JG So, your display – these structures, these pavilions – aside from protecting the work, how do they help us see it?

RT Well, one of the premises behind this exhibition is a question about the individual. Who is the individual, today in this moment of social media confusion? What is individuality, how does one interact with others? It depends on connecting my sense of art with Calder's sense of art. That gets us to the notion that two artists can be one individual. I'd like this show to reveal something about what Calder was trying to tell us about himself.

JG Where do you see yourself in relation to Calder?



'Calder/Tuttle:Tentative', 2023, installation view. Courtesy: © 2023 Calder Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photograph: Pace Gallery

RT I am a person who thinks that art comes from art. There is something about art that is a journey. Calder is part of a lineage of artists who were interested in connecting the ideas of isolation and freedom. His real achievement, his real gift to art, was that he paid attention to shape. In a mobile, it's possible for the mind to isolate one of those shapes. And the more you isolate it, the freer you get. The ironic part is that it's attached, it's not free. This is the most amazing thing, and it's why artists are important in the world: because when you isolate that shape, freedom appears, a certain space appears. And that is the space of abstract expressionist painting. The sacrificial part of Calder is that

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he couldn't do this himself because he was a sculptor, and that space had to be painted. Calder should be celebrated because he changed the definition of painting. But we don't deal with that, because it's such a big jump from sculpture to painting. In my work, right from the beginning, I've pursued something which spans painting and sculpture.

'Calder/Tuttle: Tentative' is on view at Pace and David Kordansky in Los Angeles, until 25 February

Main image: 'Calder/Tuttle: Tentative', 2023, installation view. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery; photograph: Fredrik Nilsen Studio