

Art Out of Darkness

By Phylis Tuchman
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When painter Yves Tanguy died in 1955 at the age of 55, from a cerebral hemorrhage, he was one of the world's better-known Surrealists. Shortly after, the Museum of Modern Art mounted a full-scale retrospective of his work, but it didn't sustain his reputation. Once a leader of the Paris avant-garde, his wide renown receded with the years.

History has been kinder to Alexander Calder, his friend, Connecticut neighbor and contemporary. In just the past few years, the American sculptor has had a slew of surveys devoted to his work ("Calder's Circus," "The Paris Years," "The Surreal Calder" and "Calder Jewelry")-so many that, at first glance, another wouldn't seem immediately necessary.

"Tanguy/Calder: Between Surrealism and Abstraction," at L&M Arts, reunites the two Modernist masters, celebrating their friendship and filling in some crucial gaps. The involving, illuminating exhibition features more than 40 paintings and sculptures primarily executed by the two men during the bleak days of World War II. In one stroke, it rescues a major Surrealist painter from semi-obscurity while also revealing that, amazingly, not every facet of Calder's dynamic career has been investigated.

The two artists, born within 18 months of each other at the turn of the 19th century, were a mismatched pair. Playing the role of Mr. Glum, Tanguy painted anxiety-inducing dreamscapes that furrow the brow. With his future wife, the Surrealist fled his native France for America in 1939. Cast as Mr. Glee, mobilemeister Calder, who was born in 1898, created an animated, colorful art with twirling shapes. He and his spouse had owned a place in Roxbury, Conn., since 1933, and Tanguy settled nearby. For more than a dozen years, the two couples lived 10 miles apart in Litchfield County.

With the exception of a fondness for biomorphic shapes, stylistically, they had little in common. Tanguy's canvases, much influenced by the stone menhirs in Brittany, feature eerie rock formations casting ominous shadows in lunarlike or subterranean settings. The deep space rendered in ethereal tones of rose, pale blue and gray evokes backdrops in sci-fi movies. A slow, methodical artist, Tanguy executed less than 10 paintings a year.

Calder, on the other hand, was a prodigious craftsman who executed art at an astonishing pace. For a brief time during the 1940s, he worked in wood rather than metal, and tethered the resulting works to ceilings or, as in the case of his Constellations series, mounted them high on walls so that gallerygoers would look at them the way they might scan a night sky. Even though he had to shape, carve and sand these wood units, it didn't slow him down. In the blink of an eye in 1943, he fashioned 27 enchanting Constellations, of which five are in the current show. Three quirky, uncharacteristic 1944 bronzes are also featured.

The two artists' works in the show share a poetic stasis. Tanguy's limbolike world seems frozen in time. The Calder's are stopped in place, too. You almost feel the key is in the ignition and the Calder motor is about to be turned on.

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"Tanguy/Calder: Between Surrealism and Abstraction," at L&M Arts, 45 East 78th Street, through July 9, www.lmgallery.com.