

# HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

## The Violent Forms of Alexander Calder And Cady Noland

The dialogue among four works — two by each artist — suggests a dissonant string quartet as each piece asserts its distinctive timbre and range.

James Gibbons | 5 hours ago



Installation view of “Kinetics of Violence: Alexander Calder + Cady Noland” (2017) (all images courtesy Venus Over Manhattan)

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In its inaugural public showing, Alexander Calder's large, late sculpture "Rhombus" (1972), currently on view at the Venus Over Manhattan gallery on Madison Avenue, anchors an exercise in curatorial theater. Curated by Sandra Antelo-Suarez, with the cooperation of Cady Noland, the exhibition *Kinetics of Violence: Alexander Calder + Cady Noland* initiates a dialogue among four works — two by each artist — that one might imagine as a dissonant string quartet, unfolding as each work asserts its distinctive timbre and range. As befits a début, "Rhombus," with its tapering black forms bisected by a moveable red trapezoid, makes the greatest impact. The emphasis often given to sculptural works by positioning them on pedestals is transposed to the gallery's ceiling, which has been roughly torn open above the work, underscoring its power and dynamism. Immediately confronting viewers upon entering the gallery, "Rhombus" defines the relational field orchestrated by the curator.

That field, at least according to the exhibition's conceit, is the arena of violence, specifically the political violence exercised by the State. Noland's "Gibbet" (1993–94), the more forceful of her two included works, is an unambiguous synopsis of the centuries-old American propensity to discipline and punish. A kind of stockade, it is draped with an American flag and suggests, through the holes in the flag's fabric and the absence of one of the fifty stars, that repression committed in the name of the nation is also a self-inflicted mutilation or wound. One can't help but connect the familiar, politically symbolic stars to Calder's small-scale "Constellation" (1943) in the gallery's adjacent room.

To follow such a lead is to assent to the show's desire to place Calder in a more overtly political context than we are often inclined to see him. (At least provisionally: the intimacy of "Constellation," even as it evokes far-off stars, is worlds apart from the inert severity of Noland's piece.) As Antelo-Suarez reminds us, the activism of Calder and his wife Louisa

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during the 1960s and '70s included anti-nuclear and antiwar commitments, with their signatures appearing on a two-page advertisement in the New York Times calling for President Nixon's impeachment in 1972. The visitor can peruse a facsimile of this document and others from Calder in the gallery — and, of course, the reminder of a historical call for impeachment is part of an overall aim to make the show, which intentionally opened on Election Day in November, seem topical. Whatever one thinks of attempts to imbue these works with renewed urgency and relevance, it's a useful thought experiment to nudge our sense of

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Calder in this direction, if only to encourage us not to be complacent in the way we understand his works.

Yet “Rhombus,” the show’s highlight, need not be read as a sculpture about violence or an especially violent sculpture. Antelo-Suarez proposes that its red trapezoidal form, the element that can be activated into motion by a push, is a sort of blade — the blade of the guillotine, even. If so, it’s a fairly lumbering instrument of punishment, moving not with sudden, decisive menace, but with leisurely patience. While it was spinning the form also brought to mind an airplane’s propeller, and, indeed, the show’s press release notes that Calder’s activism should prompt us to recognize his works’ “relationship to military materials and destructive machines.” But at this point my associations wandered elsewhere: not to the technologically advanced machines of aerial bombardment and surveillance, but to a more tentative, experimental, and somewhat charming airborne contraption.

“Rhombus” reminded me of how Calder’s monumental sculptures can be commanding without being imposing, authoritative without being — to use a term suggested by the presumed context of Kinetics of Violence — authoritarian. And within the long, low-ceilinged gallery space, this particular outdoor sculpture communicated not only its durability and solidity, but also a kind of vulnerability. It seemed to need air; the punctured ceiling appeared less a testament to its own capacity for violence and more a sign of the inadequacy of its placement indoors. Given our claustrophobic present moment, a time when politics is sucking the air out of everything else, the show’s most powerful resonance may be this plea for more light and open space, for breathing room.

Kinetics of Violence: Alexander Calder + Cady Noland *continues at Venus Over Manhattan*  
(980 Madison Ave, Upper East Side, Manhattan) *through December 22.*

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