

Introducing Modern Western Art : Movements and Artists
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Lecture – 14
Introspection & Innovations (Giacometti & Calder)

Welcome viewers to MOOCs online course on Introduction to Modern Western Art. In this lecture today we will be looking at two distinctively different sculptors working more or less in the same time, and contributing very meaningfully to the history of modern western sculpture. These two sculptures are Giacometti and Alexander Calder.

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In temperament Giacometti is or belongs to a different philosophical contrast a different approach to art all together whereas, Alexander Calder is an artist who worked very differently not only in terms of ideas, but also in terms of the medium materials and forms.

The first look at Giacometti Alberto Giacometti he who was born in 1901 and died in 1966, the Giacometti sculptures as you can see here and also you can see here the sculptor with a work in progress is or can be characterized as very introspective works.

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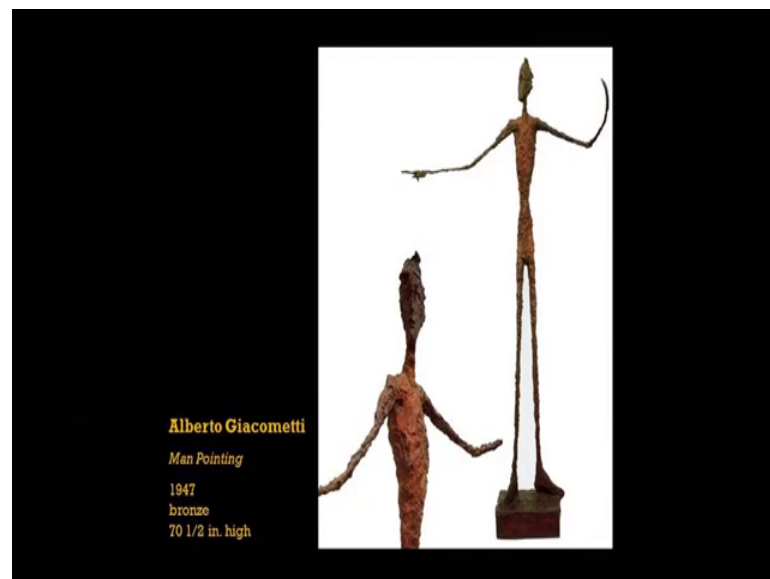
In fact, Alberto Giacometti is famously known for his tick like figures whereas, until Giacometti the entire history of western sculpture including both the tradition and the modern has been full of well bodied figures in sculptures. Whether realistic or not representational or not, sculptures shared in the traditional art as well as modern art a common feature: a feature that implied a solid physical embodiment a kind of volume a kind of solidity of forms abstract or representational.

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In contrast Giacometti was making sculptures devoid of volume; interestingly Giacometti sculptures were never abstract in the sense that in all the sculptures that he has made over a period of many decades in his career as an artist. There is hardly any one single sculpture which does not have any visual reference or any real life reference. Maybe the forms of representation are not realistic, but the real life reference has always been there in Giacometti's works be it a man, or a group of men or a walking man or a dog. It is never difficult to identify or recognize the identity of the form.

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But what makes his sculptures look very removed from the real life references that these sculptures carry is the fact that almost all his sculptures look to use a very commonplace word: emaciated. They look as if these figures have lost their body, lost their flesh, lost their muscles or musculature. As if these figures are left with only a skeleton. Even if I say this that these figures look like as if they are left only with the skeletons; the figures are not skeletal either, but they are devoid of a sense of volume.

Now, interestingly if you look at the postures usually found in Giacometti sculptures or the jesters.

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There isn't much variation; it is more or less limited to either a posture of walking or standing. Or in this case as you can see a man pointing, that is it. Or walking slowly may not be in a hurry.

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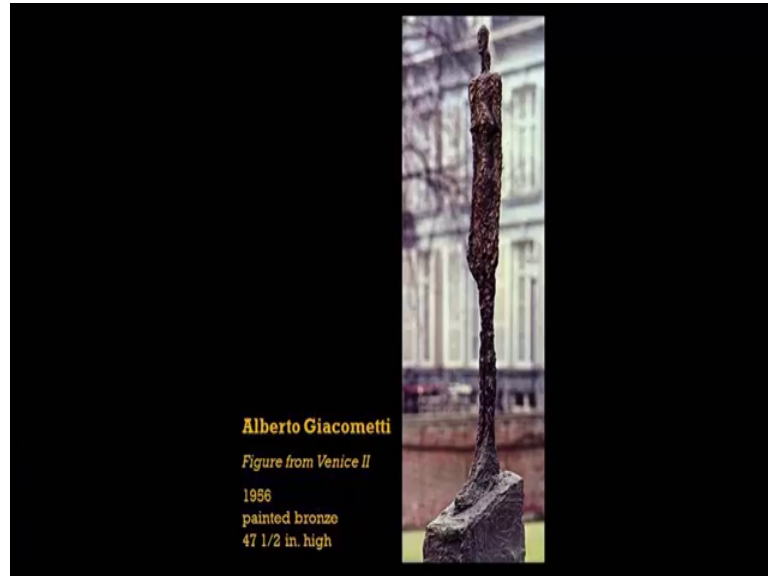
So, postures the range of postures and gestures is pretty limited in Giacometti works.

So, there is a kind of consistency a consistent or a constant feature that is appearing and reappearing in his works like I mean the focus on the subject matter. The focus on the forms, the focus on what he is actually showing is confined to very limited subject

matters. But there is an enormous depth in which he was trying to feel, capture and rebuild his feelings or executive his feelings in sculptural language.

In fact, when you look at the sculptures made by Giacometti one after the other in different postures.

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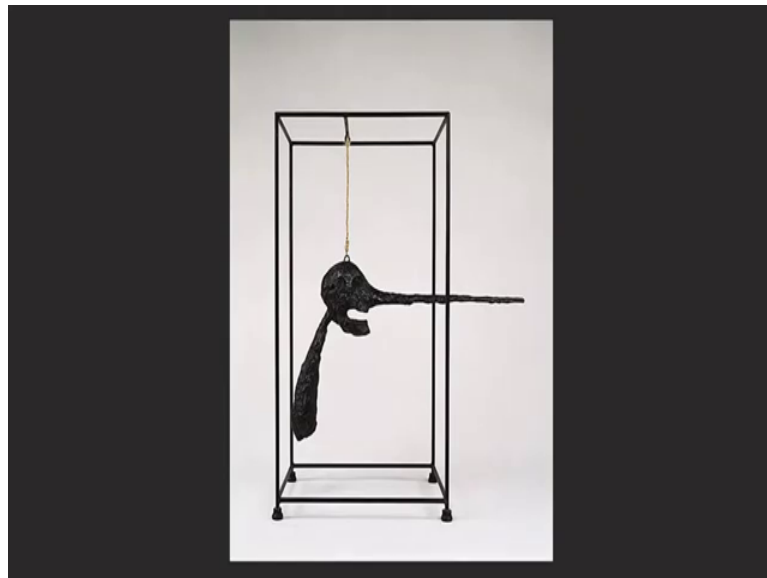
Or sometimes like this one when you look at this sculpture called figure from Venice II, it seems that she does not have any posture at all along standing almost like a tree trunk she rises from the stone this is now in bronze.

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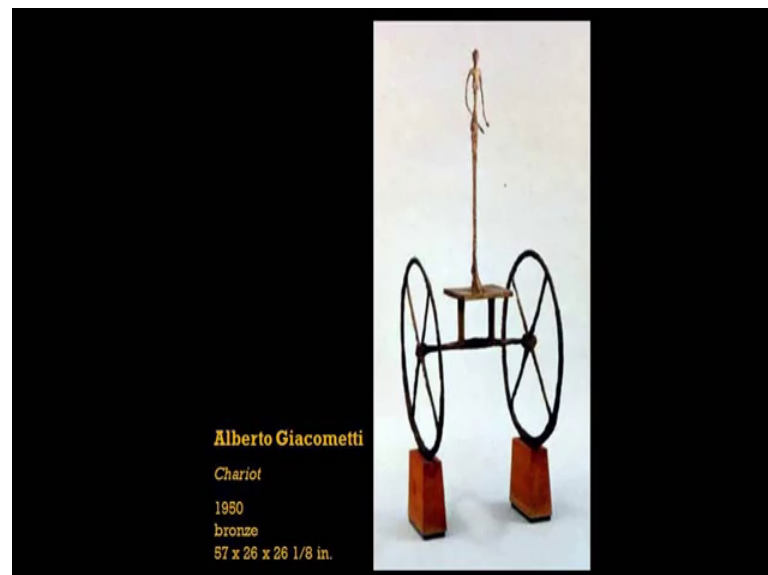


Or for that in matter which is a slightly more literal one like this one a girl beside a table, and the girl does not have a legs hence this work looks a little surreal because there is you can see her arm with the fingers. And they look like that part of her body is separated from the rest.

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Or for that matter This one a caged bird which almost looks like a gun, or a chariot with a long elongated man standing upright on the chariot.

So, when you keep looking at his works you have a feeling that though Giacometti figures look like as if they are completely devoid of the volume.

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They are supposed to occupy they do not even look skeletal either, they appear fall in Giacometti's own works as if they have lost their bodies and they themselves have become their own shadows. Now what is this whole idea of losing once own body losing once own physical body and becoming once own shadow?

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Scholars have written on Giacometti have studied Giacometti's works, a few interviews are available where Giacometti has been asked to explain his works.

Now, what transfers from his works and whatever he has to see about his works, looks that his approach to his work of art is strongly tied up, with a certain philosophy of life, which is out rightly existential in nature. In fact, though there seems to be a certain kind of theme like this work where you see a group of people on a roughly cut tabletop and the people are moving towards each other or moving away from each other. They are extremely thin figures with a lot of space in between them and around them, and there is a title to this work called city square.

The city square is a suggestive title true, but it is not very thematically connected I mean city square is not the theme of this work. The theme perhaps of this work and many other works by Giacometti like this one called cat or even this figures are existential and they are all about a continual and perennial anxiety of human life.

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If physically Giacometti figures have lost their flesh and body, then philosophically they have correspondingly lost their hope, and any ray of hope to live and survive. Probably Giacometti figures are all about a certain existential crisis, characterized by the haunting sense of anxiety chasing human being throughout the First World War, Second World War and even after that.

Giacometti sculptures are not really tragic sculptures. They are not about a certain tragedy a certain kind of tragic predicament, that human being finds themselves in. There about a very a dynamic a kind of situation where human being without a certain sense of volume, where the figures are no more occupying the space that they are supposed to occupy, and hence what is created between the figures and between a figure and around that figure is an enormous and a very disturbing kind of silence. You may very well remember that Brancusi also creates a certain kind of silence in some of his works.

But that silence is created by or through or by applying measurement calculation and an impeccable sense of geometry. In case of geometries Giacometti works the sense of silence and then ed uncanny silence, that we feel along with a certain kind of loneliness. Either is a result of a certain language of representation sculptural representation, which refuses to accumulate any more flesh on it is body, and thereby tends to almost disappear within the environment. Yet leaving behind the shadow of it is existence. And this is

where Giacometti is so different from Brancusi or so different from Henry Moore as well.

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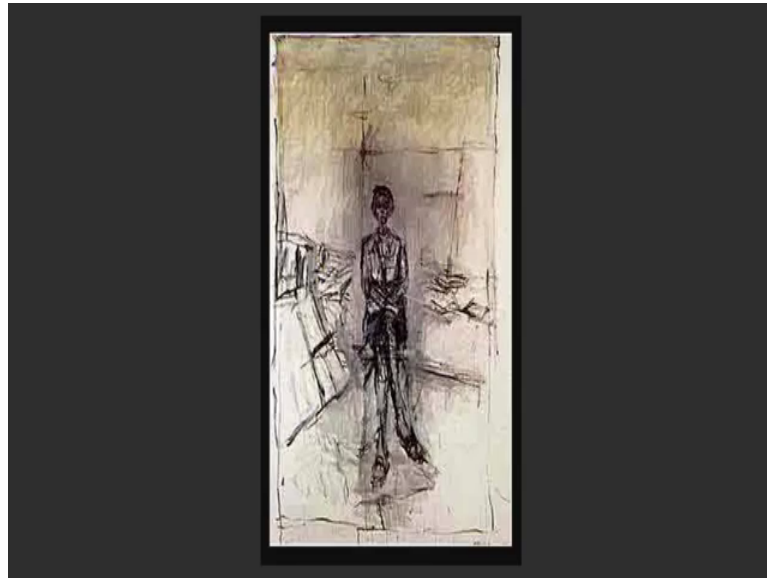
Look at this sculpture, these 3 figures seem to be pretty close to each other. And also close to us the viewers. But the way we are forced to perceive these figures because of their thinness, because of their physical status which is almost on the verge of disappearance, that what we feel is an enormous sense of gap and silence, or for that matter this one.

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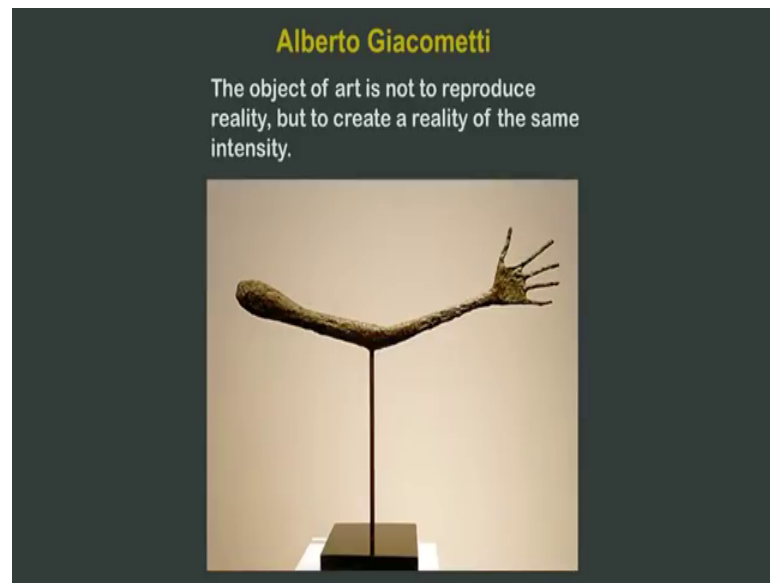
So, thematically and conceptually speaking, Giacometti throughout his life was following this central theme, his most preferred theme of loneliness anxiety and a very disturbing and impending silence all around.

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And that is also evident not only in his sculptures even in his drawings, where even if he is drawing somebody from very close from proximity, the way he places the figure in the given physical context, the figures tends to move away from us. And this is what happens with his sculptures too, even if you look at a Giacometti sculptures from very close. The figures will tend to move away from you, because of it is physicality, it is thinness because of it is apparent tendency to disappear every moment you go close to that figure.

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So, when Alberto Giacometti says that the object of art is not to reproduce reality, but to create a reality of the same intensity, you know what he is talking about? He is talking about a certain intensity of not the form, the physical form the intensity of the formlessness that is the absence of the form. That is the silence, the void and the emptiness that keeps overwhelming us the modern life all the time, in spite of hope sometimes at the corners of our life.

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Alexander Calder on the other hand was a flamboyant artist.

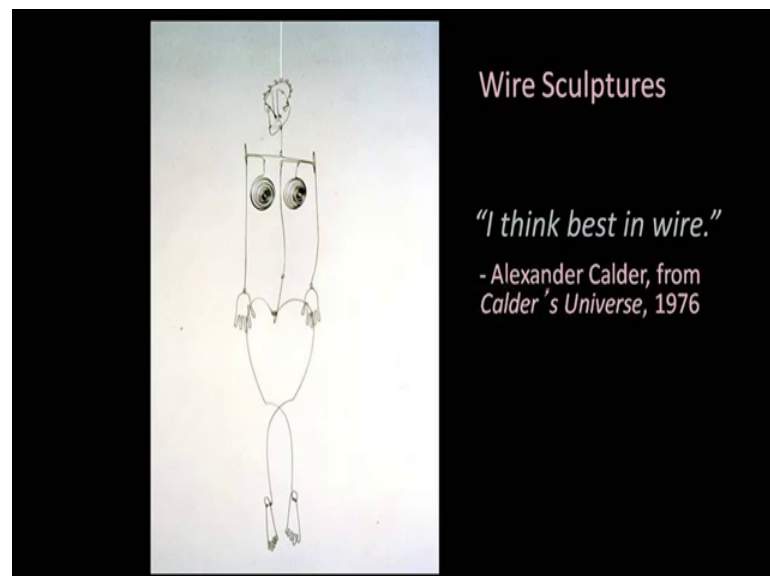
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And he went down to history as the founder of what is now known as mobile sculpture or kinetic sculpture. Of course, we would remember the constructivist artist moholy Nagy, who first created a sculpture with a motor driven apparatus, which would make the sculpture move or rotate.

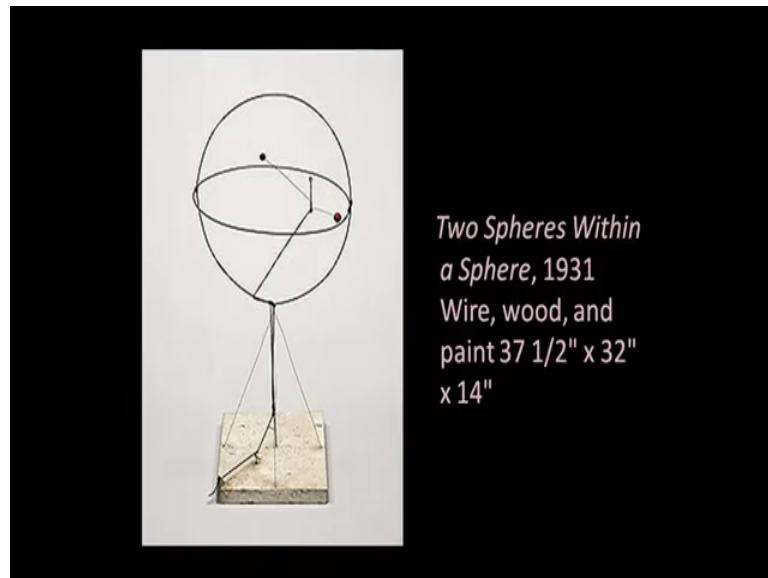
So, in that sense Alexander Calder's is not the inventor of kinetic sculpture, but he is the one who consistently experimented on that. Even when he was young he used to make funny little toy like sculptures like this dog and duck.

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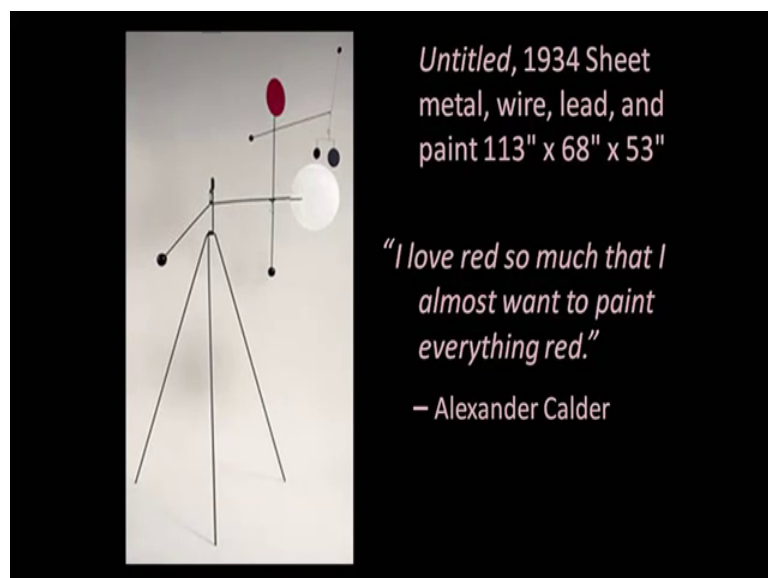
And by the way he had an engineering degree he never went to an art college and as an engineer he always worked loved to work with wire. And once he told that- I think best in wire so as much as he is very well known for his kinetic sculptures, or mobile sculptures; Alexander Calder is also very well known for his wire sculptures. And once he told somebody that whereas, other artists draw with pencil and pen I draw with wire.

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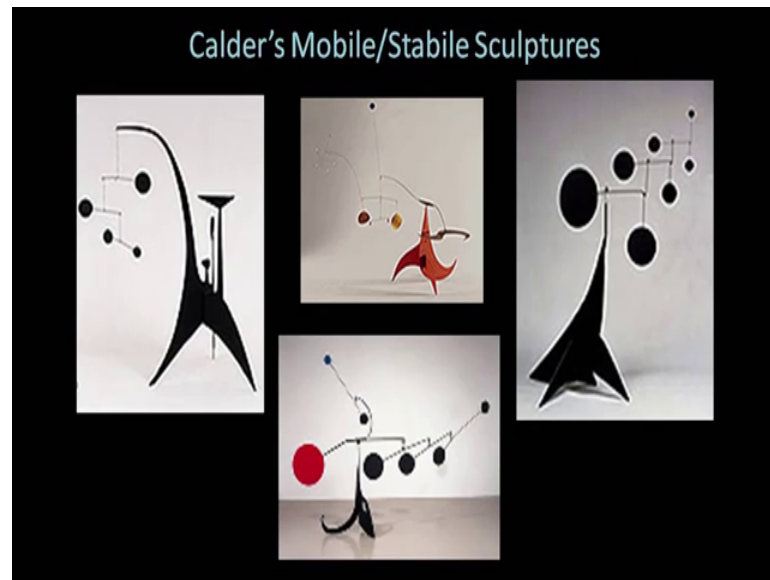
So, these wires sculptures made by Calder would eventually take him to a different concept of sculpture, where he would feel the earth to make the construction move.

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And also he love to paint certain portions of this sculptures. In fact, the colour red became the hallmark of many of his sculptures so much so that Alexander Calder once said I love red so much that I almost want to paint everything red.

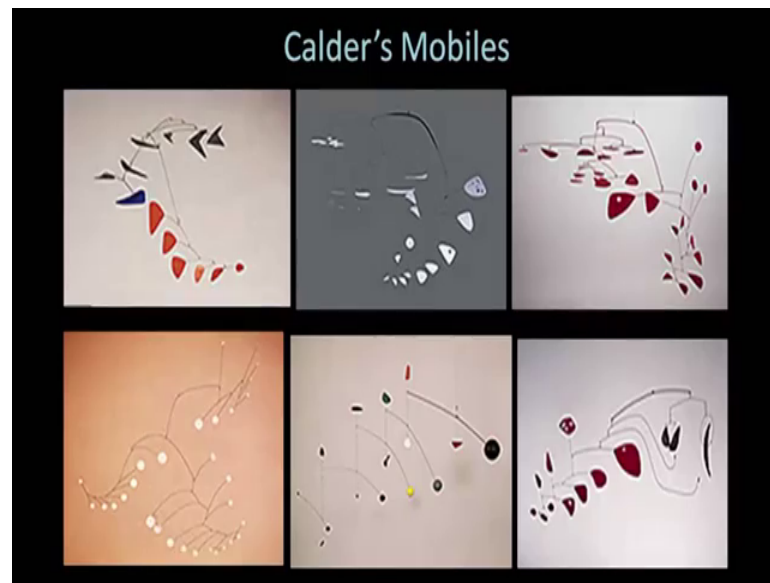
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So, slowly he moves towards sculptures whether they move or not kinetic or static. The fern evokes a certain feeling of movement all the time, because of it is lightness, because of the movement that is embedded in the shapes, the viewer gets this feeling that any moment they are formed may begin to move around up and down or anywhere.

So, with similar forms Calder was doing 2 kinds of sculptures.

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One, that is mobile and another that is stable, stable sculptures. As far as his mobile sculptures are concerned initially she would simply hang them, from above maybe from ceiling if he is displaying it inside a room. Or if is displaying it outside he would hang like a contraption from some rod, and let the natural breeze or wind move this sculpture, and he would construct the sculpture in a way being an engineer.

He would know that very well that a little bit of force from the wind would not only move this sculpture shake this sculpture, but could actually rotate the sculpture using the power of the wind. And his sculptures are usually very lightweight hence very easily these sculptures would get rotated or moved with a little bit of help from the nature like a gush of wind or slight breeze.

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And the other kind of mobile sculpture that he made required a certain kind of mechanized system.

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“The idea of detached bodies floating in space, of different sizes and densities, perhaps of different colors and temperatures, and surrounded and interlarded with wisps of gaseous condition, and some at rest, while others move in peculiar manners, seems to me the ideal source of form.”

- Alexander Calder

Maybe a Moto by using or applying of fitting a moto retro sculptures he moves the sculptures in a mechanical way, but that was a more a kind of orderly movement. Because you are using a motor, but when you are allowing the nature to move the sculpture it is random, arbitrary, surprising and unpredictable.

So, he worked with both these ideas, predictable movement and unpredictable movement. So, the idea of the detached body this is what I am quoting from Alexander Calder. He says that the idea of a detached bodies floating in space of different sizes and densities. Perhaps of different colours and temperatures and surrounded and interlarded with wisps and gaseous condition, and some at rest while others move in peculiar manners seems to me the ideal source of form.

So, a sense of movement sense of floating a sense of kinetic energy was there in his mind as a sculptor right from the beginning.

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So, if you look at it forms you will find that very, very evident, in most of his works then even when Calder's works are not moving, are not kinetically driven the very form of his sculptures evoke the sense of movement evoke the sense of multiple directions.

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Evoke a sense of dynamic feature, whether they are kept outside or inside.

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In fact, some of his sculptures installed outside may be right in front of the building are also very giant sized. Huge in scale they may not have the capacity to be moved anymore, but they still evoke a sense of movement a sense of leaping movement and really speaking a huge size sculpture, outdoor sculpture by Calder can change the environment altogether.

The presence of Alexander Calder sculptures particularly outside is extremely I would not say very heavy, but it is unavoidable. But at the same time it is also very entertaining. You do not really required to do a course on art to appreciate Alexander Calder's works, whole lot of common people public in general are in love with Alexander Calder's works also, because his words are not conceptually or physically overloaded Alexander Calder's works are pretty light hearted.

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Look at this one.

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So, look at his face, the sculpture himself is looking at his own sculptures with a kind of jovial expression, which reveals to us very clearly that he himself they where wanted his sculptures to get philosophically loaded, but he would really wanted to play with his art and he wanted the viewers also to enjoy this playfulness.

Thank you.