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# 'Connecticut Modern: Art, Design, and the Avant-Garde, 1930-1960' Review: A Creative Corridor

An exhibition at the Bruce Museum highlights the group of painters, sculptors, architects and designers—including Alexander Calder and Marcel Breuer—for whom the state proved a fertile artistic ground.

*By Judith H. Dobrzynski*

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Installation view of 'Connecticut Modern' featuring Alexander Calder's 'Big Bird' (1937) PHOTO: PATRICK SIKES

*Greenwich, Conn.*

For a curator in search of a compelling exhibition, there's little better than a fresh, revealing storyline, a cast of artists both well-known and not, and art to substantiate the narrative. That's exactly what the Bruce Museum has in "Connecticut Modern: Art, Design, and the Avant-Garde, 1930-1960."

As told by independent curator Kenneth E. Silver, a corridor in the state's southwest, from New Canaan to Hartford, attracted a critical mass of artists

including Alexander Calder, Louise Bourgeois, Marcel Breuer, Yves Tanguy and Kay Sage, among others. Arthur Everett “Chick” Austin—the pioneering director of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, who organized the first show in an American museum of Surrealism and Picasso’s first retrospective in the U.S.—completed the nexus, heralding their work. Over three decades, their lives intertwined socially and artistically, making these scenic acres fertile ground for the furthering of American Surrealism, Magical Realism, Dada and Midcentury Modern architecture and design.

Other than its natural charm, Connecticut possessed no special artistic elixir. As the wall texts make clear, practicalities created this “laboratory of artistic modernity.” The towns these artists inhabited were close to New York City, the capital of the art market, and the state’s property was cheap, depressed by the exit of agriculture to the west and diminished again by the 1929 Wall Street crash and Great Depression. The darkening mood in 1930s Europe, economically and politically, prompted many artists there to flee, with some settling in Connecticut.



Installation view featuring Calder’s ‘Yucca’ (1941) PHOTO: PATRICK SIKES

Installed loosely by theme and geography—clustering works by artists who lived near each other—the exhibition comprises nearly 85 works, photographs and documents. Calder, who moved to Roxbury in 1933 after many years in Paris, emerges as a connector and an innovator, with sculptures appearing throughout the show. He was already well-established but, in Connecticut, he gives nature a more prominent role in his works. Wanting to activate his mobiles, he harnessed

the wind to move the colored discs of his outdoor, free-standing “Red, White, Black, and Brass” (1934). He devised the playful, red-and-black, seven-foot stabile “Big Bird” (1937) and “Yucca” (1941), whose sharp leaves are leavened by a mobile of small flowers floating above. And he created several snow mobiles, like “Roxbury Flurry” (1946), a gathering of fluttering white discs inspired by a blizzard, poetically installed here against a blue-gray, winter-sky wall.



Yves Tanguy's 'There, Motion Has Not Yet Ceased' (1945) PHOTO: ESTATE OF YVES TANGUY / ARS, N.Y.

In nearby Woodbury, French-born surrealist Tanguy felt both his mood and palette lighten, with his once gray “mindscape” now incorporating color, as in “There, Motion Has Not Yet Ceased” (1945). Sage, his American wife, thrived there too: Her brand of Surrealism, more figurative than his, produced one of the most ingenious, if nearly inscrutable, pieces in the show: “Pour Yves” (undated), five watercolor-and-collage landscapes, sometimes bright with blue sky, sometimes duller, each with cutouts, displayed vertically in a row, inches apart, in a series—like a peep show.

Several artists acknowledge Calder, either inspired by him, as in David Hare’s whimsical “Sun, Clouds, Mountain” (c. 1952) landscape sculpture, or referring to him. Peter Blume’s painting “The Italian Straw Hat” (1952) intriguingly marries Surrealism with Precisionism and a dash of New England folk art—and incorporates both a Calder mobile and an old-style, made-in-Connecticut Hitchcock chair. And Paul Cadmus’s crystalline “Inventor” (1946) includes a mobile of shells and feathers that, while never something Calder would have made, nonetheless pays him homage.

The exhibition devotes a section to architecture and design, noting the followers drawn to Connecticut by Breuer. Along with models of the cantilevered glass-and-stone house Breuer built for himself in New Canaan and Philip Johnson’s



'Cherner armchair' (1958), designed by Norman Cherner PHOTO: CHERNER CHAIR COMPANY

famously transparent Glass House (both 1947-48), visitors will see three studies for the "Homage to the Square" series by Josef Albers, who injected Bauhaus style into the Yale department of design, and Anni Albers's geometric weaving "Two" (1952). The quintessentially modernist, bentwood "Cherner armchair" (1958) rests beside Norman Rockwell's cover for a 1961 Saturday Evening Post, "Artist at Work," that depicts the chair. Nice touch.

Austin, who Mr. Silver says was one of "the essential links in the Connecticut visual arts network"

(along with Calder and Breuer), is hardest to grasp. Not an artist, he comes through in documents and art made for him, including a catalog for his Surrealism show, "Newer Super-Realism" (1931), and Calder's funny, figurative collage (1936) thanking Austin for including him in the Atheneum's Hartford Festival. Pavel Tchelitchew, who lived in Weston, memorialized Austin wearing a red top hat and jacket over white trousers in a winsome watercolor, "Ring Master (Mr. Austin)" (1936), made for a museum gala. And Arshile Gorky, who on occasion stayed in the area, clearly perused the catalog for Austin's 1934 Picasso show. He bracketed the list of lenders (including Pierre Matisse and Averell Harriman) with two elongated figure drawings.

The exhibition also features the collectors and sometime artists Hilla Rebay, the first director of the Guggenheim Museum, and Katherine Dreier, founder of the Société Anonyme, plus important dealers like Julian Levy, who championed Surrealism. It concludes with a coda of works by the likes of Helen Frankenthaler and Jasper Johns, a reminder that Connecticut creativity continued past 1960.

The value of "Connecticut Modern" goes beyond the artworks it displays. With its plentiful photographs, documents, cogent wall labels and catalog, it adds up

to a sociological exposition as much as a visual one—and that's its real strength.

—*Ms. Dobrzynski writes about art for the Journal and other publications.*