

# Approximations of Perfection

Alexander S. C. Rower

My grandfather, writing about his work in 1943, described the difficulty of translating abstract intuitions into physical sculptures. He believed that he had to accept approximation—it was impossible to be absolute about one’s creative powers—because the artist “cannot see, or even conceive of a thing from all possible points of view, simultaneously. While he perfects the front, the side, or rear may be weak; then while he strengthens the other facade he may be weakening that originally the best. There is no end to this. To finish the work he must approximate.”<sup>1</sup> Calder’s quest for the organic, unpredictable growth of sculpture is splendidly expressed in the exhibition *Calder: Monumental* at Denver Botanic Gardens, where Calder’s stabiles and mobiles—approximations of perfection—are set within an approximation of nature.

In a botanical garden, nature is at once compelling and quixotic. As part of a concerted effort, flora is made subservient to man, coaxed into blooming at intervals in curated groupings. At Denver Botanic Gardens, as nature unfolds through the seasons, visitors will have the opportunity to experience Calder’s sculpture in all its expansive diversity. They will not be passive witnesses to some steel statuary. They will be actively engaging—viscerally confronting—energized geometry and equally energized voids: a perpetual unfolding of lines and spaces in vibrating resonance. Frequent visits to the exhibition should prove enormously gratifying, with Calder’s sculptural forms and nature’s botanical forms set in a dynamic harmony, full of shifting shadows and exotic juxtapositions. This was precisely the type of experience that Calder wanted people to have with his work—one that’s in the present moment, constantly changing. My grandfather rejected the idea of a work of art as a completed story. He wanted a work of art to be an active event, an evolving circumstance.

Over the course of its six-month run, *Calder: Monumental* will provide visitors with a valuable insight into my grandfather’s sensibility. They will be emboldened; they will be encouraged to commune directly with his sculpture. It is in this unalloyed experience that the complex energy of his work resides. “What I produce is not precisely what I have in mind—but a sort of sketch, a man-made approximation,” wrote Calder. “That others grasp what I have in mind seems unessential, at least as long as they have something else in theirs.”<sup>2</sup>

---

1 Alexander Calder, “À Propos of Measuring a Mobile,” manuscript, Calder Foundation archives, 1943.

2 Alexander Calder, “What Abstract Art Means to Me: Statements by 6 American Artists,” *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* 18, no. 3 (Spring 1951): 8.