



With Revolution On Hold, Vintage Dissent Reawakens In Four NY Shows: Arte Povera; Ashley Bickerton; Kara Walker; Alexander Calder & Cady Noland



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11/24/2017 01:29 pm ET | Updated 19 hours ago

Kinetics of Violence: Alexander Calder and Cady Noland at Venus Over Manhattan

The smallest of the shows, *Kinetics of Violence*, at the brand new Venus Over Manhattan gallery on Madison Avenue, is also the most surprising for bringing together two artists we might not picture in dialogue, given that Cady Noland was born nearly sixty years after Alexander Calder. In fact, Noland's work draws out the political and humanist implications in Calder's work, which, if we accept curator Sandra Antello-Suarez's word, is too eagerly sanitized by art historians, critics and curators as 'formalist', when really his mobiles and stabiles have at least since the Spanish Civil War in 1921 evoked the pathology of international fascism. In fact, until recently art critics and historians hardly if ever disclosed that Calder's kinetic objects and silhouettes were born with and evoked the missiles, propellers, and flying debris of explosions, which he then transferred to his mobiles issued with the mobilizations of World War II, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War. Upon learning this, the old man we thought was a formalist suddenly seems the perfect political chaperon for the woman artist who wore her political radicalism on her sleeve, inside and out.

Antello-Suarez elaborates: "When paired in physical proximity, Calder and Noland

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Alexander Calder, *Rhombus*, metal, 1972. Moved by interaction with the blade. Collection of Calder Foundation.

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construct critical visual and conceptual paradigms for a kinetics of violence that threaten, if not rains down on, whole populations with a general destiny of strategic and metaphorical physical and/or sociological movement.” Any resistance we cling to in digesting this disclosure is likely to drop away when we encounter the show’s centerpiece, Calder’s *Rhombus*. The massive, 1.5-ton, pointed metal artillery-like stabile has been situated in the gallery with the ceiling cut away to accommodate its symbolic “kinetic of decapitation” and which can be manually — and somewhat hazardously — set in motion by the viewer. The work is uncharacteristically violent for a Calder stabile, but according to Antello-Suarez it more adequately embodies the deadly despotism that Calder spent his life both in Europe and the US opposing.

In fact, *Rhombus* was made at the same time that Calder co-published a full, two-page spread in the *New York Times* on May 31 1972: *A Resolution to Impeach Richard Nixon as President of the United States*, which, as an addendum to the sculpture, is represented at the gallery in facsimile.

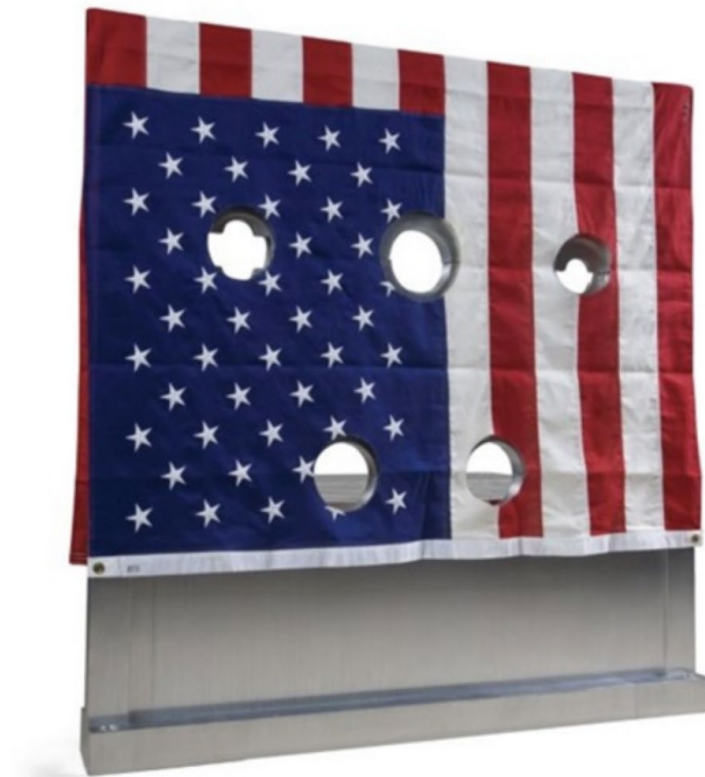
Adjacent to Calder’s *Rhombus*, is Cady Noland’s *Corral Gates*, 1989, a pair of tubular metal gates made with angular supports adjacent to the rectangular construction that the viewer can open and close. Noland supplies a saddle string to define the context. And here is where the pairing of the two artists reveals itself to be particularly ingenious. For just as Calder’s early mobiles and stables evoke the semiotics of missiles, propellers and flying debris of explosions, Noland’s tubular gate and saddle strap together impart signifiers of the overly-romanticized image of “an invisible cowboy”, with “invisible cattle in the conceptual distance”, “with all their imaginable joys and pains, all the whats and whys of a phantom, omnipresent Wild West to question the viewers’ trespassing into a forbidden space”.

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Noland's famous *Gibbet*, 1993, is the show's masterpiece. Composed of a wood and aluminum stockade that mimics minimalist sculpture, except that it is comprised of wood with five round holes cut for the extremities of forcibly-confined human bodies. Draped over the stockade is an American flag with large corresponding holes displacing both stars and stripes for us to peer through. The effect is a semiotic superimposition of contemporary nationalism over an anachronistic medieval brutality that inundated American prisons of war while symbolically foreseeing such scandalous atrocities as Abu Graihb a decade after its making. But even without knowledge of America's dark and covert violence abroad, we all recognize the overtly authoritarian stockade as a public relations effort to terrorize populations into conformity.



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Cady Nolan, *Gibbet (in 2 parts)*, aluminum, wood and fabric, 153 x 142.9 x 20.3 cm. (60.2 x 56.3 x 8 in.).

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How does a stockade embody the kinetics of violence when it arrests the motion of its captive? The work invites us to see ourselves in the place of the prisoner, and in so doing, we come to imagine having to watch the movements of others. In addition to shaming the prisoner in the publically-exposed stockade, the prisoner experiences the free movement of others as a kind of psychological violence inflicted on her or him. A violence echoing in the mind even as s/he shuts her eyes, and thereby is inescapable. In art, the proper mimicry or nuanced signs of trauma, and especially the isolation and framing of these signs by the appropriate political and moral context and presentation, makes the authoritarian inducement of trauma readable to anyone possessed of the most rudimentary recognition of healthy and sick human behaviors. Noland's *Gibbet* excels at conveying the semiotics of human brutality and suppression by presenting no more than the minimal, but no less formidable, restraints required by authority to perpetuate authority.

As an addendum to the show, Antello-Suarez points out in her essay that “even after his death, Calder's art foreboded the kinetics of violence: His much-lauded sculpture, *Bent Propeller*, 1970, which resembled an airplane propeller, was permanently installed at The World Trade Center in Manhattan, where it was destroyed in the carnage of planes flown into the Twin Towers.”

Any one of the shows alone, but especially the four shows together, conveyed that as we excavate beneath the surface of our democracies and global alliances, we find that all manner of malfeasance, hostility, untruth, informs our friends and our enemies alike. Amid the artists' persistence to convey such an array of inhumanity, gratification of desires, sheer ignorance and naked and covert grasps at power alike, one question remains: Can activist art remain activist so long as its marketing, the sustenance of artists and gallerists, depends solely on oligarchical patronage?

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Cady Nolan, *Corral Gates*, 1989, pipes police straps, cattle straps. Collection Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Torino.
