



69. *Two acrobats*, by Alexander Calder. 1929. Wire and wood base, 87.8 by 55 by 16.5 cm. (Menil Collection, Houston; exh. Tate Modern, London).

So this anthology at Tate Modern, facilitated by the Calder Foundation run by the artist's grandson, Alexander S.C. Rower, is a genuine occasion; its concentration on art-as-movement is in fact liberating. It is a kind of visual Garden of Eden, all newly minted, the sexual connotations joyfully beguiling. It is Calder's gift to have made a lifetime of art that can be appreciated and approached on several levels. This is summed up perfectly in the range of work, dating from c.1926 to 1961.

The beginnings are Calder's apparently simple, yet extremely complex, portraits in wire, drawing literally in space: circus figures, acrobats, portraits that encapsulate the sense of play, *homo ludens*, in a serious sense. Calder was captivated by the circus, and made a circus of human and animal figures; it was portable, but because of its height it required five suitcases to move it. With these – Cirque Calder – he would perform all the circus acts, and several films show how wondrous this was. He was to collaborate with and befriend composers and choreographers from John Cage and Virgil Thomson to Martha Graham.

The early work in wire, drawing in space, is remarkably evocative. Twisted pieces of slim metal vividly mimic the flow of a performer's body, an acrobat (Fig.69), the physicality of an animal or a portrait (among others Miró, Léger, Josephine Baker and the composer Varèse) (see photographs of the works pp.92–135). The sense of a spontaneous doodle is actually the result of precise craftsmanship. The early motorised mobiles are now too fragile to be operated; it begs the question as to whether these static relics can be appreciated as Calder's work, or whether

working replicas would give a better sense of what he intended.

A group of painted abstract wall panels with moving coloured shapes in front of them dating from the 1930s are rarely shown and, while fascinating, they seem more like investigations than fully fledged works of art (see photographs of the works pp.161–71). The two large galleries filled with active mobiles are the dazzling centre of the show. Their movements are almost infinite, each based on a precise balancing act. Some mobiles occupy floor space, as they are suspended from floor supports.

In the 1940s and the 1950s the Connecticut landscape was inspirational. Calder's are abstract, but also abstracted. In *Snow Flurry I* (photograph p.197) one can almost feel the soft patter of ice flakes (Fig.67), while *Vertical Foliage* (photograph pp.184–85) is a moving cascade of black leaves. *Red Sticks* (c.1942; photograph p.187; Fig.68), *Descending Spines* (photograph p.208), *Nineteen White Discs* (photograph p.209), *Antennae with White and Blue Dots* (photograph pp.206–07), *Gamma* (photograph pp.194–95) and several untitled works – these mesmerising marvels are a series of moving shapes continually interacting with each other and with light and shadow in unpredictable and unexpected ways. In the next gallery, *Black Widow* (photograph p.199), which the artist gave to the Institute of Architects in São Paulo, is a handsome summary of many of his concerns. His vocabulary of three-dimensional abstraction was nourished by his acute observation, and reminds us that everything is always in flux. Calder has been so embedded – think of mobiles to hang in babies' nurseries – that it is all too easy to take what he did for granted. This exhibition reminds us that beyond his works' charm, his vision refines and sharpens ours. The contradictions apparent in his work – spectacle and chaos, as in his attachment to theatre, dance and the circus, and serenity and calm, as in the sense of watching clouds pass over us, framed in a sunlit sky – and their imaginative resolutions have a universal appeal beyond words.

<sup>1</sup> The quotation is from the very informative website of the Calder Foundation: see [www.calder.org](http://www.calder.org).

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Katharine Kuh in *The Artist's Voice*, New York and Evanston 1962, frequently quoted, e.g. in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Alexander Calder 1898–1976*, Washington (National Gallery of Art) 1998; the current catalogue; the Foundation website.

<sup>3</sup> Catalogue: *Alexander Calder: Performing Sculpture*. Edited by Achim Borchardt-Hume and Anne Coxon, with additional contributions by Penelope Curtis, Marko Daniel, Thomas Fichter, Sérgio Martins, Vassilis Oikonomopoulos, Alexander S.C. Rower and Alex Taylor. 224 pp. incl. 200 col. ills. (Tate Publishing, London, 2015), £35 (HB). ISBN 978-1849-763-967. £24.99 (PB). ISBN 9781-8497-63448. There is a chronological list of each exhibited work with information only as to date, material and current ownership. The well-documented chronology held by the Foundation is reproduced and there is an extensive bibliography; an even more extensive bibliography is available on the Foundation's website.

## Lee Miller

London

by HELENA ANDERSON

LEE MILLER MUST certainly count among the most fascinating twentieth-century photographers. She lived and worked across three continents, made a name for herself on both sides of the camera, inspired some of the great names in modern art history, served as a US war correspondent during the Second World War and produced a ground-breaking photographic *œuvre*. Exhibitions of her work have been shown at the Edinburgh Festival and elsewhere, but no major monographic display of Miller's work has been shown for nearly ten years.<sup>1</sup>

*Lee Miller: A Woman's War* at the **Imperial War Museum, London** (to 24th April), is therefore an important study of this pioneering photographer's work, focusing on her images of women around the time of the Second World War. The unusual decision to overlay a monographic study of Miller's work with the social history of women's evolving roles during the War in Britain and Europe somewhat obscures her own intriguing biography, but the overall effect is nevertheless an engaging exhibition that provides insight into a particular historical moment. The result of curator Hilary Roberts's unfettered access to the Lee Miller Archives is a visually rich exhibition featuring large-format prints of Miller's work alongside paintings and photographs by her artist friends, as well as documents, clothing and other ephemera that illustrate Miller's personal experience of war.

The exhibition is divided into four sections that move chronologically through Miller's life. The first, 'Women before the Second World War', mentions Lee Miller's involvement with the Surrealists before returning to her childhood and moving swiftly through her early career in New York, Paris and



70. *Immgard Seefried, Opera singer, singing an aria from 'Madame Butterfly', Vienna Opera House, Vienna, Austria*, by Lee Miller. Photograph. (Lee Miller Archives, Chiddingfold, East Sussex; exh. Imperial War Museum, London).



71. Anna Leska, Air Transport Auxiliary, Polish pilot flying a spitfire, White Waltham, Berkshire, England, by Lee Miller. 1942. Photograph. (Lee Miller Archives, Chiddingly, East Sussex; exh. Imperial War Museum, London).

Egypt. This formative period, in which Miller began to incorporate Surrealist motifs into her studio portraiture, is rather rushed but this is partially rectified by her son Antony Penrose's biographical essay in the accompanying catalogue.<sup>2</sup> The section ends with Miller's return to Europe in 1939.

The second section, 'Women in Wartime Britain 1939–1944', is where the intersection of the personal and the socio-historical is most effective. At the outbreak of war, Lee Miller defiantly remained with Roland Penrose in London. She was hired by British *Vogue* as a photographer, re-entering the world of professional photography just as women all over Britain were re-entering the workforce and volunteering on the home front. *Vogue* and other women's magazines were part of the Ministry of Information's soft propaganda campaign, and Lee Miller's assignments for *Vogue* intriguingly reflect the progression of

the war effort while also displaying her innovative photographic style. Features promoting Utility dress and documenting the work of the Women's Land Army and the Red Cross mark the beginning of Miller's transition from fashion photographer to photojournalist.

In 1942, Lee Miller became an accredited US war correspondent and soon began writing articles to accompany her photographs in *Vogue*. Her first assignments as a war reporter involved photographing women in uniform, from the Air Transport Auxiliary (p.95; Fig.71) to the Women's Royal Naval Service. This project led to some of Miller's most striking documentary images, as her eye for beauty in the uncanny informed her compositions.

The third section of the exhibition, 'Women in Wartime Europe 1944–1945' marks a profound shift in Miller's time as a war correspondent. She was granted access to the war zone in July 1944, arriving just in time to capture the siege of Saint-Malo. She followed the US 83rd Division to Paris, where she witnessed the liberation of the city before travelling on into Germany. Her insightful photojournalism for *Vogue* produced iconic images of the liberation of war-torn Europe, and of the concentration camps Buchenwald and Dachau. Perhaps the best-known image in this exhibition is her defiant nude self-portrait in the bath of Hitler's Munich home, her boots soiling his bath mat with dirt from Dachau (p.163; Fig.72). Many of the photographs in this section show terrible suffering, but there are equally images with glimmers of irony, hope and even celebration.

'Women and the Aftermath of War' provides a brief overview of her travels after the War and her life after returning to Britain. Her European photographs from 1945–46 show women in transition: displaced, homeless and jobless. Images from this period,

such as Irmgard Seefried singing an aria from *Madame Butterfly* (p.167; Fig.70), are permeated by a terrible sense of isolation; an emotion which gripped Miller herself later in life. What the exhibition skims over, although the catalogue investigates in more depth, is Lee Miller's rapid decline into alcoholism and depression after the War. Her career as a professional photographer ended and her world closed in around her at Farley Farm in Chiddingly, East Sussex. Thankfully, the exhibition ends on the positive note of her recovery and her return to her Surrealist roots through an unexpected medium: cooking.

Accompanying this exhibition, focused on Lee Miller's images of women, is a catalogue that makes a significant addition to the current scholarship. All the exhibited images from the Lee Miller Archives are reproduced here, but unfortunately many of the other items displayed in the exhibition, such as the correspondence between Miller and Audrey Withers, the editor of British *Vogue*, are not. A notable exclusion from both the catalogue and the exhibition are Miller's more graphic images of the dead and dying prisoners of Dachau and Buchenwald. They truly shocked not only *Vogue* readers, but the world, and remain some of the most famous photographs of the concentration camps ever taken. Their absence was therefore clearly felt in this exhibition, which was chiefly focused on her war photography.

The curator's goal of critically examining Lee Miller's biography through the social history of women is belied by a slight hint of gender essentialism in the exhibition texts and catalogue. Some pronouncements about Miller's gender and femininity seem contrary to the overall aim of the exhibition: 'Miller was unwilling to sacrifice her femininity in her quest for personal and professional fulfilment. It is no wonder that such fulfilment eluded her in the pre-war years' (p.17). Similarly, another caption reads: 'Miller's intimate photography of servicewomen's living quarters conveys a sense of feminine empathy' (p.100). The universalising 'femininity' ascribed to Miller in these quotes does not do her, or her subjects, justice. It is indeed important that she was a female photographer documenting the War at home and abroad, but what makes her vision unique was its relation to the particular socio-historical moment in which she was working, not as a manifestation of timeless feminine sensibility. This is where the connection between the monographic and the social history sides of an otherwise sensitively curated exhibition breaks down. These reservations notwithstanding, *Lee Miller: A Woman's War* is a welcome and significant addition to our understanding of this brave woman and outstanding photographer.

72. Lee Miller in Hitler's bathtub, Hitler's apartment, Munich, Germany, by Lee Miller with David E. Scherman. 1945. Photograph. (Lee Miller Archives, Chiddingly, East Sussex; exh. Imperial War Museum, London).



<sup>1</sup> *The Art of Lee Miller*, London (Victoria & Albert Museum) 2007–08.

<sup>2</sup> Catalogue: *Lee Miller: A Woman's War*. By Hilary Roberts, with an introduction by Antony Penrose. 224 pp. incl. 156 ills. (Thames & Hudson, London and New York, 2015), £29.95. ISBN 978-05-005-1818-2.