

Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck & Media Farzin

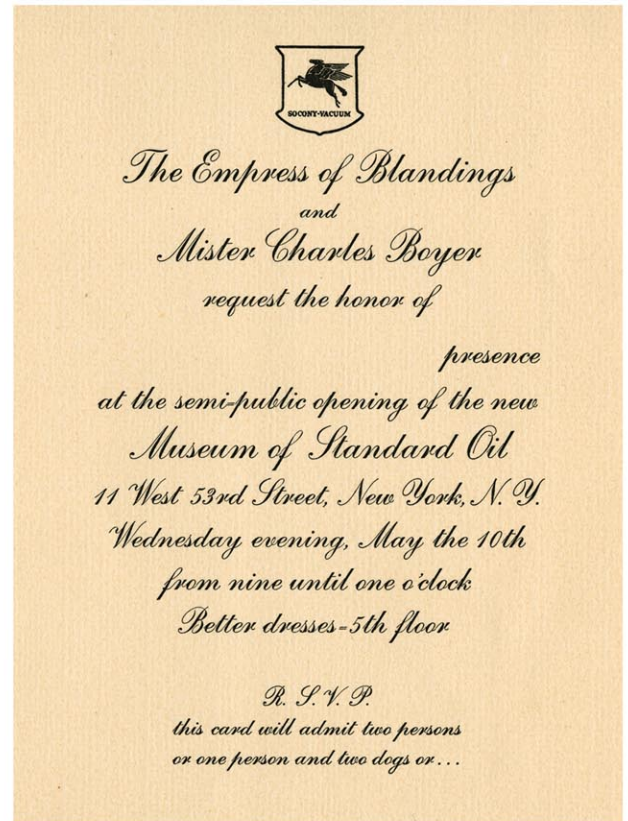
Christopher Grimes Gallery, Los Angeles, USA

Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck and Media Farzin's exhibition at Christopher Grimes Gallery, 'Cultural Diplomacy: An Art We Neglect', casts Alexander Calder and his docile abstractions as the unlikely protagonists in a tale of international intrigue, a tangled narrative tracing the twinned histories of the US interest in Venezuelan and Iranian oil following World War II. The story takes us from a Caracas hotel owned by Nelson Rockefeller to MoMA in the 1940s, from atomic test sites in the Bikini Atoll to Tehran's Museum of Contemporary Art and housing developments by architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva. It threads through maps, photographs, Calder replicas and Calder-esque installations, a haze of scholarly quotations, and the pages of *New York Magazine* (which ran an article titled 'Cultural Diplomacy: An Art We Neglect' in January 1954). The catch, of course, is that none of this is fictional: Calder played a significant role in the large-scale propaganda efforts undertaken by the US as it sought to cultivate new diplomatic relations and gain oil reserves during and after the war.



R.S.V.P., 1939 (2007-9), detail

The objects which drive Farzin and Yazbeck's story are almost too good to be true, conveying a historical moment – and its ironies and tensions – with minimal means and maximum force. The miniature *Model of Alexander Calder's Tower with mobile*, 1943 (2007-9) highlights a period in Calder's career when he drew upon the hulking skeletons of oil derricks, of all things, as inspiration for his metal-frame



Joseph Blumenthal and Frances Collins, Mock invitation to the 10th Anniversary Gala at MoMA (1939)

sculptures. *R.S.V.P.*, 1939 (2007-9) is a reproduction of an invitation conceived by former MoMA staff member Frances Collins and a professional printer friend. The expensive, flowery invite sarcastically invites guests to the opening of the 'new museum of standard oil'. Its front is stamped with a small crown above the motto 'Oil that glitters is not gold' – a dig at Rockefeller (then president of MoMA). (Rockefeller may be the most infamous embodiment of the collusion between private and government interests that characterized the time: as the head of intelligence in Latin America during the war, he commissioned MoMA to arrange several art exhibitions which toured the region.)

About this review

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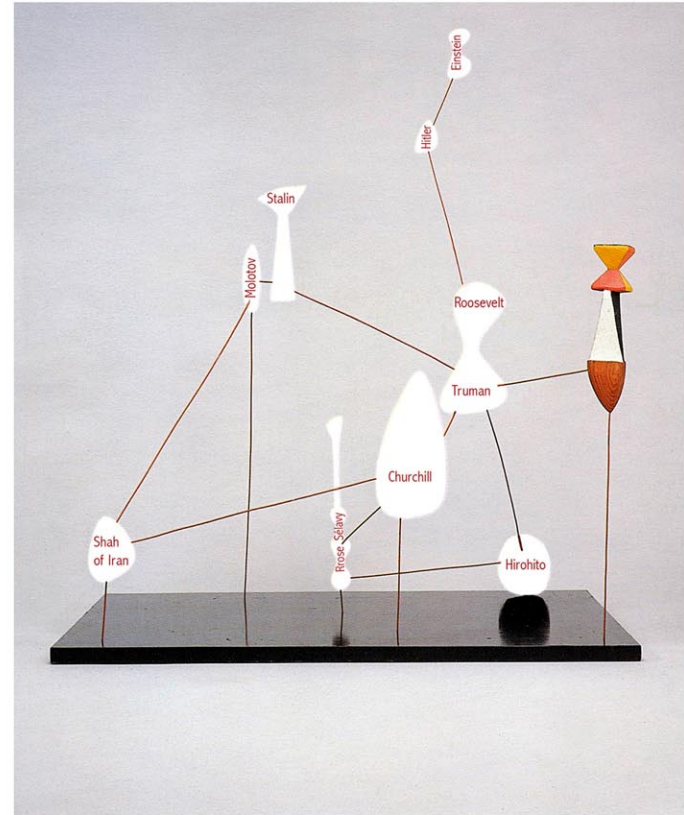
By Sarah-Neel Smith

Relying as it does upon historical narrative and extensive wall copy, this type of show – the critical presentation of information gathered through extensive research – risks becoming textually top-heavy. Visual material can easily become only illustrative, and is not always an adequate counter-weight to sheer factual overload. What saves ‘Cultural Diplomacy’ is its focus upon Calder’s artistic output as the ground for a particularly topical history lesson. If Calder’s work – unthreatening, expedient – is shown to have been uniquely suited to a specific Cold War political agenda, Farzin and Yazbeck take him up once again as a sort of blank slate.

The centrepiece in this exercise is *Didactic Panel and Model of Alexander Calder’s Vertical Constellation with Bomb, 1943* (2007-9), featuring a miniaturized sculpture where a ‘constellation’ of bulbous white wooden forms seem to ricochet from the impact of a rocket which hovers just to the side. An accompanying textbook diagram is subtly altered: each of the sculpture’s forms are labeled, many in joking congruence with their shape. Churchill is bulbous, Stalin appears to wear a bulky hat, and the meeting of Einstein and Hitler in a distant corner transforms the entirety into a teasing conspiracy theory, still shaped by Calder’s unmistakable hand.

‘Cultural Diplomacy’ evades the convenient narrative structures of cause and effect, or the presentation of wrongs to be righted, for an earnest and even playful exercise in history-writing. In just one of the many instances in which Farzin and Yazbeck show how the vicissitudes of multiple historical moments – including our own – might cluster around an single object, in a *Didactic Panel a running narration of parallel events (1943: authorization of the Manhattan project)* (2007-9) stands in quiet contrast to Calder’s ominously vague statements of the time: ‘the sculpture had the suggestion of some kind of cosmic, nuclear gases – which I won’t try to explain. I was interested in the extremely delicate, open composition’.

Sarah-Neel Smith



11 / Vertical Constellation with Bomb, 1943

Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt meet at the Tehran Conference, their first encounter since the beginning of World War II.

Didactic Panel for Alexander Calder’s Vertical Constellation with Bomb, 1943 (2007-9), detail

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