

Art

Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

In a month of excellent sculpture exhibitions, Barbara Mathes Gallery leads off with the Italian artist Fausto Melotti (1901–1986).¹ Mathes focuses on Melotti's sculpture from after the war, with whimsical copper- and brass-wire constructions from the 1960s and 1970s. Here the richness of Melotti's materials plays off the frivolity of his designs. Mathes calls it "arte elegante." *Anfibio* (1977) is a toy cart with flags and oval wheels. *Insetto* (1978) is an ornamented figure with wispy wire wings.

Mathes pairs Melotti with Alexander Calder. Although the two never met, both sculptors fed off the same Surrealist line. They make an interesting comparison. In the early nineteenth century, the English essayist William Hazlitt remarked that sculpture, "though not proper to express health or life or motion, accords admirably with the repose of the tomb." Not exactly a glowing recommendation, but Hazlitt was right. Sculpture could capture "the fleeting dust in imperishable forms." But sculpture had little life of its own.

Perhaps no artist did more to resurrect sculpture from the tomb than the Pennsylvania-born Calder (1898–1976). His wire mobiles and stabiles have become so familiar that we forget how radical they once were. With work like *Tower* (1951), a black wire

folly that grows out of the wall, on view at Mathes, he gave sculpture health, life, and motion of its own. Melotti does not quite live up to Calder's challenge. Both sculptors trained as engineers, but only Calder pushed sculpture's architectonic properties, working with tension and balance. Melotti's sculptures are more static—traditional set pieces often built within a wire frame. A pianist, Melotti arranged his biomorphic forms as a visual score, as in *Contrappunto II* (1969–1984). Unlike Calder's self-contained inventions, Melotti's objects stand for something else, even though the reference is abstract.

Melotti may have lagged behind Calder's innovation. But the artists can be equally delightful. Melotti's work is a joy to see, especially in such joyful company.

Whenever Richard L. Feigen joins forces with Jan Krugier, the results are noteworthy. In late 2004, they came together to compare Max Beckmann with Pablo Picasso. Now with "Drawings in Space," the focus is on twentieth-century artists "who blurred the boundaries of physical dimension."² The title comes by way of Julio González, who said his sculptures were occasions "to project and draw in space with the help of new devices, to use this space and construct with it as if it were a newly acquired material." Whether or

¹ "Calder/Melotti: Lyrical Constructions" opened at Barbara Mathes Gallery, New York, on November 1 and remains on view through December 22, 2007.

² "Drawing in Space" opened at Richard L. Feigen & Co., New York, on November 1, 2007 and remains on view through January 18, 2008.

not the title is equally apt for all sixty pieces on display, the exhibition benefits from smart hanging and superb work. Here we find *Seated Woman I* (1935), a C-shaped bronze sculpture by González, in front of Ellsworth Kelly's *Study for Curves for "Stele I"* and *"Stele II,"* an arced drawing from 1973. The show also brings together several pages from Picasso's remarkable "Dinard" sketchbooks, with their drawings of pneumatic forms from the late 1920s occasioned by Picasso's new infatuation with the beach-ball beauty Marie-Thérèse Walter. Twenty-two artists make up this show that would be the envy of any museum's modernist collection.

At PaceWildenstein, Joel Shapiro (born 1941) is back with his latest sculpture, variously composed in wood or cast in bronze out of wooden beams. Shapiro is a lyrical, playful conductor of form.³ Sometimes he gets too literal, with high-kicking stick figures that can be cloying. At other times, his assemblies stay too abstract, never doing much of anything. At Pace Wildenstein, we can further wonder why his finished pieces in wood generally surpass those in bronze. Perhaps due to the limitations of wood, these constructions often seem tighter, like dancers in motion. Shapiro finishes his wood in casein paint while leaving his bronze a dull patina. Composed of delicate boxes, the wooden elements reverberate off one another. I could live without many of Shapiro's bronzes, but his wood sculptures are always welcome.

In November, David Nolan Gallery featured its second show of Mel Kendrick (born 1947), a New York sculptor whose adherence to process is all or nothing.⁴ For seven of the nine pieces on display, Kendrick began with identical, sixteen-inch-high blocks of solid

mahogany that he stained japan red. Through an ingenious set of cuts, Kendrick extracted a core shape from each block, pulling it apart and reassembling the inner piece on top of the original material, which became a pedestal of negative space. It was a direct translation, the red paint of the cut-up core keying into the openings beneath. What resulted had intense internal logic but did not resonate with the world around it. At thirty-two inches high, the final products were an unusual size for sculpture, just a little too big for a table, not quite large enough for the floor. Their shapes—cones and cylinders carved with a band saw—may have a constructivist echo, but they refused to talk. That may be the point—why should sculpture be defined by human size and human shape? The problem is, we cannot help it, so that looking at these shapes from above, it was hard not to call them cute. This was more than I could say for the eighth object in the show, a hulking, sixty-eight-inch block of pine in green, oozing sap and glue.

Two final exhibitions this month take us back to two dimensions, with one show that looks knowingly to the past and another that anticipates the future. Allan Stone Gallery features drawings by Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) that reveal his beaux-arts training in Holland and his abilities as a draftsman.⁵ De Kooning's style progressed in fits and starts, producing everything from the wonderfully anachronistic *Portrait of Elaine* (1940–1941) to the pure abstractions of the 1940s and the shimmering clamdiggers of the 1960s and 1970s. De Kooning is at his best when he looks back, finding the detours in the road and taking them.

Jules Olitski (1922–2007), who died earlier this year, never looked back, always pushing abstraction into new territory with new materials and new techniques, experimenting with the airbrush and plastic paints. He

³ "Joel Shapiro: New Sculpture" opened at PaceWildenstein, New York, on November 2, 2007 and remains on view through January 19, 2008.

⁴ "Mel Kendrick: Red Blocks" was on view at David Nolan Gallery from October 4 through November 21, 2007.

⁵ "Willem de Kooning, Drawings: 1920s–1970s" opened at Allan Stone Gallery on October 30 and remains on view through December 22, 2007.