COME ONE, COME ALL:
The Circus in the American Artistic and Cultural Tradition

Amy Elizabeth Gonzales

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
Art and the Book Program
Corcoran College of Art + Design
Washington, D.C.
Spring 2011
We hereby recommend that the thesis prepared under our supervision by Amy Gonzales entitled Come One, Come All: The Circus in the American Cultural and Artistic Tradition be accepted as fulfilling, in part, requirements for the degree of Master of Art in Art and the Book.

Graduate Thesis Committee:

Amy Gonzales

Georgia Deal

Kerry McAleer-Keeler
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Thesis Statement

The history of the circus is parallel to the coming age tale of America, in all its eccentricities, blights, embarrassments and wonders and this is among the reasons artists are enamoured with it as a theme. Viewed through the lens of relevant historical examples and contemporary artistic works, it acts as a reminder of a place and time that will never exist again, but still lingers in pockets of American culture. It is irreverent, frivolous, oddly charming and often provokes self reflection and examination, much like the birth tale of America itself. As a social experience the circus is akin to opening a book and becoming part of the narrative itself, both written and visual.
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This time the anticipation wasn’t hopeful, but threatening, ominous, hungry. The land started to drown me, then time, then just being alive in this way seemed too hard to bear for the next five, six, seven decades. I was drowning without a drop of liquid in sight and I had a lot more to look forward to. I couldn’t imagine a life outside of this, away from the slow fuzz and warble inside my head, the sound of realities brushing against expectations, the sound fish must hear inside a tank. Until one Saturday night the circus came to town and I left with it.

It was a world I understood instantly and completely and somehow not at all. I ran away. I ran toward a place that offered the anticipation I swam through as a child, eyes wide open, stinging from the salt, but unable to shut for the sights.

—The Canvas Man
A Quintessentially American Contradiction

The circus, as a cultural and social phenomenon, has defined and embodied the American ideals of entertainment, adventure, escapism and curiosity over several centuries. Just as books and works of art often offer worlds filled with mystery, whimsy, oddities, and thought provoking peculiarities, the world of the circus also allows the masses to experience a full bodied slide into a universe that is not their own, but one that is part of their larger cultural heritage. The circus is vital within that heritage because its history acts as a microcosm and a metaphor for the history of America. Both stem from humble British beginnings which soon outgrew the hopes and desires of their motherland and both value the variety of ideas and realities that arise from a group of eager and distinctly ambitious individuals. As such a paradoxically miniature magnification of American life and culture, the circus provides an admittedly sordid and voyeuristically fascinating answer to the ever present, but often unvoiced, cultural, philosophical and artistic question: How did we get here? More specifically: How did we, as a population of vastly unique individuals, a nation built by rebels and outcasts, thinkers and dreamers, arrive at our place within this larger cultural heritage? An examination of the social, historical and artistic implications of the American circus provides insight and helps to answer the inevitable question.

Once again, how did we get here? Asked with equal inflections of awe and disdain, this inquiry into the state of popular and artistic milieu comes from a place that values the nostalgia of years and occasions gone by, but is uncertain that the future can out-perform its artistic and social predecessors. There is an inevitable unease that arises when things of the past are held up in comparison with things of the present. The circus is no exception. It is perhaps even more intimidating because of its tendencies toward contradiction and fluidity when people are more comfortable
with clearly defined roles and boundaries. Despite this unease, the circus as a cultural phenomenon still informs us about a collective past, one that was experienced by generation after generation of Americans and immigrants, alike. It is at the center of the American experience in the beginning and middle of the 20th century. The question still remains, why are people drawn to the idea of the circus? Is it the visual (over)stimulation, the acts of bravery and cunning, the humour and frivolity, the contradiction and confusions that somehow only make sense within the space of the big top? Paul Bouissac answers this inquiry by brilliantly observing that “[The Circus] is a kind of mirror in which the culture is reflected, condensed and at the same time transcended; perhaps the circus seems to stand outside the culture only because it is at its very center.”

Author and social commentator Will Bradley bemoans the fact that “meaningful community life in the west is disappearing” and consequently, “the decline of the circus and the marching band is permanent and final...” Even if this is a rather extreme pessimistic view of the modern world, there is some truth to this premise. Due to the cultural and social changes in technology and media, we often experience entertainment within the confines of our own homes with people we specifically choose to include or exclude in those experiences. With easy access to televisions, computers, phones and the ever increasing portable devices that add convenience and metaphorical tethers to our lives, entertainment is no longer something we have to seek out. It seeks us, at times unceasingly. In contrast: “as a powerful agent of global representation in an age before electronic media, the railroad circus collapsed the world under canvas — right at home — for urban and rural


consumers across the United States.” Bradley is correct in stating that community experiences are harder to access despite the myriad of technology that connects us. We rarely experience any event or entertainment as a collective whole with the exception of live sporting events and even those are tempered by allegiances to specific teams or geographical locations. Instead our experiences are highly personal and personalized. This idea would have been unfathomable one hundred, even fifty years ago. Leisure and entertainment were shared cultural experiences, meant to impact and empower an entire group of people. It was something that merited writing to your cousin three states over, or bringing up in line at the grocery store.

Very few experiences have the same cultural impact today. The sheer variety of television shows, movies and music makes it nearly impossible for any group of people united by geography or genetics to experience entertainment as a community. The railroad circus in America during the first half of the 20th century performed this exact function. It brought people together and created a collective memory for

millions of Americans. Naturally, since these types of experiences are admittedly rare in the current cultural and social spectrum, there is a certain nostalgia and wistfulness that lingers with their memory. The circus is one of the institutions that evokes a sense of time and a distinct longing that is unique and telling about the thing itself, as well as the people who experience the longing.

The idea of the circus maintains an aura of intrigue, even though it is no longer the largely viable entertainment enterprise that it was during its American hey day in the mid 20th century. Artists, writers and filmmakers turn to it as a source of inspiration. The circus continues to pervade American culture and art to this day. Perhaps this is true because the circus represents a past remembered fondly, wistfully, vividly with the simultaneous recognition that it could never exist in the same capacity today. It encourages a collective nostalgia that is both endearing and unsettling. Memory and reality are often entirely different and the circus plays on the tendency to romanticize and hyperbolize the past.

The circus encourages a mingling of truths and half-truths, fact and fiction, clarity and confusions. In essence, it is an entire world of contradictions all housed within its canvas walls. It is a world which allows multiple conflicting ideas to exist at the same time, without implosion or self destruction. America was conceived with this same principle in mind: freedom from the oppression of one singular idea as law. Differing religions, political parties, ethnicities, cultural perspectives and lifestyles must all come together and exist at the same time in the same place without negating their own existence. They must yield to one another in order to ensure their own reality. And because of this there are many, many realities being lived at any one moment. The circus simply compounds these realities into one place and one time, encouraging confusion, absurdity, frivolity and abundance. My own renditions of the
circus and its inhabitants, both written and visual, play upon this idea of multiple realities and the contradictions that stand, despite themselves, within the world of the circus. Ultimately, this world created within the circus is a microcosm of everyday life. The circus is a cultural oddity precisely because it allows for this confusion and contradiction at its very core, while most other realms of society strive to maintain an appearance of consistency and control.

The history of the circus is parallel to the coming of age tale of America, in all its eccentricities, blights, embarrassments and wonders. This is among the reasons artists are enamoured with it as a theme. Viewed through the lens of relevant historical examples and contemporary artistic works, it acts as a reminder of a place and time that will never exist again, but still lingers in pockets of American culture. It is irreverent, frivolous, oddly charming and often provokes self reflection and self examination, much like the birth tale of America itself. As a social experience the circus is akin to opening a book and becoming part of the narrative itself.
The Psychological Allure

Viewing the circus through dual cultural and artistic spectacles exposes questions which get at the social and psychological allure of the circus as an institution in America. This allure of the circus stems from its root as a sphere of other, a sphere of possibility that is tangible and immediate. The circus celebrates life and its triumphs. It also points out the follies and absurdities under which we operate daily, and exploits their contradictory nature. It allows ordinary individuals to achieve extraordinary feats of athleticism, showmanship, humor and social satire by allowing for the creation of a community that wills these feats into reality. “This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things.”4 Because people believe in their reality, these extraordinary actions are able to exist.

The circus creates a suspended reality wherein average people are transformed into performers who feel anointed with the divine ability to entertain.

Circus impresarios...aimed to amuse, tantalize, educate, and perplex their audiences with a jarring mix of the real — “genuine” exotic human and animal acts — and the pointedly unnatural — educated dogs, boxing elephants, or human “iron jaw” acts in which performers dangled from the heights by their teeth.5

People fly through the air untethered, shoot themselves out of cannons and into fire unprotected and teach bears how to dance to a rhythm. Within the fun, frivolity and amazement are hidden “great moral lessons about courage, discipline and bodily fortitude.”6 The impossible is achieved and brought into the realm of the possible

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right before the eyes of the audience. Ordinary people perform extraordinary acts of extreme skill and bravery for an audience of people that are both just like them and nothing like them.

There is an immense sense of duality within the walls of the tent. Two distinct and extremely complex worlds are able to exist simultaneously. Ultimately, the circus is alluring because it is a surreal place that exists within a hyper-real world. It allows for things to happen which could never happen in the everyday world of the post office or the school yard or the dinner table:

With their blurring of male and female bodies, circus acts flattened sexual differences, and went so far as to challenge the distinction between human and animal. Trapeze artists and acrobats became birds and butterflies, while the “Learned Pig” solved simple math problems, and elephants, tigers, and bears danced upright. The circus encompassed an array of remarkably transgressive bodies: women grew long beards, armless ladies sewed with their feet, hairy people worked as “missing links,” and midgets and giants played cowboys, royalty and military figures.  

The circus is a place of unrealized possibility bursting to become itself. Often the realization of this possibility does not turn out as expected, but defies boundaries and expectation to create a dimension that is only possible within the space between the performers and the audience. One cannot exist without the other. This symbiotic relationship contributes to the psychological allure of the circus as it allows for vulnerability and genuine communication amongst two groups of disparate individuals: those who perform and those who watch. “It showcases the interconnectedness of humans and animals, and playfully tests one’s potential to transfigure physical laws. The circus contains innumerable bodies — lithe and

muscular, fat, hairy, shockingly thin, flexible, glass- and fire-eating, legless, armless.”

Once again, the lines are obscured and two worlds are allowed to mingle and bump up against one another, each influencing the other and struggling to define its individual boundaries and expectations.

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A Grand Metaphor

There is an appealing sense of surrealism that surrounds the circus and its inhabitants. A world of wonder, charm, secrets and stories exists both within the reality of everyday life and also outside of it. As an exaggeration of the world in which we live, the circus maintains aspects of everyday life but pushes their meanings to extend beyond the common vernacular. There is a sense of recognition and understanding that is tempered by the oddity and the surreal nature of the performance and the acts themselves. The circus creates a world within a world that is amplified and hyperbolized.

The circus, as a metaphor for everyday life, has even caused a cultural language shift, allowing audiences to adopt the colloquialisms and mindset of circus actors. Daily, average people jump through hoops that are bright and hot with flame, juggle fragile and dangerous objects and walk a thin line with peril licking their heels. Even if these acts are metaphorical instead of actual, the emotional sentiment is still present. Quiet acts of bravery and sacrifice and skill are performed everyday in offices and farms, houses and classrooms across the country. The circus simply takes these actions and makes them literal. They become a performance instead of a routine. People recognize themselves, the best part of themselves, in the exciting and cunning and awe-inspiring performances which take place in the ring.
The circus is not only a distraction or an escape from the ordinary, it is a reminder that the ordinary is built from tiny moments of extraordinary acts. It tells us that anything worth doing is a bit dangerous and a bit foolish, but that is what makes these actions worthwhile and satisfies the human desire for connection and achievement, be it humble or grand. Circus performers are simply ordinary people performing extraordinary actions. They show the audience that possibilities are there, hanging silently in the air waiting to be grasped by capable and tender hands. The circus is a lesson in the illimitable nature of the human capacity for achievement, which can be used to help or to harm. The choice is there and the audience must decide what to carry home.

In addition to celebrating the triumphs of the everyday, the circus also brings the strange and the uncomfortable to the forefront. Freak shows and sideshows have been an important part of the history of the circus in America, and allow for telling glimpses into the minds of both circus proprietors and audiences. It begs the question of why we, as a culture of multi-faceted people, with varied perspectives and experiences, are fascinated with and drawn to the social outcasts, freaks and deviants showcased with the genre of circus. This fascination lingers despite the relative truth that we continue to make choices that adhere to mainstream values which operate in an arena that is the antonym of what the circus represents. Why do we get pleasure from the abnormal when we strive to maintain normal in our lives at all costs?
Once again, we recognize a small part of ourselves in the oddity or curiosity of others. There is a little of the odd or the curious hidden in everyone. To some degree, we are all freaks, finding our way in the world, thinking there is no one else like us out there. We are fascinated by the difference in human nature, because so often, by choice or circumstance, we surround ourselves with day after day of sameness. We forget the variety the world has to offer. The circus plays on that great variety and reminds patrons that the human life does not have to adhere to one single standard, but that many realities are possible and able to exist within one single moment. Perhaps most importantly, the circus brings people of different backgrounds, philosophies, ethnicities, economies, birthplaces and religions together in order to experience something as a collective whole:

The peripatetic fin-de-siècle circus reached virtually all Americans. It educated and challenged people, irrespective of their ability to read or their distance from the metropolis. Its live visual presence made it a popular forum on science, race-thinking, gender ideologies, U.S. foreign relations, and national identity.  

Freak or not, normal or not, all have the capacity to see past the exterior and experience the truth and recognition of connection when given the chance.

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THE CIRCUS AS A DESTINATION

Inevitably, the circus also conjures up the deep-seeded longing to escape and experience a small corner of the world that is seen as other. As humans we harbor the desire to depart from the usual routine of life, if only for a moment, and in doing so we attempt to liberate ourselves from the banality of the day to day:

Its variegated exhibitions of human and animal relationships, and its spectacles of America’s growing power in world affairs heralded the arrival of a new modern age, framed around an unsettling matrix of bodily celebration and prudery, social conformity and marginality, jingoism and internationalism, racial hierarchy and racial fascination.9

In essence, this is the main function of the circus. It rolls into town bursting with vibrance and energy and a sensibility that is distinctly different than the everyday. It allows people the possibility of escape, both mental and physical, even if the flight into fantasy lasts only a few hours: “the railroad circus was an ephemeral community ritual invading from without.”10 The idealistic hope of the circus is that patrons are able to escape into a different world and come away with a renewed appreciation for their own lives. It attempts to showcase the best and most bizarre in humanity and demonstrate the plethora of options and realities available to Americans.

Of course, this demonstration became a literal way of life for people fed up with their old realities, hoping to procure a new one by running away to join the circus when it left to put its mark on a new town: “audiences occasionally responded to the show’s becoming vision of a big, exciting world by “running way.” The act of “running away” involved breaking away from one’s community for the imagined economic


opportunities and unfettered life with the circus.”11 It provided an opportunity for a life outside of the one known to the average small town, mid western, middle class American in the 1900s. It represented a place which offered travel and excitement and a steady pay check to anyone who could pull their own weight regardless of societal factors and norms. Bias or judgement held no creed in the life of a circus: “despite the presence of oppressive racial representations, circus people—many of whom were social outsiders—often found a refuge of sorts in this nomadic community of oddballs. In fact, the circus often provided a better income than was available elsewhere.”12

Those who chose to escape with the circus formed a disparate group of individuals brought together by circumstance and the understanding of a common dream: life can be better. Not always, not instantly, but for a moment, in time, humanity’s promises will come to fruition. In this sense, a rag-tag group of circus show-makers and performers zigzagging through the heart of the nation are not unlike the small band of travelers who sought out new life on the shore of an unknown land after disembarking from the Mayflower in the fall of 1620. Both groups of people look past what life is at the moment and see the promise a better future, built on the backs of those who believe that small moments have the ability to transform reality.


A (Very Little) Bit of History

As the first of many parallels to the progression of American history and culture, the modern circus sprung from British soil:

The first modern circus was not called a circus either. It was called the New British Riding School or Amphitheatre Riding Ring and was built by Philip Astley in 1770. Exhibitions given there combined several elements: the riding ring, cavalry horsemanship, clowning derived from the [italian] *commedia dell’arte*, vaulting as developed to a highly skilled art in the sixteenth-century French courts, and other circus-type skills brought from ancient times to modern times via the mimes and *jongleurs* of the Middle Ages. This form was to spread worldwide—although not always along parallel lines—and to become known as “circus,” “zirkus,” “circo,” “cirque,” “tsirk,” etc.14

The modern circus, the type from which the American version is a descendent, has a rich history of athleticism and skill. The show was based mostly on the horsemanship of the riders who did dangerous and masterly executed tricks while standing on the back of a galloping horse. Other entertainers, such as jugglers, mimes, clowns and gymnasts, would perform for the audience in between the rounds of riding. This genre of entertainment, enormously popular in England, was brought across the Atlantic by a student of Astley’s:

In 1793 the English trick rider John Bill Ricketts staged the first multi-act exhibition of riders, trick horses, clowns, acrobats, jugglers, and rope walkers in a circular arena in Philadelphia. His distinguished audience included President George Washington... From there, Ricketts’ American circus career flourished.15

Early American circuses where filled with incredible performances that allowed audiences to view an aspect of everyday life and work, riding a horse, with a fresh

Horseback riding was the most common mode of transportation and was used for everything from the farm and chore work to the battlefield. Yet, the circus allowed the audience to forget about the perfunctory nature of everyday life, if only for an hour or two, and escape to a world where even the most common of animals is marvelous and charming.

Only 17 years earlier, in 1776, a group of dedicated and enthusiastic individuals also thrilled their audience, a budding and infant nation, with that same sense of daring and enthusiasm. In declaring its independence to the world, young America called for an escape from a life of subjugation and servitude. It allowed people to see a different reality, a reality that existed for those with eyes to see it. But the circus, as an institution, has been performing this transformative task for centuries:

The essence of the circus cannot be associated with any one particular time and place, nor even solely with the two-hundred-year history of the circus as a theatrical form. Rather, it must also take into account the origins of that form—the work of the ancient acrobats, medieval jongeurs, courtly vaulting masters, etc.—and the as yet unknown innovations that lie somewhere in the future.16

One of the tasks of the circus, to perform and encourage a rebellion of sorts, is paralleled in the spirit of the revolutionary war and its heroes. As an act of defiance toward the established order, both the revolutionary fathers of the nation and circus

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proprietors sought to look outside of what was in front of them and instead use their resources to create a new, more promising, reality.

The next great historical hurdle conquered by the nation and the circus was a reliable method of transportation. American circus culture historian Janet Davis asserts: “in the United States, the circus’ growth and development closely chronicled that of the nation, because the circus — a traveling amusement —was dependent upon the same transportation networks that helped facilitate U.S. expansion.” While this is true, the conversion from wagon or motorized transportation to railroad travel revolutionized the efficiency and speed of the circus and galvanized it as a true economic enterprise, this is just one reason the histories of two great and powerful institutions developed in tandem. There is a deeper and more fundamental thematic connection shared between the two. However, the introduction of the railroad was one of the most important moments in the history of the circus, as it struggled to find its way in a rapidly changing industrial landscape:

The enormous transcontinental railroad network completed after the Civil War transformed the circus into a frenetic three-ring, two-stage, cross-country extravaganza. Now able to travel on a network of uniform railroad gauge, the circus’s rising ubiquity was a symbol of national expansion and consolidation during the Gilded Age.

Just as the nation itself was searching to find an identity within the new, modernized setting of the Industrial Revolution of the 1800s and early 1900s, the circus also had to adapt to these differing methods and changing modes of production in order to remain as a relevant part of the daily American culture.

The early to mid 1900s in America brought with it times of financial and


cultural crisis. The Great Depression caused panic that seeped into every pore of society and forced Americans to live in a world they did not recognize. As a democratic form of entertainment, the circus was meant for everyone to experience, for everyone to enjoy on the same basic level, regardless of age, race, sex or education. It encouraged camaraderie and an investment amongst a disparate group of individuals to transform themselves into a whole community, a community that only existed within the specific time frame of the show itself, but included performers, audience members and all peons in between. It brought people together, even if such cohesion was achieved through frivolity and exploitation of social deviance. As an exercise in escapism, the circus allowed individuals and families who were deeply scarred by the state of the nation to live in a world where nothing is impossible, where fantasy and reality meld into an organic and embracing whole.”

Everyone went to the circus: from President Theodore Roosevelt, who received a personal invitation scrolled on satin from James A. Bailey in 1903, to hundreds of inmates from the local insane asylums across the country who were brought to the circus by their wardens. In many ways, the composition of turn-of-the-century circus audience mirrored those of the mixed Jacksonian-era theater, because women, men, and children of different social class and ethnicity sat together under the same canvas big top.19

During both the economic excess of the roaring ’20s or the economic devastation of the ‘30s, the circus remained a democratic form of entertainment for the masses no matter their economic identity. It acted as a place of equalized opportunity for audience members and workmen, alike. Even “circus owners vigorously participating in perpetuating the popular American ideal of the self-made man”20 maintained the


idea that hard work and a little luck are enough to achieve success. The circus as a
capitalistic enterprise in one of the most successful examples in the nation’s history. It
preserves the notion that America is a country built from the successes of men who all
started out with little and gained the world on their journey to the top. This is certainly
ture of the larger circus entrepreneurs like P.T. Barnum and Adam Forepaugh. They
managed to become giants of the industry and still maintain the facade of the young
men who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps in order to fulfill a life long destiny.
They managed to project this image despite the fact that circuses were a true and
complex business with hundreds of thousands of dollars and jobs hanging in the
balance, a true circus act.
ART FROM THE MUD IN CALDER’S CIRCUS

The massive popularity of the circus amongst a widespread and diverse group of Americans has had a lasting and profound impact upon all areas of society. The cult of the circus has seeped into every pore of American culture, either as a representation of itself, a metaphor for something outside of itself, a satire ridiculing the ridiculous, a celebration of the varied scope of human form and accomplishment and all manner of other comments on society. Literature, painting, print making, film, sculpture and performance art have all embraced the theme of the circus as a starting point for ideas that have influenced American self-expression since the circus launched itself into the visual and artistic repertoire of the common man at the end of the 19th century.

Alexander Calder, a young man coming of age during this time when circus life flourished, found his first inspiration, his first understanding of artistic endeavors, under the big top. In his early career, at the age of 27, Calder worked as an illustrator for the National Police Gazette and was asked to attend rehearsals and performances of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey’s Circus and provide images based on his experiences for the publication. This assignment was one of those rare moments that altered every moment which followed. Calder had found his muse that day amidst the sawdust and the peanuts. “The circus as an artistic theme has commanded the attention of numerous European and American artists since at least the mid-nineteenth century, but few have exploited the popular spirit of the big top to quite the extent of the American sculptor Alexander Calder”21 says art historian L. Joy Sperling. But, it was more than a simple utilization or even inspiration, it was an infatuation. In the circus Calder found his life’s work. It would influence nearly

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everything he produced in his prolific career as a sculptor until his death in 1976. It was this “spirit of the big top” that Sperling refers to, which enamoured Calder and to which he would return with enthusiasm and fervor throughout his career.

Calder’s first notable work is a miniature model of a circus, aptly named Circus, which contains over seventy figures and animals made from wire and other non-traditional materials, “each of which could be made to perform physical acts by the artist. By 1927 Calder had brought the acts together to form a complete little circus performance, which in the early years lasted only fifteen minutes, but later could run for almost two hours.”

The small scale sculptures were in pursuit of something larger than their own inherent beauty. With them, Calder sought to evoke a sense of shared excitement and emotion from a live audience: “his Circus was full of the dazzling extravaganza and spinning high spirits of the popular circus. It rejoiced in, and used, the mad spectacle of the circus.”

Calder understood, and wanted to recreate, the frenetic and often frantic nature of the circus performance. He enjoyed the physicality of the sculptures and exploited their fragility in order to make his audiences generate genuine feeling:

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The unpredictably of the outcome of each act held the audience’s attention. It both involved and disconnected viewers so that the movements and actions of the Circus figures activated a drama of surprise and the unexpected in them. Just as a real circus, Calder’s Circus audience was encouraged to respond spontaneously and freely to (and thus become a participant in) each circus action. Likewise Calder’s Circus performances involved the blurring of the mimetic and the real circus. Calder conceived his Circus artistes as “living beings”—ones who lived only to perform and only in performance.24

The performance was meant to allow the audience to understand the hilarious and satisfying absurdity of the real circus, and on a larger scale the hilarious and ideally satisfying absurdity of life. By viewing it in miniature and watching Calder set the acts into motion with his own hands, the audience could better understand the question posed: what is the extent to which real life is orchestrated or the extent to which it is merely coincidence?

The Circus, in performance, represented an absurd, mad, off-balance universe through which the mind of the audience was opened to an appreciation of the equally mad world of the real circus, where real people tease at the morality of our expectations and fears by pretending to lose their footing on the high wire or by standing in front of a real knife-thrower.25

Calder likes the absurdities, the non-sensicalities, the surreal moments of the circus that make us question our own approaches to life and why we live it the ways we chose.

Subtly, he asks his audience, why take the whole of life as a serious and bitter tragedy when moments of complete and utter abandon and frivolity are there waiting, ready to be enjoyed by those brave enough to think a dose of absurdity is good for the mind and the soul: “from the beginning Calder’s work was without intellectual pretension. His Circus was an embrace of the spectacle and the wide-eyed thrill of the circus. It represented Calder’s gleefully absurd perception of the world.”

Like a true American of his time, Calder is not satisfied to sit back and let his work be still or immobile, encapsulated by time and distance. He wants it to be experienced. He wants to take part in the experience and come to his own conclusions, in the same way the circus and the American democracy ask its participants to join in and get their hands dirty, rolling around in the mud for the right to be called a true contributor to the respective society: “while Calder’s Circus humor is illuminating mockery, it is also always earthy and optimistic. Calder literally gets down in the “mud” of a circus ring and becomes part of the spectacle himself. He does not stand back and analyze. Calder is in there with his

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animals and his performers.” Alexander Calder’s vision of the circus as it is expressed through his performance touches on key elements that appear throughout the cultural and artistic identity of America. It recognizes that there is a touch of the odd or the curious or the absurd in each of us, and it celebrates these facts in order to bring about a better understanding of human nature as a whole. His Circus allows audience members to recognize that there are many realities available to Americans and even an absurd interpretation of reality is a valid recognition of reality. Finally, Calder recognizes the inherently American need to escape, to seek out new territory, physically or mentally and he embraces this need by providing a space for the wandering mind to rest and absorb a new sense of reality.

Fig 9: Calder roaring with his Circus lion, 1971

It All Comes To An End

The artistic and cultural tradition of the circus and its impact on the lives of Americans is a unique and telling insight into the wider social heritage of the nation. Memory, imagination and storytelling associated with the circus have had a profound influence on the collective experiences of a group of people that are separated by everything from race to religion to class to geography. The circus is a cultural phenomenon that brings people from disparate backgrounds together and creates shared experiences. It all speaks to a sense of duality and surrealism under the surface of American life. It is a place where two worlds collide into one another and form a mass of contradictions and confusions that are metaphoric and evocative of everyday life.

As a democratic form of entertainment, one that does not discriminate or demand anything of its audience members, the circus mirrors the meanings inherent in the book form. Art’s most basic function is democratic and all inclusive. In theory, art, especially American art, is for everyone, not just the wealthy or the well-educated or the well-informed. Ideally, all forms of art should be experienced by all levels of society, as reflected in the audiences who filled the bleachers of circus performances.

The book form also has its roots in this line of thinking. The idea of the book is based on the idea of the democratic multiple, the multiplicity is inherent in the form itself. For the past four centuries, since the advent of the printed book, this form has been the most effective and functional means through which to disseminate information to a large audience. Books make knowledge and experience accessible, tangible and immediate in the same way as the circus. A book is a physical object meant to be held, explored and investigated. Opening an artists’ book and leafing through its pages (literally or metaphorically) is an experience
that somehow transcends both the artists’ intentions and the viewer’s expectations. A third, heretofore unknown, element is created because the experience is intimate, physical and immediate. Certainly, the circus functions in the same way, presenting an experience to the audience that is a combination and a transcendence of the expectations of the performers and the hopes of the viewers.

The work of this thesis explores these tropes of the democratic function of art as a means to bring together people who are separated by circumstance. It highlights the multitude of realities that lurk under the surface of the everyday and asks viewers to investigate their own realities. It is this element of surprise and surrealism that infuses the work with a sense of wonder and escapism that is vital to any successful circus. This work also delves into an exploration of social cultures and metaphoric microcosms that exist within everyday life. These subjects are important to the work as they contain an inherent mystery and have an uncanny ability to endow ordinary words and objects new meanings.

Nostalgia is also an important theme within the work. It seeks to evoke a sense in the viewer for a time, place or space that is familiar in essence, but perhaps not in actuality. This is achieved through photographic print processes in combination with sculptural book forms. The journey that takes place within the work, and thus within the audience, is at times surreal, funny, whimsical and ultimately celebratory. Both the terrain and the destination may be anachronistic, but are instinctively and inherently recognizable. Nostalgia may be felt for a person, event or time period that is far outside the scope of personal experience, but is an experience that maintains the appeal, perhaps a misguided appeal, of escape, both triumphant and mundane. This sense is achieved through narrative, printmaking, and binding techniques that underscore both the intellectual familiarity and the physical and temporal distance
that is the nature of nostalgia.

A sense and evocation of nostalgia is vital to the scope of work as a whole and also to a healthy sense of self in the much larger scope of time. Nostalgia was the first inspiration for this project: inspired by the memory of a place remembered fondly in reality, but exists more vividly within the mind of the artist and with the hope that it could live again in a (re)imagined universe. The wistfulness inherent in this sort of nostalgia also produces an urge to create a better or more meaningful way of living in the here and now. It speaks to a truth about the nature of self reflection and self recognition in unexpected and contradictory places or spaces, where differing opinions, lifestyles, appearances and realities come together with a unified goal: to let the imagination run away.
ILLUSTRATION REFERENCES


Bibliography


