

VENUS OVER MANHATTAN

Press Release

VANUATU TOTEMS & CALDER GOUACHES

Independent 20th Century

September 7 – 10, 2023

Booth A1

Cipriani South Street

New York, NY 10004

Venus Over Manhattan

September 5 – October 7, 2023

55 Great Jones Street

New York, NY 10012



VANUATU TOTEMS & CALDER GOUACHES

(New York, NY) – Opening this September, **Venus Over Manhattan** is pleased to announce concurrent presentations featuring historical **Vanuatu figures** from the Ambrym and Banks Islands and gouaches by **Alexander Calder**. These exhibitions will be on view at **Independent 20th Century**, hosted at the historic Battery Maritime Building at **Cipriani South Street** from September 7th through 10th, and at Venus Over Manhattan's gallery space at **55 Great Jones Street**, on view from September 5th through October 7th, 2023. Marking the gallery's second participation at Independent 20th century, the presentations reprise the gallery's 2019 exhibition that staged Vanuatu figures alongside Alexander Calder's *Crags*.

39 GREAT JONES ST
NEW YORK, NY 10012

55 GREAT JONES ST
NEW YORK, NY 10012

T +1 (212) 980-0700
F +1 (212) 980-8861

WWW.VENUSOVERMANHATTAN.COM
INFO@VENUSOVERMANHATTAN.COM

VENUS OVER MANHATTAN



The movement and exchange of ethnographic artifacts across Europe and North America significantly impacted the international avant-garde, particularly the Surrealists. Alexander Calder—much like his friends and peers Pablo Picasso, André Breton, and Tristan Tzara—collected and displayed African and Oceanic objects, and at certain points in his career, Calder’s works hint at formal resonance to a number of these objects. In his homes, Calder frequently displayed his own works alongside his collection of African and Oceanic objects. In the spirit of such juxtapositions, *Venus Over Manhattan*’s presentations will consider a group of Vanuatu figures, produced on the Ambrym and Banks Islands, alongside a selection of Alexander Calder’s gouache paintings on paper.

Reflecting forms from his sculptural practice, Alexander Calder’s paintings on paper comprise a significant aspect of his production. During a transformative year in Aix-en-Provence in 1953, he produced a series of gouaches that drew thematic and visual parallels to his mobiles and stabiles. This technique, which he would refine and revisit throughout his life, allowed Calder to channel the language of his sculpture toward a medium that contrasted with the hulking monumentality of his sheet metal works. Reflecting the angularity and kinetic energy synonymous with his sculptures, these gouaches intertwine geometric motifs with more grounded, representational themes. Echoing visions of his early wire sculptures, these works variously capture spiraling vortices set against pyramid backdrops—a motif kindled by a plane trip over Egypt—and are juxtaposed with radiant impressions reminiscent of sunrises seen on his travels to South America. Taking celestial bodies, human figures, and natural forms as inspiration, Calder’s brushstrokes assemble

VENUS OVER MANHATTAN



arabesques, orbs, and audacious striped patterns. With compositions awash in his primary palette of red, yellow, blue, and black, Calder's paintings on paper stand as a testament to his lifelong dedication to his signature vision.

The Vanuatu figures on view hail exclusively from the Ambrym and Banks Islands of Vanuatu, and were produced during the early 20th century. The core of the group comprises two sets of towering fern figures, notable for their distinct stylistic differences. The larger group, featuring curvilinear forms and bright sections of hand-painted color, represents a formal approach unique to Ambrym Island, centrally located in the archipelago of Vanuatu. The second group, which features a more geometric approach to figuration, is unique to the Banks Islands, located at the northern end of the archipelago.

Though the individual characteristics of the communities that comprise Vanuatu vary significantly among its islands—some 100 languages are spoken among the nation's 250,000 inhabitants—the region is bound by a general social, political, and religious structure known as Kastom. The particularities of this cultural system vary between communities, but central to the societies on the Ambrym and Banks islands is the "Grade" system, a hierarchical structure through which members of the community advance their status. The two sets of figures, then, represent works commissioned by individuals as ritualized offerings that permit entry to successively higher grades. As Crispin Howarth notes in his book, *Kastom: Art of Vanuatu*, "[t]he commissioned sculpture is a form of public monument that, along with drumming, performance, and sacrificing pigs, signifies that an individual is taking a new grade." Carved from the fibrous trunk of the fern tree, these figures function as temporary homes for spirits associated with specific grades and represent uniquely figurative approaches to sculptural form.

VENUS OVER MANHATTAN

ABOUT VENUS OVER MANHATTAN

Founded in 2012 by Adam Lindemann, Venus Over Manhattan is dedicated to unique and iconoclastic exhibitions featuring the work of both historic and contemporary artists. Venus represents and collaborates with numerous artists and estates including Cornelius Annor, Anastasia Bay, Ana Benaroya, Joan Brown, Roger Brown, Robert Colescott, John Dogg, Jack Goldstein, Michael Kagan, Susumu Kamijo, Sophie Larrimore, Richard Mayhew, Maryan, Peter Saul, Sally Saul, Shinichi Sawada, Keiichi Tanaami, H.C. Westermann, Dustin Yellin, and Joseph Elmer Yoakum. In its ten-year history, the gallery has also staged major exhibitions of work by Billy Al Bengston, Katherine Bernhardt, Bernard Buffet, Alexander Calder, Maurizio Cattelan, William N. Copley, Walter Dahn, Roy De Forest, Mike Kelley, John McCracken, David Medalla, Cady Noland, Charlotte Perriand, Raymond Pettibon, Andy Warhol, and Franz West.

For further information about the exhibitions and availability, please contact the gallery at info@venusovermanhattan.com

VENUS OVER MANHATTAN

39 Great Jones Street
New York, NY 10012
55 Great Jones Street
New York, NY 10012

GALLERY HOURS

Tuesday – Saturday
10:00 am – 6:00 pm

IMAGE CREDITS

Detail of "Black Leafed Flowers," 1972. Gouache and ink on paper; 29 1/2 x 43 in (74.9 x 109.2 cm). Private Collection Alexander Calder, "Kwai," 1974. Gouache on paper; 29 1/2 x 43 1/4 in (74.9 x 109.9 cm). Private Collection. Images of all works by Alexander Calder © 2023 Calder Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo courtesy Venus Over Manhattan, New York. Grade Society Figure, Ambrym Island. Fern wood, earth, vegetable matrix, paint; Height: 94 in (238.8 cm). Private Collection. Grade Society Figure, Ambrym Island. Fern wood, earth, vegetable matrix, paint. Height: 116 in (294.6 cm). Private Collection. Grade Society Figure, Banks Island; Height: 99 in (251.5 cm). Private Collection. Courtesy Venus Over Manhattan, New York. Grade Society Figure, Ambrym Island. Fern wood, earth, vegetable matrix, paint Height: 112 in (284.5 cm). Private Collection. Courtesy Venus Over Manhattan, New York.