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### AT SAM, THADDEUS MOSLEY AND ALEXANDER CALDER'S SCULPTURES JUXTAPOSED

by Thomas May



*Artist Thaddeus Mosley has 17 of his sculptures on display at Seattle Art Museum's "Following Space: Thaddeus Mosley & Alexander Calder" exhibition, running Nov. 20-June 1. (L. Fried)*

"You just keep going till you get there."

Thaddeus Mosley is describing how he will know when the sculpture he's currently working on is finished. At 98, he spends his days as he has countless others: transforming mute, hefty logs into mystery-imbued works of art.

Using a chisel and gouge, Mosley manipulates the natural curves and patterns of the wood so that they become freshly animated, revealing shapes as varied and malleable as cloud formations.

Seattle Art Museum is featuring 17 of Mosley's sculptures in "Following Space: Thaddeus Mosley and Alexander Calder." Named after the tallest of them — a gravity-defying wonder carved from cherry wood that soars nearly 10 feet — the newly opened exhibit (which runs through June 1) is a milestone that marks the largest showing of Mosley's work on the West Coast to date.

The Pittsburgh-based artist, best known for his monumental wood sculptures, has long been a hero in his hometown, but widespread recognition only started accelerating after Mosley was featured in the 2018-19 Carnegie International, an influential survey of contemporary art hosted by the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. That in turn led to Mosley's current representation by Karma Gallery in New York City, making him a highly sought-after figure.

"He's an extraordinary artist and should be celebrated far and wide, which is one of the reasons why we're thrilled to be able to show his work," says Catharina Manchanda, curator of modern and contemporary art at SAM.

Manchanda curated “Following Space” as part of the ongoing “Calder at SAM” initiative. When local philanthropists Jon Shirley and Kim Richter Shirley made their recent \$200 million bequest to SAM of 48 works by Alexander Calder, it additionally established an endowment to assess the trailblazing American sculptor’s legacy through exhibits that juxtapose Calder with other artists. Mosley is the first in this new series to be given a spotlight.

“Mobiles are probably what most people associate with Alexander Calder,” Manchanda says. “He became one of the most influential American sculptors of the 20th century because of his re-imagining and questioning of what sculpture can be.”

“Following Space” invites viewers to compare and contrast how Calder and Mosley articulate movement, material and temporality. The five Calder works that are included span from 1936 to 1956 — a period to which Mosley, who gave input on the selection, has said he feels particularly drawn.

According to Manchanda, the contrast between “actual movement” in the Calder pieces and the “suggested movement” characteristic of Mosley’s wood sculptures guided the choice of works.

“Mosley takes inspiration from this abstracted modern formal language,” she notes, “but he brings a different sensibility to it — through the warmth of his materials and his process as well as his appreciation of African carvings. He melds all these together.”

At the start of his artistic career, Mosley had a chance to meet Alexander Calder in person. The encounter took place at the 1958 Carnegie International, where the already famous older sculptor won first prize for his monumental mobile named after the city.

“He was one of the few people who thought that I had something to say in sculpture in my early days,” Mosley recalls.

“Keeper of trees”

Speaking by phone from his studio in Pittsburgh’s Manchester neighborhood, Mosley takes a break from his work-in-progress to talk about his career.

He grew up in a working-class Black family in Pennsylvania’s coal-mining region near New Castle. While Calder emerged from several generations of sculptors, Mosley learned how to sculpt on his own. He served in the Navy in World War II and then enrolled through the G.I. Bill at the University of Pittsburgh, where he majored in English and journalism. At the same time, Mosley avidly took in new discoveries during regular visits to the Carnegie Museum of Art across the street.

He remembers admiring some “decorative art pieces — little sculptures of birds and fish” that he saw one day in a department store display while looking for Scandinavian furniture. Mosley realized that he could carve pieces of wood “to make birds and fish of my own. That’s more or less what got me started.”

The aspiring young artist immersed himself in exploring the world of sculpture — much as he had long been doing to nourish his love of jazz, collecting records and visiting clubs to hear his favorites perform. Mosley saw as much as he could at the Carnegie and devoured any books he could find on sculpture; he later joined a group of local artists.

A significant influence on what Manchanda describes as the “levitational” quality of Mosley’s work came from his discovery of Isamu Noguchi’s marble slabs and their interplay of weight and space.

Another passion — the vast range of tribal art from West and Central Africa — took root during his student years, when Mosley became fascinated by the inspiration Modernist avant-garde artists like Picasso had found there.

After initially attempting to make a living writing about sports — “there were very few opportunities for me as a journalist” — Mosley took a job with the Postal Service to support his large family of six children.

During the daytime, Mosley followed his imagination, carving and chiseling the lumber he carefully gathered from trees felled by Pittsburgh’s park service. “I’m dealing with the roundness of the tree and trying to use that in different ways,” he says. His friend, the late painter Sam Gilliam, described Mosley in a poem as “keeper of trees anywhere.”

Mosley has also experimented with stone and bronze, but wood carving remains the focus of his practice more than six decades after he began sculpting. He explains “the property of the hardwoods” tends to guide his choice of material. “I like the contrast with cherry and walnut. They carve well for definition.”

No photograph can substitute for experiencing a Mosley sculpture face-to-face, close-up (another reason SAM’s exhibit is a valuable opportunity not to be missed). Part of the effect is viewing the vibrant traces of the artist’s interaction with his material.

“There’s a certain rhythm to how he works with his chisel,” says Manchanda. “He creates these visual ripple effects on the surface of the wood that are quite beautiful.”

A passion for jazz

The spontaneity and improvisational suggestiveness of Mosley’s sculptures have prompted comparisons with jazz — particularly in view of the artist’s lifelong passion for the genre.

“That started long before I began making sculpture,” Mosley recalls. “My mother played piano, and my oldest sister was a really fine musician and singer. We had music all the time.” He can still remember seeing Blanche Calloway when he was “about 8 or 9 years old” and points out that her younger brother Cab “more or less copied her antics and showmanship.”

When Manchanda tried to get directions to Mosley’s studio on her first visit there, she says she was told to “just follow the jazz — and that was exactly right.” The music from his impressive record collection is like a beacon, constantly being emitted while he’s at work, while the walls are lined with photos of musicians.

“It’s great company while I’m working — and even when I’m not working,” says Mosley. “I came up during the Golden Age of jazz.”

In consultation with Mosley, SAM put together an hourlong jazz playlist on Spotify to accompany the exhibit. It includes selections intended to illuminate the Calder pieces as well. “Our colleagues at the Calder Foundation in New York recently discovered that Calder also had a quite substantial jazz collection,” says Manchanda.

Mosley delights in the fact that he was born in the same year (1926) as some of the jazz legends he most admires: John Coltrane, Ray Brown, Miles Davis — whom he remembers driving around Pittsburgh in his gold Volkswagen Beetle. “Some of these great musicians I heard at least 20 times or so.”

A number of Mosley’s sculptures pay homage to these figures, though he cautions that his love of jazz is “a very separate thing” that doesn’t necessarily influence “the shape of the sculpture.”

“I’ve named pieces after Trane and Miles Davis and Duke Ellington. I did a couple of small Dizzy Gillespie sculptures, and there’s a Charlie Parker piece in my dining room.” Although the sculptures may be abstract, “the idea is to let people know that these phenomenal people exist” — and, he hopes, motivate viewers to find out more about why they matter.

SAM’s exhibit includes a striking example of Mosley’s sculptural homage to this jazz legacy. “Opposing Parallels — Blues Up and Down for G. Ammons and S. Stitt” (2015) is named for the tenor-sax duo of Gene Ammons and Sonny Stitt, and their standard hit from 1950.

“The components of the piece are cantilevered against each other and have almost hornlike shapes,” Manchanda says. These “capture the spirit” of the musicians’ sax/horn “without being literal. He’s not trying to illustrate or translate the music.”

Asked what he wishes SAM viewers will take away from the exhibit, Mosley responds: “You’re always hoping that they’ll find some of the joy and some of the creative inspiration that I probably found in Alexander Calder when I was young and looking and learning. I hope that it will make them become more curious about other creative people.”