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Shedding New Light on Old Friends

John Lei for The New York Times

Tanguy/Calder: Between Surrealism and Abstraction The two artists illuminate each other in this show, which brings together 45 of their works at L&M Arts.

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Alexander Calder and Yves Tanguy — old friends, drinking buddies and Connecticut neighbors — are together again. Or rather, their art is, in a delightful, immersive exercise in mutual illumination at L&M Arts on the Upper East Side. Surprisingly, this has never happened before.

The L&M exhibition, "Tanguy/Calder: Between Surrealism and Abstraction," brings together 46 works from 1934 to 1956. There are 25 sculptures by Calder, including marvelously ethereal, levitating stabiles and mobiles; some of the

wood-and-wire constellations; and three uncharacteristic bronze sculptures. Quite a few of these might almost have walked out of one or more of the 19 paintings and works on paper by Tanguy, some of which even include startlingly Calderesque wire structures, and nearly all of which depict oddly shaped, water-worn stones in amalgams that suggest human involvement, albeit long past. Stonehenge for pebble lovers. These formations, in varying densities, occupy vast plains that recede in increasingly atmospheric, horizon-free gradations of land, mist and sky. The colors often have a warm sunset glow — if not a lurid afterglow.

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Alexander Calder's “Wooden Bottle and Hairs” (1943) is paired with Yves Tanguy's canvas “L'Imprévu” (1940) at L&M Arts.

The two other pieces on view here are earrings — one by each artist, each half of a pair once owned by the collector Peggy Guggenheim. Calder’s is a spiky miniature mobile in silver that resembles a fish skeleton, Tanguy’s a tiny rock landscape painted on a silver-dollar-size disc of russet seashell. Set in gold, the Tanguy

(pronounced tahn-GHEE) resembles a minuscule version of a painting that might have once hung in a Venetian palazzo, which could help explain why some of his paintings can hint at Canaletto's open piazzas, wandering figures and extended shadows.

In 1942 Guggenheim wore one Calder earring and one Tanguy to the opening of her West 57th Street gallery-museum, The Art of This Century, to demonstrate her equal loyalty to Surrealist and abstract art, examples of which she displayed in separate galleries. Reading about this diplomatic solution inspired Dominique Lévy, the L of L&M, to assemble the current show.

During the last 75 years or so, Tanguy paintings and Calder sculptures have appeared together, along with works by sundry others, in group shows and thematic exhibitions beyond count. But until now, sizable numbers of Calders and Tanguys have gotten no closer than side-by-side solo shows — in adjacent rooms painted contrasting shades of gray — mounted in 1943 by their New York dealer, Pierre Matisse, at his East 57th Street gallery.

Born in Paris in 1900, Tanguy was a card-carrying Surrealist almost before he started teaching himself to paint in the mid-1920s, and he was one of the last to break with that movement's autocratic gatekeeper, André Breton. (He finally did so in the early 1950s because Breton so openly disliked Tanguy's wife, the Surrealist painter Kay Sage, whom he married in 1940.) Calder, born in Lawnton, Pa., in 1898, tried to distance himself from Surrealism by calling himself an abstractionist.

But the distinction seems slightly arcane today. The show's subtitle is apt: *between* Surrealism and abstraction. For one thing, both artists learned a great

deal from Miró and — judging by the works here — also paid more than a little attention to the smooth, stonelike shapes of Isamu Noguchi's sculpture. And both artists built their work on biomorphism, which swings both ways. Calder's is a bit more straight-edged; after all, encountering Mondrian's severely abstract paintings had added ambition to Calder's amazing natural gifts.

The formal vocabulary of the equally gifted Tanguy is more truly organic, and later geological, in keeping with his lifelong attention to nature. His early paintings are full of soft, drifting sea creatures and plants. The work he turned to after he and Sage relocated to New York from Paris in 1939 seemed to draw more directly on a childhood spent mostly in Brittany, with its rocky coasts and Neolithic monoliths and stone circles, and on trips as an adult to places like North Africa and the American Southwest.

Tanguy and Sage settled in Woodbury, Conn., in 1941, after visiting the Calders in nearby Roxbury, Conn., and liking what they saw. It helped that the Connecticut woods were full of Surrealists, including, at least during the war, André and Jacqueline Breton, André and Rose Masson and Peter and Ebie Blume. All this is spelled out in wonderful detail by Susan Davidson in the show's substantial and expertly designed catalog.

Maybe Tanguy and Calder had just enough but not too much in common as artists to be friends. Visible differences are crucial to such relationships, and despite obvious shared interests, the differences visible here point to two extremely dissimilar sensibilities.

For example, they flouted completely different Modernist taboos. Calder, dressed almost invariably like a lumberjack, seems to have been in perpetual motion in

his barn studio in Connecticut, picking up one idea and then another. The diversity and physical ingenuity of the work here amaze and may seem to steal the show until you start looking closely at the Tanguys.

Calder's art is also almost always humorous, which modern art tended to be less and less as the 20th century progressed. And the levity is especially obvious once you realize that elegance, levitation and tenuous balance are in themselves funny. Calder is even amusing in the bronzes he made in 1944, especially "The Vine," a balancing act of a plant with a dragonlike slouch straight out of Dr. Seuss.

Tanguy, who painted in an artist's smock over his shirt and tie, was, you might say, rock steady. He concentrated unwaveringly on getting the most out of his initial style, romancing the soft bean shapes of his early paintings into gardens and armies of fully dimensional stone. His evidently tiny paintbrush might almost have been a chisel.

And like Dalí, Tanguy had no qualms about returning to the light, space and precision of the Northern Renaissance — with some updating via post-Freudian subject matter. He proved not only that seemingly reactionary means could be used to radical ends, but also that a new painting's conversation with the past could be enriching in itself.

In contrast, Calder couldn't be bothered with sculpture's past; it was one of the things he flouted. His tools were popular culture and mechanics, engineering and physics. He looked to the future, presaging most of all the structural transparence of Minimalism, if not its lack of humor.

Despite his days as an antic young Surrealist and the definite buoyancy in his

early paintings, Tanguy was not nearly as amusing in his art as Calder was, and probably not as happy in life. Either that, or he just couldn't hold his liquor as well, since he more or less drank himself to death, dying of a stroke at 55 in 1955.

In the catalog to the memorial exhibition of Tanguy's work held later that year at the Museum of Modern Art, James Thrall Soby, one of the great unsung curator-writers of Modernism, rightly identified Tanguy's "essential solemnity as a painter — a quality standing in marked contrast to the deliberate playfulness of much Surrealist art."

That Tanguy was a European, and that three-quarters of the works here were made during or after World War II, may have had something to do with this solemnity. As others have said before, his stone gardens can also be seen as cemeteries, boneyards and postnuclear wastelands.

"Tanguy/Calder: Between Surrealism and Abstraction" runs through June 12 at L&M Arts, 45 East 78th Street, Manhattan; (212) 861-0020, lmgallery.com.