30 WORKS for 30 YEARS

The Menil Collection  August 11, 2017–January 28, 2018
INTRODUCTION

The Menil Collection opened in June 1987 to house the extraordinary art collection John and Dominique de Menil began assembling in the 1940s. The de Menils were ardent believers in the importance of art to human experience and shared a desire to make their holdings available to the public. They exhibited works from their collection at a number of institutions over the years, and by the time of John’s death in 1973, the couple had begun to explore the creation of an independent museum. The de Menils had acquired a substantial amount of real estate in the Montrose area of Houston, and in 1980 Dominique engaged the Italian architect Renzo Piano to create a building that seemed “large on the inside but small on the outside.” The resultant, a substantial amount of real estate in the Montrose area of Houston, and in 1980 Dominique engaged the Italian architect Renzo Piano to create a building that seemed “large on the inside but small on the outside.” The resultant, award-winning structure anchors a neighborhood of art.

The Menil Collection was never intended to be a static entity. The Cy Twombly Gallery, Dan Flavin installation at Richmond Hall, and Byzantine Fresco Chapel have been added to its thirty-acre campus. Five directors have guided the institution through more than two hundred special exhibitions. Artists, poets, musicians, and choreographers have all contributed to its vision, as have the museum’s trustees and staff. Nearly two thousand acquisitions, including important gifts and bequests, have enriched the museum’s holdings since Dominique de Menil’s death in 1997. An additional art space—the Menil Drawing Institute—will be inaugurated in 2018.

A celebration of the legacy of John and Dominique de Menil and the continued growth of the museum’s collection and exhibition spaces, Thirty Works for Thirty Years is a history lesson in the guise of a treasure hunt, an opportunity to see favorite works of art anew and to discover pieces rarely on display. One work has been chosen to represent each year of the Menil Collection’s existence. The selection of works on view, placed throughout the museum and across the campus, reflects the range of the museum’s holdings.

The de Menils’ acquisitions were guided by instinct and informed by their relationships with artists and scholars. Father Marie-Alain Couturier, a defining figure in the evolution of the couple’s collecting practices, introduced them to modern art early on and inspired them to acquire work by such artists as Pablo Picasso and Alexander Calder. With the encouragement of gallerist Alexander Iolas, an early champion of Surrealism in the United States, they went on to assemble extensive holdings of works by Victor Brauner, Max Ernst, and René Magritte. The couple expanded their collection to a generation of artists that includes Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol. In recent years, the Menil has been especially committed to collecting the work of those who explore Surrealism’s enduring legacy, such as Maurizio Cattelan and Vija Celmins. Other areas of strength include the arts of Africa, the Pacific Islands, and the Pacific Northwest. The fifteen-volume entry on John Chamberlain in the museum’s inaugural special exhibition, American Tableau, in the museum’s inaugural American Tableau, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from September 12 through November 10, 1984. —CE

1987

JOHN CHAMBERLAIN
American Tableau, 1984
Paint and chromium-plated steel
144 × 252 × 132 inches (365.8 × 640.1 × 335.3 cm)
Conservation was funded by a grant from the Bank of America Art Conservation Project

In 1957, John Chamberlain (1927–2011) moved from Black Mountains College in North Carolina to New York, where he was drawn to the shapes and colors of automobile parts that were freely available from junkyards and body shops. He bent and folded metal sheets and added and removed paint, expanding on the range of color and texture he encountered in the found metal. Despite its heavy and unyielding character, Chamberlain often achieved a lyrical quality.

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1984

ANDY WARHOL
Lavender Disaster, 1963
Acrylic, silkscreen ink, and pencil on linen
106 × 87½ inches (269.2 × 208 cm)

In the early 1960s, Pop artist Andy Warhol (1928–1987) began a famous and sensationalistic series of “death and disaster” paintings featuring the gruesome images that flood American popular culture. Using silkscreen, a technique then more associated with advertising than fine art, he reproduced photographs of violence: car crashes, suicides, and police dog attacks on Civil Rights demonstrators. In Lavender Disaster, an image of an electric chair is repeated fifteen times against an incongruously soothing purple background. The density of the black ink increases with each recurrence until the final chair nearly disappears in a murky void. The “SILENCE” sign in the original photograph—simultaneously a command to execution witnesses and an intimation of death—echoes Warhol’s ownlegendarily detached worldview. In 1988, Lavender Disaster was one of the works displayed in the Menil’s exhibition Andy Warhol: Death and Disasters.

All works are from The Menil Collection and are displayed in the main museum building, except where noted.

—TK
The art of René Magritte (1898–1967) is a cornerstone of the Menil Collection. He is represented by nearly sixty works spanning the 1920s through the 1960s. The de Menils underwrote the creation of a catalogue raisonné of the artist’s work, and in 1989 the Menil Collection presented the exhibition René Magritte: Late Works. One of the works included was Golconda, in which bowler-hatted men facing various directions hover ambiguously in space. The figures fill the painting’s foreground, middle ground, and background in a grid-like arrangement and become increasingly anonymous as they recede into the distance above the rooftops. Magritte described his images as the solutions to problems—here, that of space—found by probing the hidden qualities of the ordinary. It is at once marvelous and commonplace, he pointed out, for people to “travel through the sky on the earth,” though their weightless appearance in Golconda is surprising. The artist frequently depicted men in bowler hats, yet here, his reduction of the anonymous as they recede into the distance above the rooftops suggests a mundane way,” she added.

In 1953, Trisha Brown (1936–2017) was invited to the Menil Collection to discuss her collaboration with Robert Rauschenberg and Laurie Anderson on the dance Set and Reset (1985), perhaps her most famous choreographic work. Throughout her long career, Brown used drawing to generate choreographic material as well as document both improvised and set solo dances. In the 1970s, she began exploring the use of video recording and a strategy she called “memorized improvisation.” This shift, in part, allowed her drawing practice to take on a life of its own, culminating in the world premiere of It’s a Draw (July 2002) at the Théâtre du Hangar in Montpellier, France. The works Brown created in the summer of 2002, including Untitled (Montpellier), demonstrate her distinctive ability to draw not only with her hands and feet but also with her torso, legs, and head. She remarked once that her dances often contain personal, quirky gestures that were meaningful to her but looked abstract to others. “I make radical changes in a mundane way,” she added.

In 1991, Nelson Mandela, the anti-apartheid activist and then president of South Africa, traveled to Houston to observe the twentieth anniversary of the Rothko Chapel. John and Dominique de Menil had founded the non-sectarian worship space dedicated to human rights and social justice in 1971. Now an independent foundation, it eventually include the Menil Collection. The idea had begun to take shape in 1964, after the death of the de Menils’ close friend the curator Jermayne MacAgy. That year, the couple commissioned Mark Rothko (1903–1970) to execute a cycle of paintings for what was originally intended to be the chapel of the University of Saint Thomas. The choice of a secular Jewish artist for what was conceived as a Catholic institution reflects the inclusive and universal spirituality that both Rothko and the de Menils embraced. Fourteen canvases hang in the chapel, but the artist painted twenty, six of which are now housed in the Menil Collection. The six so-called alternate panels most closely resemble the painting on the south wall of the chapel—a black rectangle on a plum ground. Seldom displayed or exposed to light, these panels best preserve Rothko’s original palette.

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In his painting *Voice*, Jasper Johns (b. 1930) presents two canvases in his signature grays with a pivoted lath affixed at the base of a downward arc. The wire and slat measure space in relation to the artist’s body, with the sweeping motion recalling both his own presence and the Vitruvian Man’s ideal proportions. Averse to illusion, Johns seldom renders objects when he can append the real thing—here, a fork and spoon loosely dangle from the wire pulled taut across the surface. In 1996, the Menil Collection presented the first exhibition dedicated to the sculptures of the artist. The museum’s commitment to Johns has continued to this day with drawing exhibitions and the research for and compilation of the complete catalogue raisonné of his drawings (forthcoming).

—KM

**JASPER JOHNS**  
*Voice*, 1964/67  
Oil on two canvases with wood, string, wire, and metal spoon and fork  
96 × 691/2 inches (243.8 × 176.5 cm)

The Menil Collection’s stand-alone Cy Twombly Gallery opened in 1995. Designed by Renzo Piano, the architect of the main building, in collaboration with Cy Twombly (1928–2011), it continued the tradition of single-artist spaces in the Menil neighborhood that began with the Rothko Chapel. Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor), 1994  
Oil, acrylic, oil stick, crayon, and graphite on three canvases  
1571/2 × 624 inches (400.1 × 1,585 cm)  
Purchased with funds provided by Dominique de Menil

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**CY TWOMBLY**  
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1571/2 × 624 inches (400.1 × 1,585 cm)

Conceived by John Cage (1912–1992) and presented at the Menil in 1994, the exhibition *Rolywholyover: A Circus for Museum* emphasized the interconnectedness of the arts and embodied the concept of continual change. Cage was deeply influenced by Eastern thought, in particular by Zen Buddhism and ideas of randomness. The selection of artworks on view and their placement were determined daily by a computerized I Ching program; some objects were moved as many as twenty-sevens times during the run of the exhibition. The project involved contributions from visual and performing arts organizations across Houston. Rolywholyover’s dynamic nature echoed the Asian conception of five continually morphing elements (earth, water, fire, wind, and void), as does *River Rocks and Smoke 4/9/90 #5*. To make this drawing, Cage covered a human-sized sheet of paper with water and waved it through the air over a fire. Once the paper was prepared with soot, river rocks were placed on the surface and encircled with feathers dipped in watercolor.

—JB

**JOHN CAGE**  
*River Rocks and Smoke 4/9/90 #5*, 1990  
Watercolor and smoke-applied soot on paper  
72 × 471/4 inches (182.9 × 120 cm)  
Purchased with funds provided by Dominique de Menil

In 1993, the Menil Collection presented the exhibition *Max Ernst: Dada and the Dawn of Surrealism*. It was a fitting choice given that John and Dominique de Menil were the most significant collectors of the work of Max Ernst (1891–1976) in the United States and underwrote the publication of his catalogue raisonné. In 1932, the de Menils had commissioned the artist to paint a portrait of Dominique. Not yet familiar with Surrealism, the young couple were nonplussed by the resulting image of her profile floating across a brown background alongside several pale, shell-like shapes. They left the painting behind when they fled Paris for the United States during World War II. In the following years, the de Menils circulated among a group of exiled intellectuals and artists who encouraged the couple’s appreciation for modern art. Encountering Ernst’s portrait anew after the war ended was like seeing it for the first time, they reported. Dominique de Menil recalled rediscovering the painting wrapped in paper on top of an armoire: “We opened it and we screamed, because by then our eyes were open.”

—CE

**MAX ERNST**  
*Portrait of Dominique*, ca. 1932  
Oil and graphite on canvas  
251/4 × 211/4 inches (65.4 × 54 cm)

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**MAX ERNST**  
*Portrait of Dominique*, ca. 1932  
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251/4 × 211/4 inches (65.4 × 54 cm)
The Byzantine Fresco Chapel opened in 1997 to house two thirteenth-century frescoes rescued and restored on behalf of the Holy Archdiocesan Court of Cyprus. It was a fitting complement to the Menil Collection’s internationally recognized collection of sixth- to seventeenth-century icons from the Byzantine Empire in the eastern Mediterranean and from the Eastern Orthodox Christian churches of Greece and Russia. Coinciding with the opening of the chapel, the Menil acquired this fifteenth-century icon to commemorate both the museum’s tenth anniversary and Dominique de Menil’s eighty-ninth birthday. Entry into Jerusalem is replete with imagery associated with the Christian observance of Palm Sunday and the beginning of the Passion. In the lower right, Christ rides a white mule from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem. As recounted in the Gospels, he is greeted by children who extend branches and offer their clothes to cover the dirt path. Others imprudently climb a tree with axes in hand or pull thorns from their feet, perhaps foreshadowing the events of the Passion.

—PD

Shortly before he died, Minimalist artist Dan Flavin (1933–1996) completed a design for the Dan Flavin Installation at Richmond Hall. Consisting of three separate but related artworks, the permanent, site-specific installation commissioned by Dominique de Menil opened in 1998. On the exterior of the building, two horizontal lines of green fluorescent lamps articulate the top edges. In the entryway, two diagonal daylight fluorescent lamps reach across angled, opposing walls. The largest work occupies the main interior space. A horizontal double row of filtered ultraviolet lamps runs the length of the room on two facing walls. Above and below them, vertical lamps, slightly offset from one another, repeat a sequence of pink, yellow, green, and blue. Their structure and placement activate the space between them by filling it with soft color. The colored light blends together on the polished concrete floor and the white walls, enlivening the long, rectangular hall.

—HB

Women in the Lake Sentani and Humboldt Bay regions of the island of New Guinea historically wore plain, unadorned cloth made from the bark of trees. In response to European interest in the arts of New Guinea in the 1920s, decorated bark cloth, or maro, became more prevalent. One of two examples John and Dominique de Menil acquired in 1932 from Surrealist author and art dealer Jacques Viot, this maro features a design of abstracted sea creatures. Under the aegis of gallerist Pierre Loeb, Viot traveled to the Humboldt Bay region in 1929. There, he collected numerous maro with similar designs as well as several large wood figures that had previously adorned the tall posts of ceremonial houses. Dominique de Menil met Viot shortly after his return to Paris through his neighbor Max Ernst. (Ernst’s painting Portrait of Dominique, ca. 1932, from the same period is also on view [see entry for 1995].) In 1999, Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision opened at the Menil Collection as a tribute to Dominique de Menil from her son-in-law, the anthropologist Edmund Snow Carpenter. This bark cloth is included in the long-term installation near other compelling objects admired and collected by the Surrealists.

—PD

From 1960 onward, John and Dominique de Menil studied artistic representations of peoples of African descent. Their decades of work culminated in the book series The Image of the Black in Western Art. The Menil Collection includes many examples of depictions of Africans and members of the African Diaspora. Given to the Menil by former director Paul Winkler in 2000, this 1997 pop-up book by Kara Walker employs the silhouetted nineteenth-century imagery that characterizes much of her work. Through word and image, Freedom, a Fable tells the story of the journey and struggle of a formerly enslaved African American woman who faces personal and universal horrors and challenges. The dynamic character of the pop-up enhances the moving nature of Walker’s narrative, the ambiguous future facing the story’s protagonist, and more generally, the struggles of many African Americans after emancipation.

—EW
ARTWORK LOCATION GUIDE

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American Tableau, 1984

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1997 Entry into Jerusalem, early to mid 15th century

1998 DAN FLAVIN
untitled, 1998

1999 Bark Cloth (Maro), late 1920s

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Freedom, a Fable ..., 1997

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Hurt the Word Radio #1, 1964

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Isolated Mass/Circumflex (#3), 1968/78

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Promenade of Merce Cunningham, 1963

2004 Michael Heizer
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Two Acrobats, 1929

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Feast Ladle, 19th–20th century

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Figure (Dege), 17th–early 20th century

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Untitled (Horse and Rider), ca. 1953
Edward Ruscha (b. 1937) loves words, their sounds, the shapes of their letters, and even their “temperatures”—the ways they can become “hot” and transcend dictionary definitions. With trademark dry humor, he transforms the sureshit of “visual noise” pervading his Los Angeles home into laconic image-and-word rebuses for the information age. Hurting the Word Radio is one of several paintings using similar-sounding words the artist associates with his city, including “radio,” “rodeo,” and “adios.” It contrasts the authority of sign painting—in which Ruscha was trained—with a playful exploration of language’s innate elasticity and slipperiness. A C-clamp of the type probably found in his studio squeezes the “O” in “RADIO” suggesting the ways broadcast news, pop songs, and twenty-four-hour talk can mangle language and warp minds. This 1964 oil on canvas depicts three tall figures that reflect his interests in the duality of human and animal, metamorphoses, and rebirth. Using his knowledge of ancient and contemporary cultures, he rendered geometric shapes that resemble the images of Egyptian hieroglyphs, Mayan codices, and the kachina figures of the Hopi. Using found wood panels as a support, the artist applied and incised thin layers of wax, paint, and ink, a technique he invented during World War II, when traditional materials were scarce.

—TK

In 2002, the Menil Collection organized Victor Brauner: Surrealist Hieroglyphs, the first American museum exhibition dedicated to the work of the Romanian-born, Paris-based artist (1903–1966). The project dated back to 1997, when Dominique de Menil initiated plans for a retrospective. Throughout his career, the artist and his patron maintained an extensive correspondence that reveals a kinship of ideas, particularly their mutual belief in art as a universal language. A keen student of folklore and symbolism, Brauner developed a unique artistic vocabulary that fused his biography with the archetypes widely seen in Surrealism. In Memory of Reflexes, he depicted three tall figures that reflect his interests in the duality of human and animal, metamorphoses, and rebirth. Using his knowledge of ancient and contemporary cultures, he rendered geometric shapes that resemble the images of Egyptian hieroglyphs, Mayan codices, and the kachina figures of the Hopi. Using found wood panels as a support, the artist applied and incised thin layers of wax, paint, and ink, a technique he invented during World War II, when traditional materials were scarce.

In 2003, the Menil Collection and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, jointly presented James Rosenquist: A Retrospective, co-curated by the Menil’s founding director, Walter Hopps. For several years early in his career, James Rosenquist (1933–2017) made abstract paintings. By 1960, however, he had moved away from abstraction and developed a signature style characterized by large, slickly illusionistic paintings of fragmented and juxtaposed images that he culled from advertisements and mass media. The artist used the techniques he had learned as a commercial billboard painter to enlarge collaged compositions, sometimes to monumental scale. Promenade of Merce Cunningham—a pastiche of dancing feet and a woman’s face on a ground of Chinese noodles—was included in the exhibition and is dedicated to the innovative choreographer. Rosenquist recalled that the Cunningham dance company’s ability to “allow anything and everything into their performances is something I tried to address in this work.”

—CE

A pioneer of Land Art, Michael Heizer (b. 1944) began creating immense earthworks in the 1960s, many of which required large machinery. In 1968, for Nine Nevada Depressions, the artist dug nine large curved and zigzagged trenches into a dry Nevada lake bed, which were then left to erode away. Several of these designs were later re-created in weathering steel, Isolated Mass/Circumflex (#2) is one of the resulting works. It was sited and installed by the artist on the Menil Collection’s front lawn just before the museum’s opening in 1987. Heizer interrupted one of its sections with the central walkway in order to reinforce its identity as sculpture rather than a linear design element framed by the surrounding sidewalks. The 2004 exhibition Earthworks: Land Art at the Menil celebrated the outdoor “pavilions” made up of this work and three other sculptures by the artist near the museum’s main entrance, a testament to John and Dominique de Menil’s early support of Land Art.
**ALEXANDER CALDER**

**Two Acrobats**, 1929
Paint, wire, and wood base
34 1/2 × 21 5/8 × 6 1/2 inches (87.8 × 54.9 × 16.5 cm)

In the 1940s, a Northwest Coast spoon in the window of Julius Carlebach’s New York gallery reportedly caught the eye of John and Dominique de Menil’s close friend the artist Max Ernst. Decades later, the couple acquired this similar ladle. In 2006, it was included in *Chance Encounters: The Formation of the de Menils’ African Collection*, curated by Kristina Van Dyke in the 2008 publication *African Art from the Menil Collection*. 

The artist was drawn to cardboard’s susceptibility to damage and its inevitable deterioration: “A desire built up in me to work in a material of waste and softness. Something yielding with its only message a collection of lives imprinted like a friendly joke. A silent discussion of their history exposed by their new shapes.”

— KM

**KWAKWAKA’WAKW (KWAKIUTL) peoples**

**Feast Ladle**, 19th–20th century
Canada, British Columbia
Wood and abalone shell
8 1/4 × 21 5/8 × 6 3/8 inches (22.2 × 54.9 × 16.2 cm)

In 2007, the Menil Collection mounted the first major exhibition of Cardboards by Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008). These works—boxes split open and placed in large arrangements, their dents and creases from use on full display—had not been on public view since their 1971 debut at the Leo Castelli Gallery. Rauschenberg began this body of work in 1970 after leaving New York City for the island town of Captiva, Florida, which became his permanent residence. Enlivened by the stamps and scuffing of shipment and transportation, *National Spinning/Red/Spring (Cardboard)* evinces the global movement of goods.

Figural sculpture, or dege, from the Dogon peoples in the Bandiagara region of West Africa make up a significant portion of the Menil Collection’s holdings of art from Africa. They can function as objects carried in celebratory processions and shrines for receiving devotional offerings. This figure’s archetypal pose, in which the arms are raised, is often interpreted as a spiritual appeal for rain. It was one of the first works from the Dogon peoples acquired by John and Dominique de Menil and was frequently on view in their Houston home during the 1960s. The figure is representative of the significant role the couple played in the history of collecting art from Africa in the United States during the twentieth century. The de Menils elegantly combined their aesthetic and spiritual appreciation of these objects with social activism to effect change, as elucidated by former curator Kristina Van Dyke in the 2008 publication *African Art from the Menil Collection*. 

John and Dominique de Menil purchased Two Acrobats from Alexander Calder (1898–1976) in 1952 and donated it to the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Dominique then repurchased the work in 1974. It was included in the Menil Collection’s 2005-06 exhibition *The Surreal Calder*. Early in his career, Calder was asked to sketch scenes from the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey traveling circus for the National Police Gazette. He was so enamored that he returned almost every night for two weeks. The experience sparked a lifelong interest in the circus, reflected in his subject matter, lightheartedness, and spectacle of his work.

**ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG**

**National Spinning/Red/Spring (Cardboard)**, 1971
Cardboard, wood, string, and steel
100 × 98 1/2 × 8 1/2 inches (254 × 250.2 × 21.6 cm)

Purchase, with funds contributed by The Brown Foundation, Inc., and the following Menil Board of Trustees: Luisa Stude Sarofim, Frances R. Dittmer, Estate of James Elkins, Jr., Wendi Gemes, Agnes Gund, Janie C. Lee, Isabel S. Lummis, Roy Nolen, Charles Wright, Michael Zilkha

**DOGON peoples**

**Figure (Dege)**, 17th–early 20th century
Mali, Bandiagara Circle
Wood
67 × 31 1/4 × 9 3/8 inches (170.2 × 28.6 × 23.8 cm)

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MAURIZIO CATTELAN

Untitled, 2009

Canvas, wood, and plastic

82⅜ × 32⅜ × 12½ inches (209.9 × 82.1 × 31.8 cm)

Joint acquisition of The Menil Collection, Houston, with funds provided by Nina and Michael Zilkha; Dallas Museum of Art, gift of The Rachofsky Collection and Deedie and Rusty Rose; The Rachofsky Collection; and Deedie and Rusty Rose

The acquisition of this untitled 2009 work by Maurizio Cattelan (b. 1960) was made possible through cooperation with the Dallas Museum of Art, the Rachofsky Collection, and Deedie and Rusty Rose. This sculpture plays with museum visitors’ expectations and the idea of art itself. It displays the coy sense of humor that has characterized the work of the Italian artist throughout his career. At first glance, the work is a horrifying mistake. Did a janitor accidentally push a broomstick into a work of art? Among multiple art historical references, Cattelan’s gesture with the broom pays homage to the early twentieth-century readymades of Marcel Duchamp, who presented ordinary objects in the museum setting as art. The apparent calm in this photograph of a lunch counter sit-in belies the bravery required of the African Americans who defied the “Whites Only” rule of their time. They observed the Nashville Code of nonviolent protest:

1) Don’t strike back or curse if abused.
2) Don’t laugh out.
3) Don’t hold conversations with floor workers.
4) Don’t block entrances to the stores and aisles.
5) Show yourself courteous and friendly at all times.
6) Sit straight and always face the counter.
7) Remember love and nonviolence.
8) May God bless each of you.

—MW

Danny Lyon

Atlanta, Georgia. A Toddle House has the distinction of being occupied during a sit-in by some of America’s most effective organizers. In the room are Taylor Washington, Isamah Donaldson, Joyce Ladner, John Lewis behind Judy Richardson, George Green and Chico Nebbitt., 1964, printed 2000

Gelatin silver print

11 x 14 in. (27.9 x 35.6 cm)

Gift of Edmund Carpenter and Adelaide de Menil

The museum’s 2010 book Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil chronicles the couple’s commitment to human rights, including their relationship with activist photographer Danny Lyon (b. 1942). His images for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee document crucial moments of the Civil Rights Movement, and his 1970 exhibition Conversations with the Dead at Rice University exposed disturbing truths about the Texas prison system. The de Menil family has been ardent supporters of Lyon’s socially conscious work, and the Menil Collection has significant holdings of both his photographs and related archival materials. The apparent calm in this photograph of a lunch counter sit-in belies the bravery required of the African Americans who defied the “Whites Only” rule of their time. They observed the Nashville Code of nonviolent protest:

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—MW

VIJA CELMINS

Torso, 1964

Oil on wood

35⅞ × 15 × 9 inches (90.2 × 38.1 × 22.9 cm)

Gift of Edmund Carpenter and Adelaide de Menil

This painted wood mannequin torso by Vija Celmins (b. 1938) was acquired in 2011, following the artist’s solo exhibition at the Menil. One of her earliest extant works, Torso was completed while Celmins was studying painting at the University of California, Los Angeles. The Vietnam War was under way, television and the media were transforming the way people looked at the world, the “cool school” iteration of Pop Art was forming on the West Coast, and artists like Celmins were grappling with the question of representational painting after Abstract Expressionism. Though best known for her paintings and drawings of starry skies, desert floors, and ocean waves, surfaces that seem to go on forever, in the 1960s Celmins worked primarily with images of violence and disaster culled from magazines and newspapers. Photographs of atomic bombs pervaded the press, and the explosion depicted here, with its long plume, likely has its source in an image of China’s first test of the A-bomb. The artist’s photorealistic aesthetic is based on copying a straight and objective approach to brushwork with what she calls “impossible images.”

—MW

RICHARD SERRA

Emerson, 2010

Paint stick on handmade paper

78⅜ × 76⅜ inches (199.4 × 199.4 cm)

Gift of Frances Dittmer in honor of Louisa Stude Sarofim and Jamie C. Lee; and gift of Michael and Diane Cannon in honor of Marion Barthelme

The drawings of Richard Serra (b. 1939) are about line, form, gesture, and the body’s contact with a surface. Though he is primarily known as a sculptor, drawing is an important part of his practice, allowing him to experiment with ways of making and marking. Black oil paint stick has been Serra’s drawing medium of choice since the early 1970s. He has melted it, processed it in a meat grinder, and pounded the viscous waxy substance into thick pieces of paper. The resulting works defy the idea of a “drawing.” The technique used for Emerson involved pushing and compressing melted or molten paint stick against a paper support on a low horizontal table. Evidence of this physical process is visible in the work. Impressions of thumbprints and boot marks show that Serra pressed the pigment with so much force that it splattered around the perimeter of the rounded form. Emerson was included in the 2012 traveling exhibition Richard Serra Drawing: A Retrospective, the first retrospective of the artist’s drawings and the first major one-person exhibition to be organized under the auspices of the Menil Drawing Institute.

—MW

—JB
In 2016, the Menil organized an exhibition of works from the collection of Houston-based patrons Stephanie and John Smither. As Essential as Dreams: Self-Taught Art from the Collection of Stephanie and John Smither, consisted largely of promised gifts to the museum and included works ranging from early twentieth-century Europe to contemporary works from Japan and the American South by more than thirty self-taught artists. This drawing by Martín Ramírez (1895–1963) was among the works on view. Ramírez was institutionalized in Northern California for much of his life, and it was there that he produced his drawings. In Untitled (Horse and Rider), rhythmic parallel lines radiate outward and frame the figure in a dynamic representation of pictorial space. Although the horse and rider is a recurrent motif in Ramírez’s work, likely derived from his memories of ranching in his native Mexico, this drawing is rare in that the figure rides bareback.

On his fortieth birthday, in 1948, Barnett Newman (1905–1970) discovered the painting format he would explore for the remaining twenty-two years of his career: fields of intense, earthy colors punctuated by vertical bands extending the full height of the painting. Newman would later refer to these marks as “zips.” Considered by the artist to be one of his most significant early paintings, Be I entered the Menil Collection as a gift from Annalee Newman, the artist’s widow. In 2002, the Menil began a seven-year restoration to correct damage that had befallen the painting in 1959. This led to the 2015 exhibition Barnett Newman: The Late Work, in which Be I appeared. A second version of this painting is owned by the Detroit Institute of Arts; Newman created it in 1970 using the even sparser visual language and acrylic emulsion paints characteristic of his late paintings.

For more than fifty years, Richard Tuttle (b. 1941) has been pushing against the boundaries of what might constitute art. No. 7 consists of two parts: a pencil line drawn directly onto the wall and ceiling and corrugated paper squares painted orange, red, green, yellow, turquoise, and navy blue. The squares are stapled onto a plywood support that is mounted mere inches from the floor. In one diminutive work, the artist united drawing with sculpture, with architecture, with the surrounding space, and ultimately with the viewer, who is obligated to crouch or kneel in order to closely observe the sculptural element. For Tuttle, art is a balance between the formal and the expressive, but above all it is a social practice. He explains, “The thrill for the artist is to make meaning... but the meaning is made by the viewer.” This work was acquired in 2013 as part of the bequest of Menil Trustee and architect William F. Stern. Along with his architectural partner, David Bucek, Stern restored the Menil House, the Philip Johnson–designed home of John and Dominique de Menil.

The ideas behind the 2014 exhibition Experiments with Truth: Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence occupied the thoughts of former Menil director Josef Helfenstein for decades, and the exhibition was the last major curatorial project of his eleven years as director of the museum. This work by Zarina (b. 1937) appeared alongside works by Barnett Newman, Suzan Frecon, and other artists of the sublime and the political. The title refers to the “veil of the Beloved,” an image from Sufi poetry conveying that the world is a cover over the divine. The veil reveals hints of beauty beneath and promises that phenomena are made in the image of the Creator; this towering gold panel leads the eye upward. The artist has promised the work to the Menil Collection.

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Thirty Works for Thirty Years is curated by Clare Elliott and Toby Kamps.

Entries were written by Theodore Bale, Haley Berkman, Jan Buranetz, Paul R. Davis, Clare Elliott, Bradford A. Epley, Claire Howard, Toby Kamps, Kelly Montana, Joseph N. Newland, Cindy Peña, Alexis Pennington, Michelle White, and Eric M. Wolf.

This exhibition is generously supported by the City of Houston.

Public programs commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the museum can be found at menil.org/events/public-programs. Menil members enjoy access to additional events.