

# THE DAVID WHITNEY BEQUEST



THE MENIL COLLECTION  
May 11–October 28, 2007

*This exhibition is generously supported by Nina and Michael Zilkha and the City of Houston.*

Exhibition curated by Franklin Sirmans, curator of modern and contemporary art.

Text written by Miranda Lash, curatorial assistant.

## A BOOK BEQUEST

A selection of rare books donated by David Whitney is currently on view in the Menil Library, Wednesday through Friday, 1–3 p.m.

## Notes

1. James Reginato, "The Golden Boys: Throughout his 43-year relationship with Philip Johnson, David Whitney has stayed out of the limelight," *W* magazine (July 2002).
2. Martin Filler, "The Architect of a Master Builder's Store of Art," *New York Times*, June 2, 1996.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1995), 260.
7. Accessed from Ken Price's official website: [www.kenprice.com/cups\\_special\\_1.php?LimitStartRow=0](http://www.kenprice.com/cups_special_1.php?LimitStartRow=0), March 23, 2007.
8. Whitney Trust Bequest, 2005, Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston.
9. Reena Jana, "How it was done," *Art on Paper* (January 2006): 33–34.
10. Reginato, "The Golden Boys."

front:  
Jasper Johns  
*Corpse*, 1974–75  
Paintstick, ink, and pastel on paper  
42½ x 28½ inches  
© Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

\*All works reproduced are owned by The Menil Collection, Bequest of David Whitney.

## THE MENIL COLLECTION

1515 Sul Ross Street Houston, Texas 77006 713-525-9400  
[www.menil.org](http://www.menil.org)



David Grainger Whitney (1939–2005) was a man known for modesty paired with a razor-sharp wit. During his life Whitney assumed many roles, among them curator, art collector, and advisor to preeminent collectors of modern art, including his life-long partner, the architect Philip Johnson (1905–2005). As a collector he gained renown for his foresight in acquiring works by Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella, James Rosenquist, and others very early in their careers. At the Whitney Museum of American Art (no family relation), he organized major retrospectives for Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, David Salle, Michael Heizer, and Eric Fischl. At The Menil Collection, Whitney acted as a guest curator for the exhibitions "Ken Price" in 1992 and "Franz Kline: Black & White 1950–1961" in 1994. Three years later, in 1997, he joined the Menil's Board of Trustees where he served until 2004. He also served on the board of the Georges Pompidou Art and Culture Foundation in Los Angeles.

Beyond his curatorial expertise, Whitney dedicated himself to the artists who inspired him. Not only did he develop long-term friendships with them, he monitored their professional progress by maintaining meticulous records of their work and publicity. These notes, press clippings, and photographs are now housed in the Menil archives. This selection now on view of art and ephemera, generously bequeathed to The Menil Collection upon Whitney's death, is a reflection not only of the objects he owned, but of the artists he promoted over the course of his career.

Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, into a banker's family he described as "of absolutely no interest whatsoever,"<sup>1</sup> Whitney gained entrée into the New York art scene through an auspicious meeting with Philip Johnson when he was only twenty-one years old. In 1960, as a student of architecture at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in Providence, Whitney attended a lecture by Johnson at nearby Brown University. Seizing the opportunity to introduce himself, Whitney approached the architect and was given an open invitation to visit his Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut. Wasting no time, Whitney appeared in New Canaan the next weekend and began forging a relationship with Johnson that would last more than forty years. While Johnson's fame as an architect continued to blossom over the following decades, Whitney pursued a successful career as a freelance curator, though he was rarely recognized outside the art circles in which he moved. "And that's been largely by design," Whitney once said.<sup>2</sup> The late Robert Rosenblum, an art historian at New York University, described how Whitney and Johnson worked in tandem: "They joined forces in the perfect fusion of the power and the scouting.... If Philip has the edge in historical stamina and know-how, then David is the cheerful, bright gadfly buzzing around the art scene."<sup>3</sup> Over the course of their lives, the pair would exchange gifts of works of art, which they displayed in their New York and Connecticut residences. Whitney would edit multiple books on Johnson's architecture, while Johnson would look to Whitney as his most trusted art advisor. "I don't pretend to have an original eye," Johnson once confessed. "David is my contemporary art."<sup>4</sup>



Above, left:  
Andy Warhol  
*David Whitney*, 1980  
Acrylic and silkscreen enamel on canvas  
40 x 40 inches  
© 2007 Andy Warhol Foundation for the  
Visual Arts/ ARS, New York

Left to right: Leo Castelli, Dan Flavin, David Whitney,  
Barbara Jackobson, and David White at the Rice  
Museum opening of "Dan Flavin: Cornered  
Fluorescent Light," 1972. Photo: Hickey-Robertson,  
Courtesy of Menil Archives, The Menil Collection



Claes Oldenburg, *Late Submission to the Chicago Tribune Architectural Competition of 1922 – Clothespin, Version One*, 1967  
Crayon, pencil, watercolor on paper  
22 x 23¾ inches  
Artwork © Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen

With characteristic speed, Whitney graduated from RISD, went to New York, and soon after began living with Johnson. Then a trustee at The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), Johnson helped Whitney secure a job as a designer in the museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture. By the mid-1960s, however, Whitney had left MOMA to work for several commercial art galleries including Kornblee, Green, Leo Castelli, and his own David Whitney Gallery from 1968–71. Independently of Johnson, he quickly installed himself as a recurrent figure at New York art events and openings. In 1965 he participated in Claes Oldenburg's performance "Washes." Recalling the experience, he said, "It was my first nude scene.... Everybody wanted to be a star, so I just decided to upstage them all and take my clothes off."<sup>5</sup>

Before long, Whitney's artistic interests had translated into a passion for collecting. Perhaps as a playful nudge directed at Johnson's urban constructions made of glass and steel, in 1968 Whitney and Johnson acquired a 1967 sketch by Oldenburg entitled *Late Submission to the Chicago Tribune Architectural Competition of 1922 – Clothespin, Version One*. Part of Oldenburg's series of "monuments," begun in 1965, *First*

*Sketch* depicts an ordinary clothespin, or found design, transformed into Oldenburg's definition of "personal architecture."<sup>6</sup> In 1976 *Clothespin* became Oldenburg's first monument drawing to be converted into a large-scale steel sculpture, now located in downtown Philadelphia.

Whitney's taste for Pop art, which extended to the work of Roy Lichtenstein and James Rosenquist, was also undoubtedly influenced by his close relationship with Andy Warhol. Friends and confidantes since the 1960s, for years the pair spent an hour every morning discussing the intricacies of the art world. In 1967 Whitney helped Warhol establish a publishing arm for his screenprints called "Factory Additions," and during the following decades he mounted several exhibitions of Warhol's work and personal art collection. These exhibitions included "Andy Warhol's 'Folk and Funk'" at the Museum of Folk Art in 1977 (featuring Warhol's collection of folk art) and, two years later, "Andy Warhol: Portraits of the Seventies" at the Whitney Museum of American Art. In the latter exhibition, Whitney installed double portraits of fifty-six subjects, including artists, art dealers, and fashion designers, in an alternating checkerboard pattern, reserving a separate room for Warhol's Mao portraits. The following year Warhol



Ken Price  
*Untitled (Palette Cup)*,  
ca. 1972–73  
Glazed earthenware  
4¾ x 3½ x 3¾ inches  
© Ken Price

created *David Whitney*, 1980, adding the curator to his colorful anthology of New York's "who's-who." Whitney kept the portrait in his office on a wall adjacent to a portrait of Warhol's mother, *Julia Warhola*, 1974, now both bequeathed to The Menil Collection.

Despite his deep ties to New York, Whitney did not look solely to the East Coast for art. Los Angeles native Ken Price caught Whitney's eye with his ability to transform clay sculptures into vehicles for self-expression. A pivotal figure in elevating ceramics from craft to fine art, Price worked chiefly on an intimate scale, drawing from diverse sources ranging from architecture to organic fluids. About his use of the everyday form of a cup, Price explained, "The cup is its own subject matter so it doesn't have to be about anything else, and at the same time it's a great idiom to carry all kinds of references and cultural information if you want it to."<sup>7</sup> Versatile in his approach and palette, Price experimented with the surfaces of torn clay in his *Untitled*, 1973, and with highly polished, almost cartoon-like angles in his *Untitled (Palette Cup)*, ca. 1972–73. Whitney organized a retrospective of Price's work at The Menil Collection in 1992. His interest in post-Pop artists like Price also extended to Vija Celmins, the Latvian-born "visionary realist." Like Price, Celmins explores the subtlety of textures, in her case through seascapes, night skies, and desert sands. Her extraordinarily detailed graphite drawing *Untitled*, 1974–75, a meditation on her travels through the California deserts in the early 1970s, is her first work to enter The Menil Collection.

Of all the artists who held Whitney's interest over the course of his life, perhaps none was more thoroughly documented in his research than Jasper Johns. In his hand-scrawled preparatory notes for an essay on the development of Johns's drawings, Whitney once wrote: "read everything written on JJ + notate."<sup>8</sup> During his early years in New York, Whitney worked directly for Johns as an assistant, an experience that undoubtedly solidified his commitment to the artist's career. By 1977 Whitney had organized the first major retrospective of Johns's work at the Whitney Museum of American Art, which featured drawings such as *Scott Fagan Record*, 1969; *Untitled*, 1973; and *Corpse*, 1974–75, now on view in this exhibition. The seventeen works on paper by Johns that Whitney bequeathed to the Menil offer a broad overview of the artist's career, from his 1957 *Sketch for Numbers* to his 2004 *Bush Baby*. Part of Whitney's bequest also includes sixty-three volumes of notebooks, documenting Johns's oeuvre from 1951–92. In tandem with the drawings, the notebooks serve as a foundation for a future catalogue raisonné and establish the Menil as one of the premier centers for research on Johns.



Steve Wolfe  
*Untitled (Picasso)*, 1996  
Oil, screenprint, modeling paste,  
paper canvasboard, wood  
8¾ x 57/8 x 1/2 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Luhring Augustine, New York

Whitney's scholarly pursuits are also reflected in the more than one thousand books on modern art he gave to The Menil Collection. This vast assortment of exhibition catalogues, artist biographies, and rare editions forms a composite portrait of Whitney's projects and interests and will be accessible to the public through the museum's library. As a corpus, the books resonate with Steve Wolfe's trompe l'oeil books, which Whitney collected and displayed in his Calluna Farms residence located near the Philip Johnson Glass House (both are now owned by The National Trust for Historic Preservation). With painstaking attention to detail, Wolfe reconstructs the appearance of books in his own library, replicating dog-eared pages and the wear and tear due to many readings. Through these faux books, Wolfe has been creating what he calls a "self-portrait" of his sensibilities since 1988.<sup>9</sup>

David Whitney's spiritual kinship with The Menil Collection lives on through his bequest and the projects it will inspire. Those closest to him knew that one of his lifelong passions was gardening. As a gardener he worked intuitively, trusting his instincts in a manner that could be compared to his technique in installing exhibitions. "It's just a feel," he once explained. "You have it or you don't."<sup>10</sup> His interests in art collecting grew similarly. Trusting his eye, Whitney nurtured personal relationships with artists he believed were among the most important of his time. His process never precluded the possibility for change, experimentation, and new growth. Through this exhibition we honor his love for innovation and excellence in art and the ideas that spring from it.