

WOLS: Retrospective

On View at the Menil - Exclusive U.S. Venue -
from September 13, 2013 through January 12, 2014

The artist's first museum exhibition in the U.S.

Public Preview: Thursday, September 12th, 7:00-9:00pm,
preceded by 6 o'clock panel discussion



Houston, TX, September 3, 2013—As ***Wols: Retrospective*** will make abundantly clear, the draftsman, painter, and photographer known as Wols (1913–1951) was one of the most ingenious and influential figures to emerge in postwar Europe. He was, along with Jean Dubuffet, Pierre Soulages, and Georges Mathieu, a leading figure in *Tachisme*, a movement in painting considered to be the European equivalent of American Abstract Expressionism. Derived from the French word *tache*, meaning stain, *Tachisme* was an outgrowth of the larger movement known as Art Informel, or “art without form,” emphasizing free lines and forms that flow spontaneously from the unconscious.

Organized by Menil Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art Toby Kamps in collaboration with noted Wols scholar Dr. Ewald Rathke and the Kunsthalle Bremen, Germany, ***Wols: Retrospective*** opens at the Menil on September 13 and will remain on view through January 12, 2014.

The exhibition—the first an American museum has dedicated to the artist—aims to illuminate the many forms, innovations, and delights of Wols’s work. “During his short life,” said Kamps, “Wols made a spectacular body of paintings, drawings, watercolors, photographs, and

engravings that flows freely and exhilaratingly between representation and abstraction. Raw, mysterious, and heedless of fashion, Wols's ever-morphing images earned him a reputation as an innovative descendant of Surrealism and the prime progenitor of art informel.”



And yet Wols—son of the chancellor of the German state of Saxony, who entered the world as Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze before a telegram typo inspired his self-rechristening—is a woefully under-recognized artist. He died in 1951, some twenty years after he had left Germany to work as an artist in Paris. Although familiar with the leading figures and movements of his time (a number of his prints illustrated books by Antonin Artaud, Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre, and others), Wols remained an artist’s artist, an outsider who blazed new aesthetic paths. To this day his oeuvre is difficult to assimilate in the history of modern art.

Comprised of 21 of the artist’s 80 known paintings and 79 drawings, watercolors, and photographs, the exhibition supplements the Menil’s holdings of the artist’s work (the most comprehensive in the world) with significant international loans, providing a thorough overview of the artist’s universe.

In his intimately scaled drawings and paintings, Wols followed no preconceived compositions but, after making a few marks, allowed his unconscious (in the Surrealist and existentialist senses of the word) to shape images into highly complex, self-contained visual universes. Early drawings and watercolors include fantastical animals, figures, sailing ships, and cityscapes. Later paintings are almost entirely abstract, using heavy impasto and tentacle-like drips to suggest otherworldly botanical specimens or atomic explosions. Reticent about his work, Wols, shedding more mystery than light, once compared his vision of the world to a crack in the sidewalk: “Look at that crack. It is like one of my drawings. It’s a living thing. It will grow... It was created by the only force that is real.”

Even as his reputation began to grow and some success came with exhibitions of his work, Wols's existence was precarious, exacerbated by illness and alcoholism. Just when his extraordinary innovations were being recognized—noted by critics and fellow artists for synthesizing subjective and visionary and objective and formalist impulses in revolutionary forms of abstraction—Wols died, at 38.

Wols: Retrospective—which will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, the first major publication on his work and life in English—will introduce new audiences to an artist who remains largely unknown in the United States. Available at the Menil Bookstore, the book contains 280 pages and more than 100 color plates. Hardcover, \$65, ISBN: 3777420530.

A panel discussion will precede the public preview of the exhibition:

Thursday, September 12, 2013, 6:00 p.m.

Following introductory remarks by Frankfurt-based scholar Dr. Ewald Rathke, exhibition curator Toby Kamps will be joined by art historians Patrycja de Bieberstein Ilgner, Archivist at the Karin and Uwe Hollweg Foundation, Bremen, Germany and Katy Siegel, Professor of Art History at Hunter College, New York, and Chief Curator of the school's galleries.

This exhibition is generously supported by the National Endowment for the Arts; Anne and Bill Stewart; Louisa Stude Sarofim; Michael Zilkha; Skadden, Arps; and the City of Houston.

Images: Wols, *It's All Over*, 1946–47. Oil, grattage, and tube marks on canvas, The Menil Collection, Houston © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Photo: Paul Hester.

Wols, *Oui, oui, oui (Yes, Yes, Yes)*, 1946–47. Oil, grattage, and tube marks on canvas, The Menil Collection, Houston © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Photo: Paul Hester.

Contact:

Vance Muse or Gretchen Sammons

Menil Press Office

713 535 3170

press@menil.org

www.menil.org