

This exhibition is generously supported by Courtney and Christopher Sarofim, Mark Wawro and Melanie Gray, and the City of Houston. Exhibition underwriter United Airlines is the Preferred Airline of the Menil Collection.

## PUBLIC PROGRAMS

### Panel Discussion

“Forms of Things Unknown”

Tuesday, September 27, 2011, 7:00 p.m.

Menil Paper Conservator Jan Burandt, former Menil Foundation Curator Kathryn Davidson, artist Jack Massing, and former Menil Foundation Collections Coordinator Mary Jane Victor join exhibition curator Michelle White in this panel discussion.

### Gallery Talk

Wednesday, October 19, 2011, 12:00 p.m.

Sarah Schulz, Curatorial Assistant in Contemporary Arts and Special Projects, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, discusses works in the exhibition.

## NOTES

1. Unica Zürn, *The Man of Jasmine: Impressions from a Mental Illness* (London: Atlas Press, 1994), 33. Originally published in German, 1977.
2. In 1972 art historian Roger Cardinal first used the term “outsider art” to describe work that belongs to no movement or school in *Outsider Art* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972).
3. Jean Dubuffet, *L'art brut préféré aux arts culturels*, exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie René Drouin, 1949), n.p.
4. See Anne E. Bowler, “Asylum art: the social construction of an aesthetic category,” in *Outsider Art: Contesting Boundaries in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Vera L. Zolberg (London: University of Cambridge Press, 1998).
5. Quoted in Aaron H. Esman, introduction to *Madness and Art: The Life and Works of Adolf Wölfli*, by Walter Morgenthaler (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), xv. Originally published in German, 1921.
6. This theory, proposed by P. G. Navarro, is the basis of the book *The Secrets of Dellschau* by Dennis Crenshaw (San Antonio, Texas: Anomalist Books, 2009). William Steen also conducted major research on his work, compiled in unpublished documents in the Menil object files.
7. Zürn described destroying her drawings in *The Man of Jasmine*.

Cover: Unica Zürn, *Untitled*, 1955. Ink on paper, 24¾ x 19¾ inches. The Menil Collection, Houston.  
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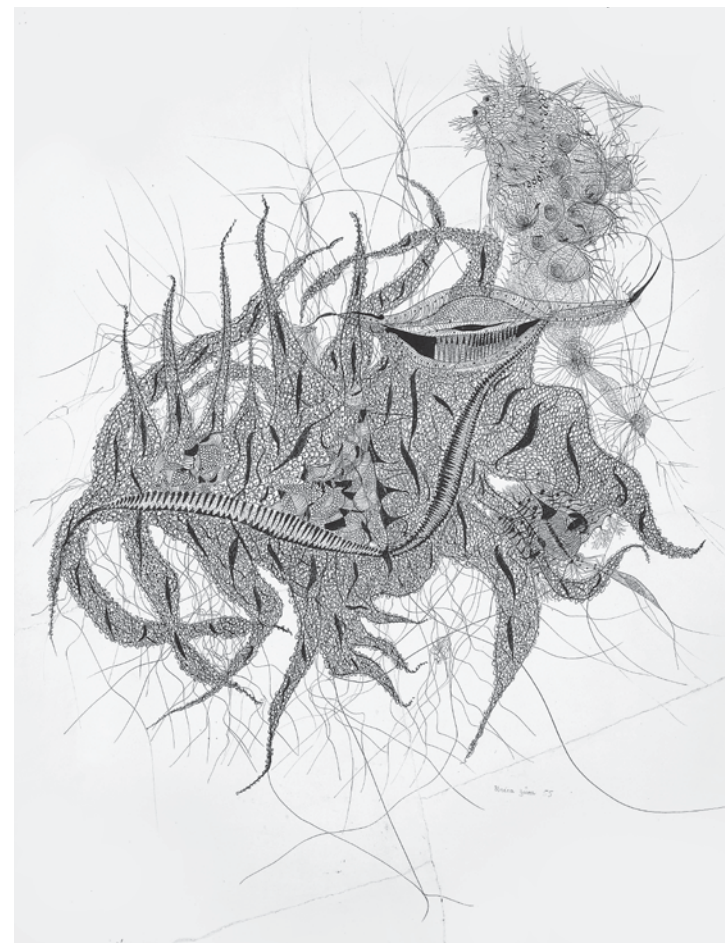
## THE MENIL COLLECTION

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# Seeing Stars

Visionary Drawing from the Collection



THE MENIL COLLECTION  
September 23, 2011–January 15, 2012

*She is unaware that she is suffering from hallucinations. In her present state, the most incredible, hitherto unseen things become reality, so that when these images appear to her in the night sky, they are really there.*<sup>1</sup>

Unica Zürn

Showcasing a unique and rarely exhibited facet of the Menil Collection, “Seeing Stars” highlights drawings that defy traditional and academic methods of representation and mark making. Called visionary art, an elastic term that encompasses outsider, folk, naive, and self-taught art, the works on view are bound together by a number of shared stylistic tendencies and intuitive processes, including repetitive and labor-intensive exercises, experiments with chance and automatism, and the construction of imaginary landscapes, creatures, and machines.

The presence of visionary art in museum collections is due in part to the influence of Surrealism, which emerged in Europe in the early twentieth century. Based on a desire to radically overturn what they saw as antiquated and bourgeois social values through new ways of making and seeing, Surrealists were enchanted by the unusual. Collectors of curiosities and non-Western artworks, they were also fascinated with work by artists with little to no contact with the mainstream art world, including children, psychiatric patients, and prison inmates.<sup>2</sup> They believed those with no formal art training or those who drew in altered mental states were untainted by the modern world and could more easily access the subconscious, creating works with greater authenticity of expression.

In 1949 French artist **Jean Dubuffet** invented the term “Art Brut”—literally translated as “raw art”—to define this form of art making. Along with several others, including André Breton, one of the founders of the Surrealist movement, he organized the *Compagnie de l’Art Brut* to promote the collection and study of creators who “draw everything (subject, choice of material, expressive means, rhythms, spellings, etc.) from their own inner selves and not from the commonplaces of classical or currently fashionable art.”<sup>3</sup> Highly influential among avant-garde artists seeking to transcend academic conventions, Art Brut began seeping into modern art. Surrealist photographer **Brassaï**, for example, was obsessed with the anonymous drawings he found on the streets of cities like Paris and Rome, which he documented over the course of thirty years in the photographic series *Graffiti*.

German psychiatrist and art historian Hans Prinzhorn of the psychiatric clinic at the University of Heidelberg furthered interest in outsider art with his collection of work by patients. Assembled in the 1920s, the collection was greatly admired by Dubuffet, Max Ernst, Paul Klee, and other established artists. Prinzhorn’s theory was that “asylum art” expressed the most primal and basic urges behind the human impulse to make images.<sup>4</sup> Among the assemblage were pieces by Swiss artist **Adolf Wölfli**, a patient in a Bern clinic who suffered from psychosis and mainly

lived in solitary confinement. Describing Wölfli’s remarkable drawings of mandala-like concentric circles and patterns, Dubuffet wrote that they were “charged with everything that can be asked of a work of art: burning mental tension, uncurbed invention, an ecstasy of intoxication, complete liberty.”<sup>5</sup>

The Surrealist’s appreciation for unbridled intuition can also be found in the collecting tendencies of John and Dominique de Menil. In addition to visionary drawings by unknown patients in German psychiatric wards, they collected work from the Prison Art Gallery in Huntsville, Texas, an outgrowth of prison reform programs of the late 1960s. Among these works are drawings by inmate **Frank Jones**, signed with his prison number. His “devil houses,” intricately structured enclosures inhabited by evil winged creatures and always marked by the presence of a clock, provide a haunting illustration of incarceration.

Among the fantastical works in the Menil Collection is a double-sided paper scroll by **Henry Darger**. It illustrates an elaborate narrative he called the “realms of the unreal,” an epic battle between good and evil waged by an army of androgynous children. Also on view are a selection of notebooks filled with drawings of strange flying machines by **Charles A. A. Dellschau**. These notebooks were found in a Houston junk shop by University of St. Thomas students organizing an exhibition called “The Sky Is the Limit” in the late 1960s. The watercolors and collages, with their cryptic diagrams and enigmatic references to flight, have largely remained mysterious, much like their creator, about whom next to nothing is known. One theory suggests that his work, which is filled with collaged news clippings describing unidentified flying objects, tells the story of a mythic nineteenth-century aeronautical secret society in California that some have claimed designed and flew airships decades before the Wright brothers made their historic flight.<sup>6</sup>

German artist **Unica Zürn**, a prolific Surrealist writer who was among the avant-garde circle in Paris, is also featured in the collection. She completed many of her drawings while institutionalized, and would sometimes tear them apart in fits of hysteria.<sup>7</sup> Her husband, artist Hans Bellmer, often pieced her drawings back together. One of the works on view shows clear signs of having been reconstructed. Zürn’s work in particular prompts larger questions about the ethics of outsider art. What does it mean to consider an artist outside the norm? What is the difference between inspiration and madness? And, perhaps most importantly, what are the ramifications of making assumptions about the intellectual agency and intentions of these artists?

Always controversial, the very definition contested, the allure of visionary art endures. The exhibition’s title, “Seeing Stars,” references a physiological anomaly in which the stimulation of the retina by the brain creates the illusion of points of light, colors, or shapes without external stimulation. The works on view parallel this phenomenon, showcasing the unique form of creativity that occurs when the eyes are metaphorically shut and inspiration comes from within.

Michelle White, Exhibition Curator