Between Land and Sea is curated by Michelle White and is generously supported by Suzanne Deal Booth, Mike and Diane Cannon, H-E-B and H-E-B Tournament of Champions, Michael Metz, Scott and Judy Nyquist, and the City of Houston. United Airlines is the exclusive travel partner of the Menil Collection.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS
Lecture and Performance
Artists, Community, and the Landscape of the Coenties Slip
Thursday, May 11, 7:00 p.m.
Suzanne Hudson, associate professor of Art History at the University of Southern California, explores the ideas that influenced artmaking around Coenties Slip in the late 1950s and early 1960s. She is subsequently joined by pianist Sarah Rothenberg in a conversation about the influence of nature on abstraction in art, and the program concludes with a performance of John Cage’s “In a Landscape.”

Lecture
Finding the Grid: Agnes Martin and Abstraction
Wednesday, May 24, 7:00 p.m.
Art historian Christina Rosenberg, author of Drawing the Line: The Early Work of Agnes Martin (2016), discusses the arc of Agnes Martin’s early career, her productive confrontations with artists such as Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Indiana, and Lenore Tawney, and the vibrant artistic networks that developed between California, New Mexico, and New York in the postwar period.

Film Screening
Agnes Martin: With My Back to the World
Dr. Mary Lacy, 2016, 57 min.
Friday, June 2, 8:00 p.m.
Shot during the last year of Agnes Martin’s life, this moving documentary consists of interviews with the artist, archival footage, and images of five decades of work. In keeping with her chosen life of solitude, Martin alone appears in the film. She spent time there, often visiting Martin at her studio. The area was razed in the mid-1960s for development, accounting for the absence of the artists at that time. Only G-O-G (Coenties Slip still stands).

Additional events, including a noontime gallery talk with exhibition curator Michelle White on Friday, May 12.

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The artists of Coenties Slip looked to light, water, and the surrounding landscape as sources of inspiration for their works of abstraction. Some began to work in this manner even before they arrived in New York. In France, Kelly made studies of reflected sunshine rolling across the surface of the river Seine. He also began seeing ‘already made’ abstracted subjects, such as the broken glass tiles of a factory roof-top that he depicted in Rouelle Bleu, 1951.1 Youngerman’s sweeping horizontal work Rochetaillée, 1953, is a meditation on flickering light. The green and blue forms correspond to shadows falling on the side of a rocky French cliff. Kelly and Youngerman studied art together in Paris on the G.I. Bill in the late 1940s and early 1950s and became key figures in establishing the new language of cool, restrained, and formally reductive abstraction when they moved to New York a few years later.

Many of the works made on the Slip evidence this deep interest in using the natural world as a touchstone for formal exploration. While Kelly lived there, he cultivated a flower garden on his roof in order to have foliage to draw, a practice he maintained throughout his career. Tawney too was drawn to the area’s flora. Seaweed, 1956, a large, fiber work representative of her inventive open-warp technique, uses rough bits of linen and the linear qualities of pulled-smooth silk to evoke the feel of the slippery tentacles of aquatic plants. The blues and grays of Horizon, 1961, by Martin, conjure up a misty seascape or waves of mountains through her simple repetition of small triangles. According to the artist, her work is not a representation of the landscape but about the sensation of being in nature. In a different way, Chryssa’s work also deals with the impression of natural phenomena. Based on ancient Cycladic sculptures, her rectangular baked-terracotta tablets were made by using the inside folds of a flattened cardboard box as a mold. The T shapes in the surfaces’ inflections recall the stylized faces found in the prehistoric Greek figures. Like blank pages of a book waiting to be inscribed, the pale reliefs are activated by the passing of light and shadows.

By approaching abstraction through nature, the artists of the Slip were doing something distinct from the Abstract Expressionism then reigning uptown. Reaching its peak around that time and led by artists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, Abstract Expressionism was characterized by bold thrusts of paint and bright colors. It was centered in the heart of New York City and stemmed from a belief that a work has the greatest impact when the painted marks, gestures, or drips have a subjective correlation to the psyche. The artists associated with it rejected the idea that art was a representation of the world around them. Those affiliated with the Slip approached abstraction with a willingness to let the natural world seep into their compositions, a quieter and more limited palette, and an interest in the emotional weight of refined lines and nuanced gestures. They were experimenting with flat and unmodulated planes of color, clean contours to delineate forms, and modular geometric shapes that came from their observations of everyday life.

Within this community of colleagues, friends, and lovers, exchanged ideas and influences can be traced. Notable are the formal similarities between Tawney’s woven threads and Martin’s diaphanous compositions of thin and taut marks of graphite and paint. In the only text Martin ever wrote about another artist, an introduction to the catalogue for Tawney’s first show, in 1961, she describes the importance of felt line, sensitive touch, and precision, qualities that define the work of both artists.5 Ginkgo, 1959, the small painting by Indiana on view, is derived from the shape of the