

UPSIDE DOWN: ARCTIC REALITIES

On View at the Menil April 15 – July 17, 2011

EXHIBITION DESIGN BY DOUG WHEELER

Exhibition Preview: Thursday, April 14, 7–9 p.m.

When...powdery snow fills the air, there is neither up nor down
– Edmund Carpenter



HOUSTON, March 14, 2011 – Powerful forces combine in ***UPSIDE DOWN: ARCTIC REALITIES***, an exhibition and museum-going experience opening at the Menil on April 15. Rare and rarely exhibited examples of ancient Arctic art – many collected by the renowned anthropologist, cinematographer and media theorist Edmund Carpenter – will be presented in a “total environment” designed by the light artist Doug Wheeler.

UPSIDE DOWN will remain on view through July 17.

The exhibition showcases nearly 300 artifacts produced by native Arctic cultures over the centuries, drawn for this exclusive North American display from public and private collections in Denmark, France, New Zealand, and the United States. Made primarily of metal, bone, and walrus ivory, some of the objects are more than 3,000 years old. Many are small in scale, designed to be worn as amulets or held in the hand; even the tiniest, bearing intricate carving details, seem to possess shamanistic powers. An important group of wooden masks from the 19th century – showing how many of the ideas informing older Arctic traditions were carried into modern times – will also be included in the exhibition.

With ***UPSIDE DOWN***, Edmund Carpenter returns to the Menil in a curatorial role for the first time since 1999, when he and former Menil director Paul Winkler collaborated on *Witnesses*, the “wunderkammer” installed within the museum’s Surrealism galleries, a



collection of ethnographic objects that inspired Surrealist artists. (As a young scholar and explorer, Carpenter made a documentary film about the surrealist qualities of Eskimo masks.) Carpenter has spent decades studying the relationship between the Arctic environment and the

array of objects from that vast region. In 1973 he published the seminal *Eskimo Realities*, exploring indigenous peoples' sensory relationships with their surroundings and ways in which those relationships were manifested in an art that is at once delicate and utilitarian.



The title of the exhibition, ***UPSIDE DOWN***, has literal meaning in a land where there are many different words for “snow” and where the white blur of winter can have a profoundly disorienting effect on the uninitiated. As Carpenter writes in the exhibition catalogue, in the Arctic “there is no line dividing earth from sky. The two are of the same substance. There is no middle distance, no perspective, no outline, nothing the eye can cling to...When winds rise and powdery snow fills the air, there is neither up nor down.” Many of the objects on display were meant to be worn or displayed “upside down,” in some cases symbolizing a departure from or an inversion of life.

Born in 1922, Carpenter joined the faculty of the University of Toronto in 1948, where he taught anthropology while continuing fieldwork among the Inuit and pioneering a new field of “visual anthropology.” For the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation he also produced and hosted a series of landmark programs on Arctic life and culture. In Toronto Carpenter met Marshall McLuhan, the communication theorist who authored the “medium is the message” concept of media theory, and together they explored the role of modern media in culture change. In 1967, while sharing the Albert Schweitzer Chair at Fordham University with McLuhan, Carpenter met photographer Adelaide de Menil (a daughter of John and Dominique de Menil), and the two embarked on a research trip to study native cultures near Papua, New Guinea. The two, who collaborated on an array of documentary projects over the years, were married in 1990.



Carpenter selected Doug Wheeler (b. 1939), a pioneer of the Southern California “Light and Space” movement of the 1960s, to design an evocative environment for the exquisite and powerful works on display in ***UPSIDE DOWN***. For an earlier incarnation of the exhibition, at the Musée du Quai Branly (the ethnographic art museum in Paris), Wheeler collaborated with architect Jean de Gastines to create an indoor landscape of disorienting scope, devoid of common perceptual signposts like straight lines and definitive shapes. In bringing ***UPSIDE DOWN*** to the Menil, Wheeler will totally reconfigure a vast gallery (6,400 square feet), curving the junctures of walls and floors to create the indeterminate “horizon line” one would encounter in the Arctic. Icy neon lighting will cast disorienting glows throughout the space, while sound installations will echo with

recordings of cracking ice, calling birds and blowing winds. “I make things that you experience, and then it’s in your mind,” Wheeler has said of his work. “We all have first-hand experiences, and those are the ones we don’t forget. They stay with us and hopefully they’re meaningful enough that they’re with you for the rest of your life.”

Artists – and artwork – of the Arctic offer little distinction between decorative and practical. While many of the objects in **UPSIDE DOWN** are everyday wares and tools such as handles, knives, harpoon heads, cooking utensils, combs, and belt buckles, others – like masks and burial objects – embody spiritual beliefs and have ritualistic roles in their cultures.

Carpenter’s research suggests that, in oral cultures like the Eskimo and other Arctic natives, the relationship between artist and medium mattered more than the finished object. Such insights derive from Carpenter’s long exploration of the multisensory ways in which oral cultures conceptualize space and how they come to know and understand the world they inhabit.

With **UPSIDE DOWN**, Carpenter brings his intellectual voyage full circle, around the whole of the polar icecap and to the indigenous cultures of the Old Bering Sea, from Siberia to Alaska: a world brought stunningly to life in Doug Wheeler’s innovative exhibition design and installation at the Menil.

Upside Down: Arctic Realities will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, containing essays by Edmund Carpenter, Anne Bahnson, Mikhail Bronshtein and Kirill Dneprovsky, Ann Fienup-Riordan, Robert McGhee and Patricia Sutherland. ISBN: 978-0-300-16938-6 LCCN: 2010933926 Pages: 231; Price: \$50; Illus: 58 black-and-white; 129 color

This exhibition is generously supported by Rock Foundation, Edmund Carpenter and Adelaide de Menil, and the City of Houston.

For further information and images, please contact press@menil.org

Images: Okvik, Old Bearing Sea; *Figure with Strikers Headgear*, 250 BC–100 AD, Ivory. *Bird Head, Herring Gull*, 250 BC–100 AD, Ivory. *Female Figure with Concentric Circles*, 250 BC–100 AD, Ivory. Old Bearing Sea, *Unborn Bear (fetus) from Shaman’s grave*, ca. 500, Walrus Ivory.
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