

Late Surrealism

On view at the Menil May 24 – August 25, 2013

EXHIBITION REVISITS A PIVOTAL MOMENT IN 20TH CENTURY ART



HOUSTON, TX, April 8, 2013 — One of the most profound shifts in the history of modernism took place in New York City in the 1930s and 40s, as artists from Europe took refuge in the United States, and the radical forms of figurative art they brought with them prompted and competed against an impulse toward abstraction among American artists. By the time this period of ferment was over, New York had displaced Paris as the main site of activity for modern art, and a celebrated new movement, Abstract Expressionism, had been born.

Many accounts of this period summarize it as the pre-history of Abstract Expressionism, as if its developments had progressed toward a pre-ordained end. To the artists who lived through these years, though, nothing was settled or decided. Viewing this brief but crucial era from within as a fascinating moment in its own right, the Menil Collection will revisit these years as the period of **Late Surrealism**, in an exhibition on view from May 24 through August 25, 2013.

Said exhibition curator Michelle White: “This small and focused exhibition constitutes a fascinating aspect of our holdings, specifically some of our most stunning drawings by Arshile Gorky and Mark Rothko. This intriguing era of intersection also uniquely parallels John and Dominique de Menil’s own story of transition during this time from France to the United States.”

With works selected from the rich holdings of the Menil Collection, **Late Surrealism** will present 26 paintings, sculptures, assemblages, collages and works on paper, all but four of which date from the 1930s and 40s. A total of 14 artists will be represented: Louise Bourgeois, Alexander Calder, Joseph Cornell, Max Ernst, Arshile Gorky, Lee Krasner, Roberto Matta, Joan Miró, Meret Oppenheim, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Kurt Seligmann, Yves Tanguy and Dorothea Tanning.

“Don’t underestimate the influence of the Surrealist state of mind on the young American painters in those days,” Robert Motherwell once testified, recalling how émigré artists had introduced New Yorkers to an inner world of dreams, myths and irrational drives, and methods of automatism meant to draw on the power of the unconscious. At the time, the Surrealists had a reputation for creating phantasmagorical landscapes and biomorphic images, and were



faulted for this figurative tendency by champions of abstraction such as Clement Greenberg, who accused Surrealism of being aligned with illustration and advertising. But the line between Surrealism and abstraction was not as well defined as some critics and theorists believed.

As younger American artists such as Krasner, Pollock and Rothko adopted Surrealist methods, their works turned into fields of wonderfully slippery intersections, where hints of figures and suggestions of dreamscapes glided quietly out of the nonrepresentational forms. Although European and American sensibilities, figuration and abstraction, were supposedly inconsistent, they co-existed and gave off astonishing hybrids during the period of late Surrealism—as Peggy Guggenheim symbolically demonstrated at the 1942 opening of her gallery Art of This Century, when she wore a small abstract work by Alexander Calder as one of her earrings and a miniature landscape painting by Yves Tanguy as the other.

Late Surrealism is organized for the Menil Collection by curator Michelle White.

The exhibition is generously supported by the Taub Foundation (Marcy Taub Wessel, Henry J.N. Taub II and H. Ben Taub) and the City of Houston.

PUBLIC PROGRAM:

Noontime Gallery Talk with Michelle White and Sandra Zalman

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

Exhibition curator Michelle White and UH art historian Sandra Zalman will use surrealist drawings from the museum to trace two vital shifts in 20th century art: the movement of its capital from Paris to New York, and the concurrent replacement of figurative surrealism by abstraction. Sandra Zalman is completing a book called *Surrealism and Its Afterlife in American Art: 1936 - 1986*.

Images: Mark Rothko, *Astral Image*, 1946 © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. The Menil Collection, Houston, bequest of Jermayne MacAgy. Photo: Hickey-Robertson.
Lee Krasner, *Nude Study from Life*, 1938 © 2013 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of William J. Hill, in honor of Christophe de Menil. Photo: Paul Hester.

Contact:

Vance Muse or Gretchen Sammons

Menil Press Office

713 535 3170

press@menil.org

www.menil.org