

**THE MENIL COLLECTION PRESENTS THE FIRST COMPREHENSIVE
U.S. MUSEUM EXHIBITION OF THE WORK OF WILLIAM N. COPLEY,
FEBRUARY 19 – JULY 24, 2016**



HOUSTON, TX, November 10, 2015 – The Menil Collection is proud to present the first retrospective in any U.S. museum devoted to the work of the American artist William N. Copley (1919-1996), creator of madcap narrative paintings, drawings, and installations in a playful, ribald style of his own invention. Organized in collaboration by the Menil Collection and the Prada

Foundation and accompanied by a major publication, *William N. Copley: The World According to CPLY* will be shown in the U.S. exclusively at the Menil, from February 19 through July 24, 2016, before continuing to its only other presentation in Milan, Italy.

The exhibition includes 118 works by Copley from the Menil's own holdings and public and private collections in the United States and Europe. Representing every phase of Copley's work while illuminating the political and psychosexual themes, visual puns, and vaudevillian Americana to which he repeatedly returned, the exhibition traces the artist's career from the late 1940s, when he began teaching himself to paint and was introduced to Surrealism and the Surrealists, into the 1990s. While the exhibition is on view at the Menil, the permanent collection galleries will feature a selection of 11 Surrealist works that entered the museum from Copley's own collection, including important paintings, drawings, and sculptures by artists such as **André Breton, Max Ernst, Wifredo Lam, René Magritte, Man Ray, and Jean Tinguely.**

Josef Helfenstein, director of the Menil Collection, said, "Museums in Germany, Austria, France, and Switzerland have devoted exhibitions to Copley, but until now no U.S. museum has looked deeply at the career of this highly peculiar, and peculiarly American, artist. As a figurative painter, Copley put forward an irreverent alternative to the reigning abstraction of the 1940s and 50s, while remaining distinct from the Pop,

Minimalist, and Conceptualist innovators with whom he later mingled. Meanwhile, as a patron, collector, and sometime publisher, he was a personal bridge between the European Surrealists and a younger generation of U.S. artists, and a cheerful instigator of unexpected creative and philanthropic endeavors. We are grateful to be able to join with the Prada Foundation in at last giving Copley the retrospective he deserves.”

Toby Kamps, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Menil Collection and co-curator of the exhibition with the Prada Foundation’s Germano Celant, said, “Copley’s status as a prized artist’s artist can be seen in the provenance of some of the works in this exhibition, on loan from the collections and estates of Carroll Dunham and Laurie Simmons, Ed Ruscha, and On Kawara. His impact on the Menil is evident in the museum’s history of acquiring both his own artworks and works that he collected, in the personal ties between him and Dominique and John de Menil, and in his formative influence on the Menil’s founding director, Walter Hopps, who as a young student in Los Angeles got an early education in Surrealism at Copley’s gallery in Beverly Hills. We hope this exhibition and its catalogue will introduce Copley to many new viewers, who we expect will not only admire his work but savor its antic visions of modern life and the battle of the sexes.”

William N. Copley: The World According to CPLY begins with early works, many of them made in the 1950s during a long sojourn in France. These were years when the artist tutored himself in painting, taking inspiration from sources including Surrealism, Mexican folk art, American comic strips, and silent film comedy as he developed his distinctively guileless, heart-on-sleeve storytelling style. Later works include exuberantly satirical works of the 1960s, many featuring the vaguely autobiographical figure described by critic and artist Anne Doran as a “nattily dressed and deeply ridiculous Everyman in mad pursuit of liberty, poetry, and sex”; the pornography-inspired “X-Rated Paintings” of the early 1970s; the “Noun” paintings of the same period (each depicting a single everyday object against a bright, patterned background); the schematic, figurative canvases made in homage to Copley’s Surrealist idol Francis Picabia; and the story cycles and morality tales from the 1980s and 90s, including a painting from the installation project *The Tomb of the Unknown Whore*. Also included in the exhibition are all six of the SMS (Shit Must Stop) portfolios that Copley published in 1968 from an office on New York’s Upper West Side, offering affordable editions of works by established figures including Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and Meret Oppenheim and younger artists including Yoko Ono, Bruce Nauman, Walter de Maria, LaMonte Young, H.C Westermann, Sue Braden, and Nancy Reitkopf.

A fully illustrated, 450-page catalogue, *William N. Copley*, published by the Prada Foundation with the Menil Collection accompanies the exhibition. It includes an

exhaustive chronology of the artist's life and career with essays by Gwen L. Allen, Paul B. Franklin, Alison Gingeras, Jonathan Griffin, and exhibition curator Toby Kamps along with numerous color plates.

William N. Copley: The World According to CPLY is generously supported by Marilyn Oshman, Susanne and William E. Pritchard III, and the City of Houston.

About the Menil Collection

A legacy of the late philanthropists John and Dominique de Menil, the Menil Collection opened in 1987. Housed in the first United States building designed by the Italian architect Renzo Piano, the Menil Collection's main museum building anchors the 30-acre campus, which includes the Cy Twombly Gallery, a site-specific Dan Flavin installation, the Byzantine Fresco Chapel— now a venue for long-term installations by contemporary artists— and outdoor sculpture. A new building for the Menil Drawing Institute by Johnston Marklee and expected to open in 2017 will be the first freestanding facility in the United States designed expressly for the exhibition and study of modern and contemporary drawings. Presenting regular rotations of artworks from the growing permanent collection, the Menil also organizes special exhibitions and programs throughout the year, publishes scholarly books, and conducts research into the conservation of modern and contemporary art. The museum is open Wednesday through Sunday, 11am to 7pm, and charges no admission fee.

www.menil.org

www.facebook.com/menilcollection/

www.twitter.com/menilcollection

www.instagram.com/menilcollection/

#

Image: William N. Copley, The Cold War, 1962. Oil on canvas. The Menil Collection, Houston.

Press Contact:

Menil Press Office

Vance Muse or Tommy Napier

713 535 3170 / press@menil.org

www.menil.org

Polskin Arts & Communications Counselors

Julia Esposito

212 715 1643 / julia.esposito@finnpartners.com