

Affecting Presence and the Pursuit of Delicious Experiences

**Exhibition now on view exclusively at the Menil
through November 8, 2015**

Selected by the arts editors of the *Wall Street Journal* as a “not-to-be-missed” highlight of the season



HOUSTON, TEXAS, July 30, 2015 -- A dreamscape of objects (exquisite, meaningful, utilitarian) and paintings (from abstractions harnessing willful splashes of color and severe geometries to representations of our world and the world of emotions), *Affecting Presence and the Pursuit of Delicious Experiences* stands as an iconic Menil exhibition, one that embraces and celebrates

the revelations inherent in opposites: The show is eclectic but concise, whimsical yet scholarly, at once rigorously reasoned and right-brain inspired. Altogether new, its origins draw on the museum’s history and biographies.

The exhibition and its title highlight an experiment with two complementary ways of understanding our encounters with art. One stresses the primacy of the viewer; the other, the commanding agency of the artwork. In her introduction to the catalogue for the 1984 exhibition *La rime et la raison (The Rhyme and the Reason)*, Dominique de Menil urges viewers to seek out transcendent experiences in art. In order to absorb a work’s “delicious presence,” as she put it, this true believer advocated for each of us the deepest possible investment in the time and energy required to fully engage -- and to feel -- such powers of painting and sculpture.

While acknowledging the important role of an active, well-informed viewer, American anthropologist Robert Plant Armstrong asserted that objects themselves make significant contributions to the exchange. Objects are neither inert nor silent; they have life histories and agencies. They impress their being upon the viewer. During the 1970s

and early 1980s, Armstrong developed his conceptions of an object as an “affecting presence,” a core principle for appreciating different aesthetic achievements across cultures. Armstrong posited that all manifestations of human creativity—sculpture, painting, crafts, music, poetry, and literature—are “presences” saturated with communicative energy.

Conceptualizing and mounting *Affecting Presence and the Pursuit of Delicious Experiences*, Curator of Collections Paul Davis has mined Menil’s treasure rooms for his first exhibition since joining the Menil in 2014 to explore how Armstrong’s philosophy of empowered objects converges with a viewer’s pursuit of the delicious. Across time, place, and cultures, the exhibition highlights abstraction as a representation of the ineffable forces which shape human experience. The relationships among the artworks in the gallery space survey the affecting potential of the unrecognizable, and encourage the viewer to confront his or her desire, or reticence, to engage with these disparate approaches to abstraction.

“In a way, I am giving audiences an opportunity to engage in a pursuit much like the one I myself began when I started organizing this exhibition only three months after my arrival at the Menil,” stated Davis. “I hope viewers will find joy and satisfaction in seeing a wide range of art from the collection arranged in new and surprising juxtapositions.”

The art on display ranges from antique sculptures to paintings and works on paper that epitomize the reduction of form and the absence of representation. Works by important practitioners of abstract art in the twentieth century—Constantin Brancusi, Frank Bowling, Sam Gilliam, Eduardo Chillida, and others—are presented alongside abstract forms from earlier eras. Altogether, they write a rich history of this aesthetic practice. Distorting, minimizing, or entirely renouncing recognizable references to the natural world, the works in this exhibition underscore the emotional power of abstract forms, prompting many ways for viewers to access their delicious experiences.

Affecting Presence is organized by the Menil Collection and Curator of Collections Paul R. Davis.

This exhibition is generously supported by Mark Wawro and Melanie Gray and the City of Houston.

Public Programs

Thinking with Objects about Affect

Thursday, October 15, 2015, 7:00 p.m.

Patrick McNaughton, professor of art history at the University of Indiana, and Christina Hellmich, curator at the de Young Museum in San Francisco, discuss the affective visual and cultural power of the objects on view with exhibition curator Paul Davis.

Conversation with Sam Gilliam

Friday, October 30, 2015, 7:00 p.m.

Curator Paul Davis talks with artist Sam Gilliam about his work and its relationship to *Affecting Presence*.

All public programs are free and open to the public.

About the Menil Collection

A legacy of the late philanthropists John and Dominique de Menil, the Menil Collection opened in 1987. The Menil Collection's main museum building anchors the 30-acre campus, which includes the Cy Twombly Gallery, a site-specific Dan Flavin installation, outdoor sculpture and the repurposed Byzantine Fresco Chapel that is now the home for an experimental series of long-term, site-specific installations. 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.

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Image: Cloak (*'Ahu'ula*), ca. 1830. Hawai'i, Honolulu. Feathers and plant fiber, 64 × 93 1/2 in. (162.6 × 237.5 cm). The Rock Foundation, on long-term loan to The Menil Collection

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