think it all star

fresh: Haim Steinbach and Objects from the Permanent Collection
The Menil Collection  June 28–August 31, 2014
Getting Started
Since the late 1970s, the wide-ranging, formally and philosophically daring work of New York–based artist Haim Steinbach (b. 1944) has concentrated on the presentation of objects. His sculptural projects, which he calls Displays, feature all manner of things, from mass-produced consumer goods to thrift-store finds, works of art, and possessions borrowed from friends and acquaintances. Steinbach often arranges these items on angular, shelves of his own design made of colorful, plastic-laminated wood. Other times, he presents them as part of architectural structures or incorporates them into room-size installations. Occasionally, fragmentary texts found in magazines and books become objects and appear on gallery walls. Playful, provocative, and sometimes puzzling (“Take it easy,” Steinbach says; keep looking), his artistic project is a multifaceted investigation of our deep-seated drives to make, collect, and display things.

The Menil Collection acquired one of Steinbach’s major works, fresh, 1989, shortly after its completion, but as with many of the museum’s sculptures, it has rarely been shown in the galleries. Taking the work as a starting point, the Menil invited this arranger of objects to apply his ideas to an exhibition emphasizing three-dimensional works of art from the collection. Utilizing works ranging from a 4th century BCE Greek amphora to African sculpture to Adam McEwen’s ca. 2009 blue metal gas can filled with water from Marfa, Texas; functional items from the museum’s workspaces; and selections from Steinbach’s own eclectic collection, fresh: Haim Steinbach and Objects from the Permanent Collection explores the poetry and politics of museum presentation.

Objects and Exhibitions
The experience of encountering one of Steinbach’s Displays in a museum is at once familiar and uncanny. Extracted from the superabundance of our culture, his too-real still lifes are both their ordinary selves and enigmatic riddles. “Any group of objects is a type of exhibit, a portrait, an identity
statement,” Steinbach has said. And each of his rebus-like arrangements is an invitation to speculate on why these particular objects have been brought together. The viewer must fill in the spaces around and between, drawing on his or her own store of memories and desires to conjure stories from them.

In this exhibition, the artist scales up his enterprise to gallery size, bringing a new perspective to the Menil Collection. He asks us to consider not only the dialogue between objects but also the visual language of exhibitions: the variety and density of works on view, the height at which they are hung and whether they’re mathematically or visually centered, sightlines between galleries, and the space in its entirety, including corners and floors. Conventions of narrative, pacing, and even the quality of the objects on view are also questioned. Running counterclockwise, Steinbach has organized the galleries according to the general themes of the tabletop, geometry, travel, antiform, frames, and storage. In these groupings, works from different periods, regions, and ends of the high-low cultural spectrum become temporary Haim Steinbach Displays and resonate in unexpected ways.

**Gallery: The Tabletop**
The Menil Collection has a diverse group of small sculptures that rarely see the light of day, and how to best show a selection of them was a topic of much discussion with Steinbach. He eventually settled on the idea of two long tables in the center of the room: an antique wood table from the museum’s library and a “ghost” version of the same dimensions that he designed. Orbited by ancient Greek, Pop, and contemporary works and two plaster hat molds owned by the artist, Steinbach’s surprising tabletop mixtures include a Persian mace and a group of twentieth-century sculptures from the Menil interspersed with electrical fixtures, industrial wax masses, toy figurines, and the shards of a broken plastic sculpture in the form of an anchor. The works are reminiscent of the long tables in his studio on which he piles things until they spark an idea. With their mad-scientist logic, Steinbach notes, his tabletop arrangements embody the famous phrase by nineteenth-century French poet Isidore-Lucien Ducasse that inspired so many Surrealists: “beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella.”
Gallery: Geometry
The recent addition of several important works by Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, John McCracken, and Carl Andre from the estate of late Menil Trustee William F. Stern to the Menil Collection’s holdings of Minimalist Art inspired Steinbach to consider reductive and geometric abstraction. The regular, rectilinear forms of the sculptures on view are echoed by two plastic milk crates borrowed from the curatorial offices, where they are used to move books. And their planar surfaces are counterpointed by Steinbach’s shelf works Untitled (2 Kongs) 1 and Untitled (2 Kongs) 4, a 1930 Man Ray photograph of a woman’s posterior, and a boli, a mysterious, West-African power figure in the shape of a hulking beast that stands at the gravitational center of the gallery.

Gallery: Travel
During a planning visit, Steinbach stayed at the nearby Hotel ZaZa, where he was struck by two bottles of FIJI water placed in his room. These clear plastic containers, whose labels make them resemble tiny, tropical dioramas, and the experience of traveling to visit the Menil Collection became the organizing theme for a selection of works evoking journeys, sleep, and dreams—all revolving around a bed borrowed from the hotel. The bottles of water resting on the bed have formal echoes in the bubble-like forms in René Magritte’s 1929 painting L’abandon (Surrender) and the Plexiglas vitrine covering an aluminum suitcase used to transport small works of art, which Steinbach found in the museum’s basement. A tiny bud vase fitted with plastic flowers that adorned the dashboard of his parents’ Volkswagen during a trip through Germany as they emigrated from Israel to New York City in 1957 hangs on a wall next to the bed, serving as the lodestar in a loose constellation of works that suggest the shifts in consciousness that can accompany travel.

Gallery: Antiform
Occupying the opposite end of the spectrum from the austere forms of Minimalism, sculptures incorporating free forms of abstraction also make up an important part of the Menil’s holdings. To consider the ways in which artists create these highly expressive works, Steinbach has grouped three sculptures made from crumpled car bodies by John
Chamberlain, an open form built from salvaged metal and wood by Mark di Suvero, and a pair of ambiguous, embracing, fake fur figures by Surrealist Dorothea Tanning. A plywood base designed by Steinbach supports the smallest sculpture by Chamberlain, contrasting two distinct formal languages—one emblematizing the dynamic, process-driven side of making art, the other its carefully considered, classicizing counterpart. These works by well-known figures are contrasted with Totem, 1993, a vertical work constructed from found metal, wire, and rubber by blind, self-taught artist Hawkins Bolden, and Porcupine, 1976, a spiky wooden creature created by religious visionary Felipe Archuleta.

Gallery: Frames
“All of my work is a kind of frame,” Steinbach says. “It is a device for calling attention to things, for transporting them from their usual contexts in order to see them afresh.” For this room-scale Display, he has transplanted the museum’s extensive collection of antique frames into the gallery, retaining its configuration on the walls of the framing shop. He also has designed a skeletal, diagonal wall that is “framed out” by metal studs—except for sections of drywall that support his work fresh on one side and diamond-patterned wallpaper at odds with the space’s prevailing vertical and horizontal lines on the other. The installation is completed by Pablo Picasso’s painting Femme au chapeau assise sur une chaise (Seated Woman with a Hat), 1938, which features a heavy ormolu frame; a corner-mounted work by Michelangelo Pistoletto, Division and Multiplication of the Mirror, 1975–79, consisting of sections of ornately framed mirror; and Untitled, 1966–67, a transparent sculpture made of coated glass by Larry Bell that, in a sense, frames a void.

Gallery: Storage
The experience of entering the Menil’s storage area for three-dimensional art is surprising; works from different cultures and times rest next to each other, creating unusual juxtapositions of form and feeling. Steinbach has selected small objects from the museum’s collections of African and European sculptures and placed them on plain metal shelving units
reminiscent of those in the basement. These are interspersed with books borrowed from the Menil’s “Wee House,” where the artist stayed while installing the exhibition, and selections from his studio, including the plastic jack-o’-lanterns that appear regularly in his work. This icon of Halloween, Steinbach says, is important to him because, in the United States at least, it is immediately recognizable: “It’s of the culture. Everybody understands it.” To this playful consideration of the impulse to collect and categorize the things around us—one of the fundamental objectives of museums—Steinbach has added a number of works that play with the institutional vocabulary. Dan Flavin’s work untitled [to Barbara Wool], 1970, is made of fluorescent light fixtures of the type that illuminate museum spaces; Madame Récamier de David (David’s Madame Récamier), 1967, a bronze sculpture by René Magritte incorporating a bent coffin for a seated figure, plays off the idea of museum as mausoleum; and Untitled (After Walker Evans: #2), 1981, a Depression-era Walker Evans image photographed by Sherrie Levine, a contemporary of Steinbach’s, suggests the endless chains of “readymade” influences connecting artists throughout history.

Each of the Displays in this exhibition trails countless layers of signification. One of the many ways to think about Steinbach’s work is through the lens of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), a new philosophy aimed at moving away from a humanity-centered viewpoint toward one where individual objects and large classes of things—a toothbrush, the Florida Everglades, all the world’s Styrofoam—are given equal weight in a holistic vision of the world. In his recent book Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World, Houston-based OOO philosopher Timothy Morton describes the experience of being in a hyperobject, an inescapable, massively distributed system of things such as a climate or a city, as akin to swimming in a pool: “We produce effects in the water like diffraction patterns, causing it to ripple in particular ways, and it produces effects in us, causing our skin to get goose bumps.”3 As anyone who has ever moved house knows, the stuff surrounding us, Steinbach’s raw material, can be thought of as a hyperobject. Loaded with all kinds of significances—history, utility, monetary and sentimental values—our possessions act on us as much as we act on them.
lacrimae rerum

Some have observed that there can be an emotional charge, often a melancholy, to objects—and to accumulations of them in shopping malls, museum collections, and Steinbach’s Displays.\textsuperscript{4} This may be what Virgil referred to in the Aeneid as lacrimae rerum, or the “tears of things.”\textsuperscript{5} We cannot help but anthropomorphize our possessions, to give them personalities and moods. We long for them and mourn their loss. We “Like” them on Facebook. We fill our garages with them. Some of us may even wonder if our tastes for things define us. And, of course, there is the obvious yet nonetheless slightly tragic fact that an object is, in a sense, immortal, and we are not (indeed, you can’t take it with you). Haim Steinbach gives us psychic leverage on the physical world. For a moment, his Displays allow us to hop out of the pool of materiality in which we continually swim. By creating new conversations about and between things, he gives us fresh new ways to experience their power over us and ours over them.

NOTES
1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Haim Steinbach quotes are from conversations with the author in June 2014.
4. See Mario Perniola, “Rituals in Exhibition,” in Haim Steinbach (Milan: Charta, 1999), 18, for a description of the melancholy aspects of Steinbach’s work.
5. For a rich discussion of this idea, see Peter Schwenger, The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
fresh: Haim Steinbach and Objects from the Permanent Collection is organized by the Menil Collection and curated by Toby Kamps in collaboration with Haim Steinbach.

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS
Panel Discussion
Saturday, June 28, 5:00 p.m.
Timothy Morton, Rita Shea Guffey Chair in English at Rice University, and Bill Arning, director of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, join Haim Steinbach and Toby Kamps in a discussion of the exhibition.

Cover: Haim Steinbach, (Display) — with Hiram Cigar-Store Figure, Books from the Wee House, Lucio Fontana, Yoruba Ere Ibeji Figures, Yoruba Figure with Pipe on Horseback, Yoruba Headaddresses, Santo of the Holy Trinity, Santo with Nine Nuns and Cross, Santo of the Three Kings, Ox, Donkey, Pair of Shoes with Spikes, Various Objects from the Collection of Haim Steinbach, 2014 (detail)

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Photographs by Paul Hester, Houston