

*Review of "Late Surrealism"*  
*The Menil Collection, May 24- August 25, 2013*

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Contemporary America may still be in the throes of "late Surrealism." Explorations of unconscious, irrational, and mythical impulses continue to drive artistic innovations and artists' self-understanding. The curator of the "Late Surrealism" exhibition at the Menil, Michelle White, is well aware of the ongoing influence of the surrealist impulse, which she has described as a "frame of mind."<sup>1</sup> White has curated exhibitions with many contemporary artists who can be said to work in a surrealist mode such as Cy Twombly, Vija Celmins, and Lee Bontecou, and indeed Surrealism as a historical artistic movement and mode of making art is a focus of the Menil Collection as a whole.

White goes back to the mid-twentieth century in this exhibition, to a time when surrealists from Europe took refuge in New York City and profoundly influenced the city's burgeoning art scene. A standard art history of American Art in the mid-1940s pits surrealists against abstractionists with the latter rising victorious through abstract expressionism. "Late Surrealism," however, recognizes that Surrealism may have been derided by art critics at this time, but it remained an important touchstone for artistic practices. Eighteen works on paper, four small scale sculptures, and four paintings are offered as evidence of how many artists, who are now considered to be Abstract Expressionists were deeply informed by Surrealism. The medium scale of the artworks and the domestic size of the gallery at the Menil subtly reinforce that late Surrealism was enacted in artists' studios and collectors' homes.

An important subtext to "Late Surrealism" is the avid interest of John and Dominique de Menil in surrealist connections to American art. Most works in the exhibition are drawn from the permanent collection of the Menil, including paintings by Arshile Gorky, Mark Rothko, and Jackson Pollock, as well as sculptures by Joan Miro and Max Ernst. The collection is supplemented by stunning drawings by Louise

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Bourgeois, Rothko, and Pollock from the private collection of Houston resident and founding director of the Menil Foundation, Louisa Stude Sarofim. The de Menils had begun collecting art in Paris in the 1930s and brought their interest in advanced art to Houston when they emigrated during World War II. They maintained friendships with Max Ernst, Rene Magritte, and Marcel Duchamp after the war, serving as crucial patrons and collectors of these artists' work.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps because of close relationships with artists, the de Menils saw surrealist links to abstract expressionism early on. Even though Clement Greenberg decried Surrealism as "the rehabilitation of academic art under a new literary disguise," the de Menils purchased drawings from Rothko that showed him using automatic processes, decalomania, and totemic figures to arrive at his reductive compositions.<sup>3</sup> The couple therefore preserved a history of surrealist influence even as it was obscured by writers and academics at the time.<sup>4</sup>

The selection of works by Rothko, mostly hanging across from the entrance, form the conceptual heart of this exhibition. Three works on paper and one easel painting from the 1940s show interlocking, elongated forms that seem anthropomorphic. In "Astral Image" (1946), semi-translucent layers of beige, yellows, and whites are painted around black outlines of phalange-like and rounded shapes, all embedded in a tripartite division of the canvas that would become Rothko's signature style in the next decade. Where modernists such as Peter Selz, who curated Rothko's first solo-exhibition at MoMA in 1961, framed these works from the 1940s in the context of a monographic teleology leading to the artist's abstractions, "Late Surrealism" shows the figure pushed to the edge of abstraction as a generative concept picked up at the time by a number of artists working in a range of styles.<sup>5</sup> Works on paper by Louise Bourgeois, Merit Oppenheim, Yves Tanguy, and Dorothea Tanning are hung salon-style on a wall adjacent to the Rothkos to put his abstractions in an intergenerational conversation about abstraction and the subconscious.

Another crucial touchpoint in "Late Surrealism" is Pollock's "Magic Mirror" (1941), which has an engrossing materiality of layer upon layer of oil paint with an added granular filler that gives the work a textile-like tactility. Black, red, and ochre saturated lines are drawn into composition at various stages to suggest figures, architecture, and movement, as in the wavy lines left of center. There is a sense of free-association with a psychological resonance embedded in Pollock's formal exploration. Such a fascinating synthesis of spontaneity and control of artistic decisions can also be seen in the three Pollock drawings also included in the exhibition. Drawing in black ink on dark red and orange ground, Pollock's marks are de-centered, smeared, and build organically one on the other, and yet certain irregular shapes have a strong, iconic presence as if emerging from the haphazard mark-making. While it is tempting to draw connections to his later drip paintings, Pollock's painting and drawing are surrounded here by a small Gorky painting and

works on paper by Roberto Matta and Lee Krasner. Again, a multi-generational community of artists is shown working through similar problems of composition, technique, and concept. However, the charcoal nudes by Krasner show much more of a cubist influence than her male contemporaries.

The most surprising artist included in the exhibition, Joan Miro, is also the most delightful. The art dealer Pierre Matisse brought Miro's work to New York in the 1930s, but the artist himself did not visit New York until 1947 when he came to paint a mural in Cincinnati. Miro's sculpture and drawing in "Late Surrealism" provide a crucial light-hearted counterpoint to the intense tone struck by most works in the exhibition. His sculpture, installed just to the right when one walks in the gallery, looks like it should rest in the palm of a hand. With the smooth texture of a river stone and coloring of a potato, it is in fact a glazed ceramic painted with black lines and stick figure, whose comical frown echoes a smile like form in the relatively large, framed drawing "Musique" hanging just above it. Bright red forms in gouache hover above free flowing black outlines in a configuration that resonates with Pollock and Rothko's paintings. The triad of similarly scaled works, installed on separate walls, hold the exhibition together in a relationship that is more intuitive than historical, a tribute to Dominique de Menil's belief that narratives are distracting and "only silence and love do justice to a great work of art."<sup>6</sup>

White strikes a delicate balance in this exhibition between a history and an experience. The press release and exhibition brochure points out that art historians and scholars in the 1940s mistakenly saw a contentious division between Surrealism and abstraction where the two strains of art making had a more dialectical relationship. Yet this central thesis of the exhibition does not strictly dictate its arrangement. The feeling in the galleries is more of what White calls the "fluid space" between boundaries and linear narratives. A visitor to the Menil does not need to know the critical context surrounding the artworks in "Late Surrealism" to grasp what they are seeing. The creative energy of the art speaks for itself. That the artworks in the exhibition can still resonate with contemporary viewers is proof enough that Surrealism is alive and well, as it was in mid-century New York City.

1 Quote by Michelle White from public program with Professor Sandra Zalman on Surrealism, abstraction, and the shift of the center of the art world from Paris to New York in the 1940s, June 6, 2013 at the Menil Collection, Houston. White's comment may also have been a reference to Zalman's current book project, *Surrealism and its Afterlife in American Art: 1936-1986*.

2 For more on de Menil connections to the Surrealists, see Pamela G. Smart, *Sacred Modern* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 67, 74.

3 Clement Greenberg, "Surrealist Painting," *The Nation* (August 1944).

4 For more on a de Menil history of modern art, see Marcia Brennan, Alfred Pacquement, and Ann Temkin, *A Modern Patronage: de Menil Gifts to American and European Museums* (Houston: The Menil Collection, 2007).

5 Peter Selz. *Mark Rothko* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961).

6 Dominique de Menil. "Foreword," in *The Menil Collection: A Selection from the Paleolithic to the Modern Era* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 7. Even now, The Menil Collection does not put didactic labels on the walls in order to facilitate unfettered encounters with its collection.