

Houston Reflections: Art in the City, 1950s, 60s and 70s

By:
Sarah Reynolds

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C O N N E X I O N S

Rice University, Houston, Texas

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Table of Contents

1 Acknowledgments	1
2 Introduction	3
3 David Pryor Adickes, b. 1927	15
4 Gertrude Levy Barnstone, b. 1925	23
5 Preston Bolton, b. 1920	29
6 H.J. Bott, b. 1933	33
7 Jack Boynton, b. 1928	39
8 William Camfield, b. 1934	45
9 Lowell Collins, 1924-2003	51
10 Edsel Cramer, b. 1923	59
11 Charles Criner, b. 1945	67
12 Don Edelman, b. 1925	75
13 Eugene Foney, b. 1950	81
14 Roy Fridge, 1927-2007	85
15 Henri Gadbois, b. 1930	95
16 Dorothy Hood, 1919-2000	101
17 Earlie Hudnall, Jr., b. 1946	107
18 Harvey Johnson, b. 1947	115
19 Karl Kilian, b. 1943	121
20 Bill Lassiter, b. 1932	127
21 Jim Love, 1927-2005	131
22 Edward Mayo, 1918-2005	139
23 Leila McConnell, b. 1927	145
24 Herb Mears, 1923-1999	151
25 Edward Mills, b. 1941	157
26 Annie Moore, b. 1938	165
27 Willie Moore, b. 1935	171
28 Robert Morris, b. 1933	177
29 Kermit Oliver, b. 1943	183
30 Charles Pebworth, b. 1926	189
31 Forrest Prince, b. 1935	195
32 Bert Samples, b. 1955	203
33 Mildred Dixon Sherwood, b. 1914	211
34 Carroll Harris Simms, b. 1924	217
35 Earl Staley, b. 1938	225
36 Richard Stout, b. 1934	231
37 Stella Sullivan, b. 1924	239
38 James Surls, b. 1943	245
39 Geoff Winningham, b. 1943	249
40 Dick Wray, b. 1933	255
Index	260
Attributions	261

Chapter 1

Acknowledgments¹

1.1 Acknowledgments

For Norman Reynolds, my husband of 25 years

Fifteen years ago I began listening to the memories of contemporary artists, asking them to reflect on their lives and on the city of Houston as it was almost 50 years ago. As time went by, the list of those interviewed grew, but my collection of stories was by no means exhaustive. I leave to others the privilege of capturing those histories of another generation yet to be told.

In addition to the interviewees, all of whom provided reflections of earlier times with sincerity and enthusiasm, several individuals were key to this project. **Houston Reflections—Art in the City 1950s, 60s and 70s** is a true collaboration. Robin Schorre Glover and her mother, Margaret Schorre, generously remembered Charles Schorre with me. I regret I was unable to interview him. Joel Draut, Photograph Archivist for the Houston Metropolitan Research Center at the Houston Public Library, proved to be a great help locating historic photographs. Nancy Hixon at the Blaffer Gallery reflected back to the days of Bill Robinson and earlier, and Ava Jean Mears remembered the early days of the Contemporary Arts Association with laughter and admiration for her colleagues. Earlie Hudnall was instrumental in helping me identify and contact several artists associated with Texas Southern University. He was generous with his time and tirelessly enthusiastic. Geraldine Aramanda, Archivist for The Menil Collection, welcomed me often as I delved into the papers of Dominique and John de Menil and Jermayne MacAgy.

When he heard of this project,, Charles Henry, President of the Council on Library and Information Resources and Publisher at Rice University Press, expressed his desire to publish the book. I am indebted to him for his early commitment to the value of the project and for his ongoing support. David Chien, our designer, captured my vision of the print version of this publication from the onset.

Working diligently to obtain the best possible sound quality, the late Michael Miron tackled the audio challenges of each interview, and because these were memories captured on tape, there were many. The edited and transcribed interviews were masterfully woven into a first-person narrative format by writer and creative consultant Leigh McLeroy, capturing the substance and character of each artist's voice. Not only is Leigh a wonderful writer, but she proved to be an invaluable sounding board. The abundant assistance of Sarah Shipley, Archives Assistant of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, was integral to the success of the project.

Finally, without the interest, commitment and direct involvement of Lorraine A. Stuart, Archives Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, it would have been exceedingly difficult to bring this project to fruition.

I am tremendously grateful to all for the encouragement, support, assistance and hard work that has made this publication possible.

Sarah C. Reynolds

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Chapter 2

Introduction¹

From 1950 to 1975, Houston underwent explosive change, growing from an incubator of yet-to-be-realized dreams into a renowned metropolis—a center not only of commerce and political power but also of the arts. During that time, a generation of important artists came of age in a rapidly changing milieu that could be uncomprehending, occasionally hostile, and sometimes enthusiastic when it came to their work.

Houston Reflections collects the thoughtful memories of Houston artists, patrons, collectors, and enthusiasts as they recall laboring to build a serious arts community and to find their place in it. These individuals brought the arts from an ambitious vision to a sustainable critical mass, out of which grew the vibrant arts community the city now enjoys. By looking back at those years of change through the eyes of these seminal figures, we can gain valuable perspective on Houston’s relationship with the arts today.

¹This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m16157/1.1/>>.



Figure 2.1: Cullinan Hall during construction, 1957-1958, RG5-408. Photo by Maurice Miller. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Archives.

The artists whose memories are captured in this volume were nurtured by some important Houston institutions and patrons dedicated to fostering the arts. In 1900, sowing the seeds of what would become the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, several civic-minded women organized the Houston Public School Art League. Designed to enrich the public-school system and its students in art and culture, the League within three decades would change its name and become the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The original site of the Museum was a gift from Joseph S. and Lucie Halm Cullinan and the George Hermann Estate.

The Museum's first director, James H. Chillman, Jr., served until 1953, then returned in 1959 to serve two more years as interim director. Chillman oversaw construction of the Museum's first building, designed by William Ward Watkin, in 1924. The new structure was the first art museum building in Texas, and two Watkin-designed wings were added two years later. The Robert Lee Blaffer Memorial Wing, designed by Kenneth Franzheim, was added in 1953, and shortly thereafter Ludwig Mies van der Rohe was commissioned to design a 25-year master plan for the Museum. The 1958 MFAH Annual Report quotes the architect as saying, "The first problem is to establish the museum as a center for the enjoyment, not the internment of art."

After designing the Museum's Cullinan Hall (Miss Nina Cullinan underwrote the new addition), which

opened in 1958, Mies van der Rohe designed the installation of works selected by Museum director Lee Malone. Helping to put Houston on the national arts map, the inaugural exhibition was called *The Human Image* and included works from the Cleveland Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Wildenstein, the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Arts, and the Wadsworth Atheneum.

The following year, responding to Miss Cullinan's desire that the new wing be available to the fledgling Contemporary Arts Association from time to time, CAA director Dr. Jermayne MacAgy organized and installed *Totems Not Taboo*, long remembered as a remarkable and important exhibition.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston further raised its national profile under the leadership of James Johnson Sweeney, who became Museum director in 1961. In the MFAH 1965-66 Annual Report, Sweeney wrote, "A museum's first responsibility is to bring art works of quality to its community and to familiarize the public with works of art of quality from which a lack of familiarity might otherwise cut it off. Its second responsibility is to accumulate a collection of works of art on which it can draw so as to be able to maintain these aims constantly and to spread by loans its influence and these services to sister communities." Under his leadership, the museum expanded its collection of contemporary works and Mesoamerican pieces, and was continuously recognized for provocative and exhilarating installations. Sweeney also commissioned Mies van der Rohe to design an addition, the Brown Pavilion, which would wrap around a portion of Cullinan Hall.

The Museum's next director, Philippe de Montebello, weary of losing major art pieces to better known and better endowed collections around the country, delivered a challenge to Houston in 1973. "This year," he wrote in the Museum's Bulletin, "we had to watch many a masterpiece escape our grasp and enter collections more privileged than our own—more privileged because of the substantially higher funds available for their perpetual growth. . . . [W]e fervently hope that the Capital Campaign Fund Drive, initiated more than a year ago, will permit us to regain our earlier momentum." The city met his challenge with an unprecedented outpouring of support: a \$15 million fund raised for capital expenditures, overall operations, and acquisitions.

William C. Agee succeeded de Montebello as Museum director in 1974, and under his leadership the Museum continued to acquire 20th-century paintings and sculpture. Agee commenced a focused acquisition of photography by appointing Anne Wilkes Tucker as photography curator in 1976. That same year, he announced the first in a series of donations from the Dayton-Hudson Foundation, on behalf of Target Stores, Inc., to begin the Target Collection of American Photography.

Recognized during these years as a major arts venue, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston has since grown into a world-renowned institution. Under Peter C. Marzio, who became Museum director in 1982 and is now the longest-serving director in its history, the Museum has doubled its exhibition space, more than doubled the size of its permanent collection, and its endowment has enjoyed extraordinary growth. Today, the MFAH is famed for its provocative exhibitions, significant educational outreach, expansive growth, and comprehensive and growing collections.



Figure 2.2: Totems Not Taboo. Exhibition installation, February 26-March 29, 1959. RG05-78-002. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Archives.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston was not the only arts venue blossoming during those early years. Houston Colored Junior College, founded in 1927, renamed the Houston College for Negroes in 1935, and designated Texas State University for Negroes in 1947, brought John Biggers to Houston in 1949 to build an art department—one of four divisions in the university's fine arts program. Working with very limited resources and only one full-time art instructor (Joseph L. Mack) in a city that was still segregated, Biggers engendered Houston's rich African American art tradition, both in his own work and in his new department. In 1950, one of his pieces was awarded the purchase prize in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston local competition, but the Museum's restrictions on black attendance precluded Biggers from entering and claiming his prize on the day the awards were made—an injustice righted a few months later by Museum director James Chillman.

Also in 1950, Carroll Harris Simms, newly graduated from the Cranbrook Academy of Art, joined Biggers and Mack as a young faculty member in their new department. The enthusiasm and commitment of these young professors began drawing the attention of Houston art patrons, and the philanthropic-minded Susan McAshan and Jane Blaffer Owen, among several others, responded quickly and generously to the clear needs of this ambitious department.

In 1952, Abraham Washington, a TSU art student, painted a mural on a wall in the art department's

newly constructed home, Hannah Hall. When his mural was made permanent, a creative tradition was begun. As a lasting testimony to the powerful legacy of these teachers' tutelage and inspiration, the walls of Hannah Hall today are covered by the art of students working in the tradition established by Biggers, the aggregate result being a lively, dramatic canvas unlike anything else in the city.



Figure 2.3: John Biggers working on a drawing of two women in his studio, 1979. Photo by Earlie Hudnall, courtesy of Earlie Hudnall.

While many of the artists in this book were quietly beginning their careers here, the arts scene—a relatively small part of Houston's emerging culture—only occasionally drew widespread attention to itself, usually in connection with a big event. In April 1957, for example, the American Federation of Arts brought its convention to Houston, and the city welcomed nearly 1,500 art enthusiasts, artists, curators, dealers, academicians, and collectors from around the country. The early 1960s saw the Houston Endowment, Inc., announce a major gift of \$6,000,000 to build a performing arts center. With matching grants from the Ford Foundation and many generous local donors, the gift resulted in a new and improved Alley Theatre opening its doors in 1968. In 1973, the University of Houston opened the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Gallery, the only publicly funded university gallery in the city. One year later, there was a changing of the guard in the Houston arts scene as William A. Robinson assumed directorship of the Blaffer Gallery, building on the superb work done by acting director and art professor Richard Stout; William Agee was named Director

of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and James Harithas was named Director of the Contemporary Arts Museum.



Figure 2.4: Cover of catalog for Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, exhibition, "This is Contemporary Art," October 31-November 14, 1948. Courtesy of the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston.

The growth of contemporary art in Houston can be said to have begun in 1948, the year the Contemporary Arts Association received its charter from the State of Texas. The CAA, which had its beginnings in Robert Preusser's studio class at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, mounted its first exhibition—This is Contemporary Art—at the Museum that year. The CAA's promotional material declared, "This will be the first show of the association and every effort will be made to interest the people of Houston and to show that Contemporary Art does not only include painting and sculpture but many other fields of art and the relationship of each to good design." Under the supervision of an active Board, artist Frank Dolejska designed the catalogue and exhibition, which included sculpture, photographs, graphic arts, and everyday objects.

The CAA entered the 1950s operating out of a small building designed by Mackie & Kamrath, on land leased for \$1.00 per year. The Association's first secretary, Ava Jean Mears, remembers working at a card table in lieu of a desk, and working with Preston Frazier as security guards at the association's Van Gogh show a few years later. Contemporary art in 1950s Houston was not widely accepted, and the CAA drew tremendous energy from its sense of being part of the avant garde. It was an exciting time for the "burlap crowd," so named because the exhibitions were often mounted on burlap-covered walls by volunteers who spent countless hours conceiving, organizing, installing, and promoting provocative exhibitions.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the CAA struggled to find its identity, moving back and forth between a virtually all-volunteer organization to a more staid institution with full-time management in place. Tumultuous as those years were, they were also marked by spectacular CAA events, as the association shifted focus from perpetuating its own collection to staging exhibitions and other programs. From 1955 to 1959, CAA Director Dr. Jermayne MacAgy installed a series of brilliant exhibitions giving contemporary art a historical context. Her successor, Robert C. Morris, hired in 1959, attempted to broaden the focus of the CAA to include performing arts, film, and other media. His successor, acting director Donald Barthelme,² designed a memorable series of programs and exhibitions in music, literature, film, and the visual arts as "surveys" in the avant garde. When Barthelme left for New York, the CAA board organized several important exhibitions, including a show of west coast artists entitled San Francisco 9, and the unforgettable 1965 show of Robert Rauschenberg's works. The show included performances by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in Rauschenberg-designed costumes, dancing to the music of John Cage.

Subsequently, the Contemporary Arts Association changed its name to the Contemporary Arts Museum and board president Carrington Weems brought Sebastian J. Adler to Houston from the Wichita Art Museum to give CAM an expanded presence in the Houston arts scene. Under their leadership and that of Pierre Schlumberger, CAM launched a building campaign that—with a significant matching grant from the Brown Foundation—resulted in a new building near the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. In 1972, CAM opened its new doors with a controversial show, Exhibition 10, highlighting experimental work by young artists. The show quickly became the talk of the town and was later described, depending upon who was asked, as "bewildering," "offensive," "provocative," or "exciting."

Adler's successor, James Harithas, determined that Texas had come enough of age artistically to justify his resolve to "beat the drum for Texans," and his first CAM exhibition was a showcase for regional artists. Entitled 12 Texas Artists, it included works by John Fleming, Woody Gwyn, Dorothy Hood, Louis Jimenez, Raffaele Martini, William Petty, Sandra Stevens, James Surls, Michael Tracy, Robert Wade, and Mack Whitney.

A few years later, in the summer of 1976, a devastating flood destroyed historic records, files, works of art, and CAM's physical plant. But the community responded immediately with a campaign to restore and rebuild, and the organization fully recovered, aggressively embracing its dynamic future.

²Donald Barthelme, 1931-1989, American fiction writer, reporter for the Houston Post, and one of the founders of the University of Houston Creative Writing Program.

Opening Night - Contemporary Arts Museum



Figure 2.5: By Frank Freed. 1953. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Gift of the Eleanor and Frank Freed Foundation.

No look at the development of the arts in Houston would be complete without consideration of Dominique and John de Menil, who arrived in Houston from Nazi-occupied France during the 1940s. In 1949, they built their Houston home, designed by Mies van der Rohe protégé Philip Johnson, and began their long, loving mission in service of the arts. John de Menil joined the Contemporary Arts Association that year, and two years later he and Dominique organized the CAA's first one-man exhibition, a show by the legendary surrealist Max Ernst. In 1954, John and Dominique established the Menil Foundation, and began their generous support of the University of St. Thomas. The de Menils solidly reinforced Dr. Jermayne MacAgy in her effort to build the university's new art department into a major center of arts activity. During MacAgy's brief tenure, ten important exhibitions were mounted, the program was expanded, the art history department grew in size and influence, and a new generation of important young artists joined the department.

The unexpected death of Dr. MacAgy in 1964 brought the de Menils even more actively into the foreground of Houston's emerging arts world. Mrs. de Menil became the acting chairman of the art department, hiring staff, teaching, and organizing exhibitions. Bill Camfield, having just arrived only a few months before MacAgy's death, worked with Mrs. de Menil to hire art historians Mino Badner, Walter Widrig and Philip Oliver Smith. A young Rice University graduate, Geoff Winningham, arrived to teach photography, and James Blue took on filmmaking. A print club for collectors was begun; membership cost \$5.00 and members could purchase prints and signed lithographs at cost. In September of 1964, Art Investments, Ltd., was formed as a limited partnership with capital of \$100,000. The partners shared joint ownership of a few paintings, which rotated among them.

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