

Published in the August 13, 2016 “Weekend” edition; reformatted for this PDF.

<http://hyperallergic.com/317148/menil-collection-houston-outsider-art-stephanie-and-john-smither/>

In Houston, an Outsider Art Trove Finds a Museum Home

by Edward M. Gómez

HOUSTON, TEXAS — In this long, hot summer of violence, election-campaign anxiety, and widespread malaise, seekers of relief might find solace in music, movies or visits to museums — that is, in art in general, not so much for escapism, but for art’s reassuring messages about the endurance of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

Here in Houston, surviving steamy-hot weather might be more urgent a concern than philosophical ruminations, but a visit to the Menil Collection, a jewel in the crown of the country’s regional museums, offers both a satisfying cool-down and an encounter with what, lately, the art establishment has come to recognize as some of the coolest art anywhere.

That’s because this elegant institution, founded by the French-émigré oil tycoons John and Dominique de Menil and housed in a simple Renzo Piano building plunked down in a quiet neighborhood of cozy bungalows, is now presenting *As Essential as Dreams: Self-taught Art from the Collection of Stephanie and John Smither* (on view



A salon-style presentation of works by various artists in the Menil Collection’s exhibition (photo by Paul Hester, courtesy of the Menil Collection)

through October 16). Showcasing more than eighty paintings, drawings, ceramics, sculptures and mixed-media creations by more than thirty artists (some from earlier in the 20th century and others who are working today), this exhibition offers a fine overview of *art brut*, outsider and so-called self-taught art forms in a focused survey that vividly captures the spirit of their urgent-feeling authenticity.

Organized by Menil curator Michelle White, it has been culled mostly from a donation to the museum of fifty works bequeathed by the late, Houston-based arts patron and collector Stephanie Smither, who passed away in early June, just days after the show opened. Other pieces on view have been loaned by her surviving adult children. With her late husband, John Smither, a prominent Houston attorney who died in 2002, Stephanie had been an early admirer and champion of self-taught artists' works.



Hiroyuki Doi, "Untitled" (1985), ink on paper, 42 7/8 x 31 1/4 inches (Collection of Paige and Todd Johnson, photo courtesy of Ricco/Maresca Gallery, © 2016 Hiroyuki Doi; all rights reserved)

With a title taken from a text by the cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard, who once noted that, for humans, gathering or amassing objects is an activity that is “as essential as dreams,” the exhibition focuses on twelve artists whose works were well represented in the Smithers’ collection. In the show, White has installed groupings of emblematic pieces by each artist, and at the end of one large room, a salon-style display of works by many other artists offers viewers a fuller understanding of the breadth of the Smithers’ collecting interests — and of the diversity of their discoveries.

The Menil Collection’s holdings are rich and varied; they include antiquities, medieval and Byzantine art, works on paper (its Menil Drawing Institute is constructing its own new building), modern art and more. Its inventory of Surrealist art is especially strong and well known. In an interview at the museum, White said, “The de Menils were modernists and humanists, and the growth of their collection was guided by Dominique de Menil’s sensibility. They appreciated Surrealism but had wide-ranging interests. For example, they were early acquirers of works made by inmates in Texas prisons. They also

The late Stephanie Smither a few years ago in Houston, with works from her collection by self-taught artists (photo by Ben Doyle)

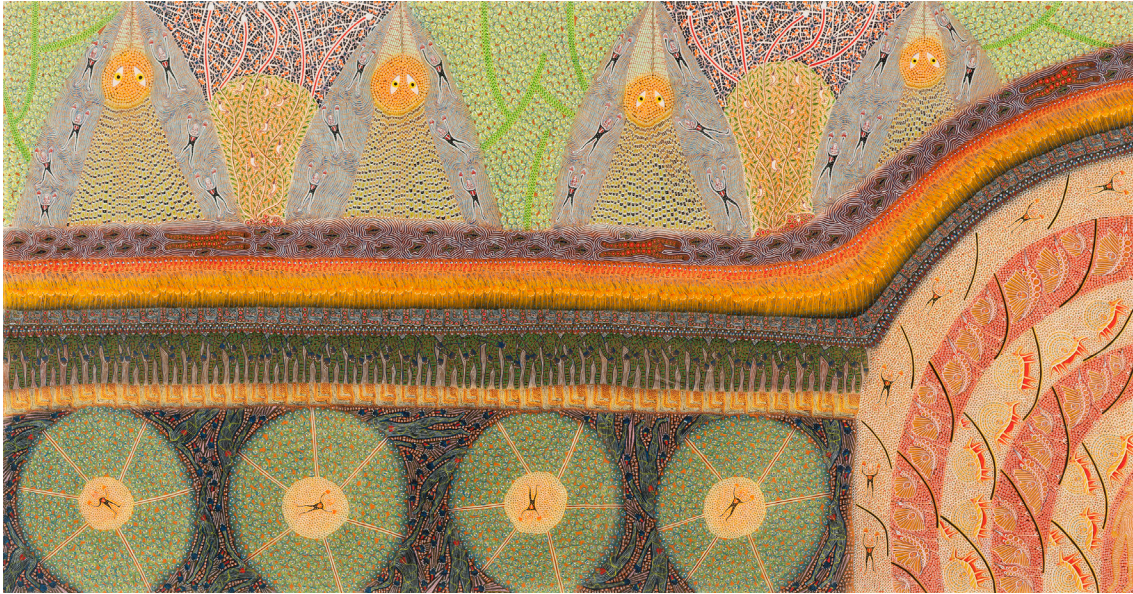


bought four of Charles Dellschau's books." White was referring to Charles August Albert Dellschau (1830–1923), a Prussian-born immigrant to Texas who had worked as a butcher and produced handmade books filled with writings about and pictures of flying machines (including collage illustrations). Long after his death, his artworks were found in a Houston landfill and later surfaced publicly. Today, Dellschau is regarded as an exemplary American outsider artist.

White pointed out that the Smithers' collecting spanned two noteworthy periods in the United States in terms of the recognition and appreciation of contemporary self-taught art-makers. "In the 1980s, they caught the end of an era in which it was possible to travel around the South and personally get to know artists and acquire works directly from them," she told me. "Today, though, some of the now-legendary artists of that time, such as Howard Finster or Mose Tolliver, are gone."

White also noted that, as the outsider art market grew more international in the 1990s and 2000s, the Smithers were among the first collectors to embrace newly discovered talents like the Japanese Hiroyuki Doi, a creator of abstract compositions made up of tiny circles, or the Mexico-based, Italian artist Domenico Zindato, who produces meticulously patterned, boldy colored, semi-abstract works on paper. After her husband's death, Stephanie Smither continued collecting; her more recent acquisitions included the mysterious, psychologically charged drawings of the Belgian artist Solange Knopf, which are filled with human-animal-vegetal forms that grow organically out of and into each other, and are often dotted with innumerable watchful — or eerily inquisitive — eyes. (Works by all of these artists are included in the exhibition.)

A brief, unreleased film, commissioned by Stephanie Smither's son and two daughters before their mother's death, recounts her many years as a collector and arts patron. (Among other Houston institutions, she actively supported the Houston Ballet, the Orange Show Center for Visionary Art, and next door to that sculptural-architectural art environment, Smither Park, a public facility built in memory of her husband). In the film, she recalls that she began collecting seriously after taking part in a museum-organized tour to Africa in 1988, during which she met Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr., a fellow participant on that trip.



Domenico Zindato, "Untitled" (2007), ink, pastel and acrylic on Japanese paper, 19 1/4 x 36 7/8 inches (Collection of Stephanie and John Smither, photo courtesy of the Menil Collection, © Domenico Zindato)

Hemphill, she learned, had been the first curator of the Museum of American Folk Art (now the American Folk Art Museum) in New York. His expansive view of what could or should be considered attention-worthy folk or vernacular art forms — everything from fish decoys and circus-sideshow banners to fraternal-society objects and more — dramatically influenced legions of American collectors. “He was the first person who made other art collectors realize that there was current, American self-taught art” worthy of being acquired, Smither says in the film.

Stephanie and John Smither went on to make routine art-seeking road trips throughout Texas, the South and the Southwest. Among the artists whose work they collected and championed were the painter Johnnie Swearingen (1908–1993), who came from a town near Huntsville, a city north of Houston where the Smithers grew up and first met, and Charlie Willetto (1897–1964), a New Mexico-based Navajo whose painted-wood sculptures broke his tribe’s taboo against making figurative art for non-ritualistic purposes. In the film, Stephanie remembers a visit she made with her husband and Hemphill to the Alabama-based painter Jimmy Lee Sudduth (1910–2007) and purchasing the artist’s paintings, which he made with mud and natural dyes, using his fingers as “brushes.” Together, she recalls, they performed “Amazing Grace” on the artist’s porch, with Stephanie at an electric keyboard, Sudduth playing a harmonica, and John, an experienced vocalist, singing the popular hymn.



Painted-wood sculptures in the exhibition by the Navajo artist Charlie Willetto, who died in 1964 (photo by Paul Hester, courtesy of the Menil Collection)



Johnnie Swearingen, "God Loves You" (1991), oil on canvas, 36 x 36 inches (The Menil Collection, promised gift of Stephanie and John Smither, photo © Estate of Johnnie Swearingen)

Among other works, *As Essential as Dreams* features three pictures in oil on board or canvas from the latter period of Johnnie Swearingen's life, including, in a semi-circular frame, "Cotton Picking" (circa 1991), in which long, bold, serpentine lines depicting paths, roads or the contours of hills mark off main sections of the composition, giving it a rollicking rhythm. Swearingen's rendering methods feel as instinctive as they are clever; here, the artist used daubs of white paint and patches of impasto to suggest fluffy balls of cotton in a panorama of farm workers processing a freshly picked crop. (Stephanie Smither once recalled that, whenever she and her husband visited Swearingen, a former preacher, he would ask them, "Did y'all bring me any wine or women?")

Another painter, Jon Serl (1894–1993), who lived in a big house in the California desert, surrounded by chickens and dogs, had performed in vaudeville shows before turning to art-making in his forties. His oil paintings on found boards or canvases portray human, animal and phantom-like figures in dreamy, inexplicable scenes. Their mystery is compounded by their richly colored, atmospheric backgrounds and the complex but indecipherable dramas in which their subjects are engaged.



Jon Serl, "Back Yard Circus" (circa 1967-75), oil on wood, 48 1/4 x 57 1/2 inches (The Menil Collection, promised gift of Stephanie and John Smither, photo © Estate of Jon Serl, courtesy of Cavin-Morris Gallery)



A group of drawings on paper by the Japanese artist Hiroyuki Doi on display in the current exhibition (photo by Paul Hester, courtesy of the Menil Collection)

Elsewhere, *As Essential as Dreams* features four fine drawings by the Mexican-born, outsider art master Martín Ramírez (1895–1963), including the stunning “Untitled (Tunnel with Cars and Buses)” (1954). This picture, in pencil and crayon on pieced-together bits of paper, shows a stream of automobiles, like a well-disciplined line of bugs, gliding into the mouth of a tunnel in a mountainside. Ramírez created this image with his signature sure, economical lines and a limited but expressive use of color, notably vivid blues and purples to highlight the tunnel entrance and some tall trees.

Also on view are works by Oscar Hadwiger (1891–1989), a carpenter, inventor and tool-and-die maker who, in his retirement, skillfully crafted ornate towers, churches and other structures using marquetry (inlaid wood) techniques, and a mixed-media painting, along with drawings in pencil, watercolor and charcoal on paper, by the Alabaman Thornton Dial (1928–2016). The painting, “Tiger on the Run” (1992), features an animal figure made with painted rope affixed to the surface of a canvas. Throughout his technically inventive, eloquent oeuvre, Dial used the tiger as a symbol of the black man as a survivor and a not-to-be-ignored, central player in the broader pageant of American and world history.



Thornton Dial, “Tiger on the Run” (1992), oil paint, spray paint, rope and rubber on canvas, 56 x 79 3/8 x 4 3/4 inches (The Menil Collection, promised gift of Stephanie and John Smither, photo © Estate of Thornton Dial/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Now, thanks to the Smithers' gift, the Menil Collection joins the ranks of American museums that in recent years have received significant donations of works by self-taught artists from private collectors. Among them are the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Given the influence on Surrealism of visionary, untrained art-makers, the Menil's Surrealist holdings may provide a fertile context for future thematic exhibitions drawn from the Smithers' donation. White beamed when we touched upon this topic. She urged me to spend time examining the works by the Surrealists on permanent display, along with the tribal art, natural-history items, and exotica that fascinated them. (Of the latter, the presentation *Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision* features such objects as a Hopi mask of wood, leather and feathers; a Polynesian effigy of volcanic stone; a coconut seed resembling a pair of buttocks; and a "Wildman" costume consisting of a leather suit and a metal helmet hammered full of wood or metal spikes, which is believed to have been produced in the 18th or 19th century in Germany or Switzerland.)

In the film about Stephanie Smither, its subject reveals in an interview recorded a couple of years before her death that she "still [had] a hard time calling it the 'collection,'" referring to the many artworks she and her husband had acquired over several decades; their quest for authentic and uncommon art, she suggests, had always struck her as a natural, worthy pursuit, even if collectors of more conventional art forms might not have known what to make of their interests.

Dan Phillips, a self-taught designer-builder of unusual houses made from found materials who also designed Smither Park, was a longtime recipient of Smither's encouragement and support. She was "generous in spirit, just so generous" he says in the film, adding, "You don't bump into people like Stephanie very often." As I ducked into the Menil's cool galleries one hot morning with John Kerr Smither, the late collector's son, he wiped his brow and told me, "My mother was a creative person, devoted to her family and passionate about what interested her. In the end, building her collection turned out to be her own form of artistic expression."



As Essential as Dreams: Self-taught Art from the Collection of Stephanie and John Smither remains on view at the Menil Collection (1533 Sul Ross Street, Houston, Texas) through October 16, 2016.

Research-travel support for this article from Visit Houston and The Whitehall Houston is gratefully acknowledged.



Solange Knopf, "Spirit Codex No. 14" (2013), acrylic, colored pencil and pencil on paper, 70 1/4 x 39 1/8 inches (The Menil Collection, promised gift of Stephanie and John Smither, photo © Solange Knopf, courtesy of Cavin-Morris Gallery)