

The Curatorial Imagination of  
**WALTER HOPPS**



In 1980, when Dominique de Menil hired Walter Hopps to advise her on her art collection and on the museum that she was planning to open in Houston, he was already established as one of America's most influential curators, having been hailed in 1967 by the *New York Times* as "the most gifted museum man on the West Coast (and, in the field of contemporary art, possibly in the nation)." *The Curatorial Imagination of Walter Hopps* celebrates his distinguished career by combining artworks from the museum's permanent collection with past and promised gifts from Caroline Huber and the estate of Walter Hopps. The first gallery sets the stage for the range of artists and approaches to art-making that fascinated Hopps throughout his career with a selection of work—diverse in style, mediums, and content—arrayed behind *Walter Hopps Hopps Hopps, 1959*, an assemblage-portrait of the curator by his friend and Ferus Gallery cofounder, **Edward Kienholz**.



Jay DeFeo. *Untitled (cross)*, 1953. Wood, cloth, plaster, synthetic resin, and nails, 28 1/2 x 16 1/2 x 4 in. (72.4 x 41.9 x 10.2 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. Gift of Caroline Huber and Walter Hopps in honor of Dominique de Menil. © The Jay DeFeo Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Caroline Philippone

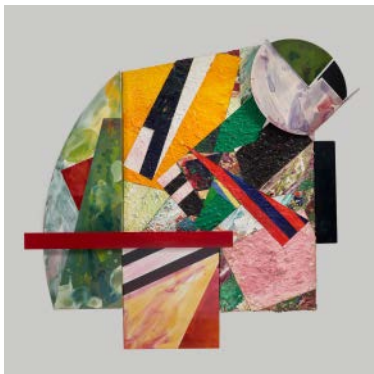
Hopps began organizing exhibitions of contemporary art while still a student at the University of California, Los Angeles. In 1957, he and Kienholz opened their gallery on La Cienega Boulevard in Los Angeles. Aimed at both promoting local artists and bringing work from San Francisco and New York to the attention of Los Angeles audiences, Ferus is now legendary for helping establish LA as a center

for contemporary art. In a city where modern art had been declared communistic and banned from public display, an artistic community emerged in and around Ferus Gallery. Constructing enigmatic sculptures out of discarded objects, pioneers of West Coast assemblage art, such as Kienholz, **Bruce Conner**, and **George Herms** reacted against the material abundance and unrestrained nationalism that pervaded American culture in the 1950s. Working in a variety of mediums, **Jay DeFeo** probed the tension between abstraction and representation, exploring ancient symbolic forms in works like *Crucifix*, which she created out of plaster and found wood.

Hopps's achievements caught the attention of the director of the Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon Art Museum), who hired him to be the museum's curator of contemporary art; Hopps soon became director of the museum. September 1962 saw the opening of his *New Painting of Common Objects*, the first museum survey of what ultimately became known as Pop art. The exhibition called attention to a major shift in 20th-century art. Artists like **Joe Goode**, **Philip Hefferton**, and **Ed Ruscha** critiqued the rapidly expanding worlds of mass media and advertising by adopting their bright colors and stylized representational forms. Only months before, the Ferus Gallery had presented **Andy Warhol**, one of the artist's earliest solo exhibitions and the first time his iconic Campbell's Soup Can paintings were on display.

In 1965 the US Department of State chose Hopps to curate the United States Pavilion at the São Paulo Bienal in Brazil. Hopps presented **Barnett Newman's** monumental abstract paintings in dialogue with the work of **Frank Stella**, **Donald Judd**, and **Larry Bell**. These younger artists shared Newman's simplified approach to abstraction while pushing the boundaries between painting and sculpture and exploring industrial materials. After São Paulo, the exhibition traveled to the National Collection of Fine Arts (now the Smithsonian Museum of American Art) in Washington, DC, foreshadowing Hopps's own move

to that city. Its presentation in the nation's capital was a revelation to artists working there, such as **Sam Gilliam**, whom Hopps would champion for decades to come. By 1984, when he completed *The Saint of Moritz Outside Mondrian*, Gilliam had transformed the explorations of materiality and color developed by artists like Judd and Stella into layers of multicolored and thickly textured canvas juxtaposed with metal forms.



Sam Gilliam. *The Saint of Moritz Outside Mondrian*, 1984. Acrylic on canvas and metal, 59 x 63 ½ x 5 in. (149.9 x 161.3 x 12.7 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston.  
© Sam Gilliam / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Caroline Philippone

Hopps relocated to Washington in 1967 for a fellowship at the Institute for Policy Studies, a progressive think tank engaged in interdisciplinary research. Before his year-long residency was over, he had been appointed director of a small contemporary art space called Washington Gallery of Modern Art. In April of 1970, Hopps was unanimously elected director of the Corcoran Art Gallery by the museum's board of trustees. **William Christenberry**, an instructor at the museum-affiliated Corcoran School of Art, showed Hopps his photographs of the American South, rekindling Hopps's own love of photography, an early interest. Christenberry introduced Hopps to two other foundational figures in American photography, **Walker Evans** and **William Eggleston**, and through Eggleston, Hopps encountered the work of **Louis Faurer**. All of these artists practiced street photography—images of everyday life captured without prearranged staging or darkroom manipulations—pioneered by photographers like Henri

Cartier-Bresson. When he began consulting for the Menil Foundation in 1980, Hopps discovered more than 400 prints by Cartier-Bresson, dating from all phases of the French photographer's career, already collected by the de Menils. Seeing Evans as the American counterpoint to Cartier-Bresson, Hopps set out to create an equally substantial collection of Evans's work, adding 150 vintage prints to the Menil's holdings.



William Eggleston, *Untitled* from *William Eggleston's Guide*, ca. 1969-1971, published 1976. Dye imbibition (dye transfer) print, 21 x 13 5/8 in. (53.3 x 34.6 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. Gift of Walter Hopps. © Eggleston Artistic Trust, Courtesy Eggleston Artistic Trust and David Zwirner

In 1981, when Dominique de Menil announced her intention to build a museum in Houston to house the art that she and her late husband John de Menil had collected, she named Hopps as the museum's founding director. With his characteristic energy, Hopps continued to seek out new directions in contemporary art, bringing into the museum's collection emerging artists including **Gretchen Bender**, **Robert Longo**, and **Haim Steinbach**. Much as Pop artists had done in the 1960s, and the Dada and Surrealist artists before them, this 1980s cohort appropriated found imagery and introduced commercial products and industrial fabrication techniques into the realm of art. By taking on the appearance of mass media or commercial displays, these artworks challenged prevailing notions of authenticity and originality.

Two years after the Menil Collection opened, Hopps gave up his administrative duties to focus on what he loved—curating exhibitions that mined the strength of the museum’s permanent collection and exploring the artistic community around him. His 1999 exhibition **Joseph Cornell / Marcel Duchamp...in Resonance** revealed connections between the artists, while recalling two of Hopps’s most celebrated curatorial achievements: retrospectives of Duchamp and Cornell at the Pasadena Museum of Art some thirty years earlier. At the same time, Hopps supported Houston’s burgeoning art community, fostering relationships with artists active in the area such as **Mel Chin** and **Terrell James**, among many others.



Joseph Cornell, *Discarded Descartes*, 1954–1956. Glass, paint, wood, and rubber balls, 14 x 10 ½ x 2 ½ in. (35.6 x 26.7 x 6.4 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. Anonymous gift in honor of Walter Hopps. © The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation / VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo: Paul Hester

*The Curatorial Imagination of Walter Hopps* concludes with a selection of works by Texas-born artist **Robert Rauschenberg**. Hopps and Rauschenberg had met in the late 1950s and struck up a close friendship, although it would be nearly 20 years before they would work together. Hopps viewed Rauschenberg, with his democratic approach to materials and collaboration, as the quintessential living American artist. For this reason, Hopps chose a midcareer survey of Rauschenberg’s work at the National Collection of Fine Arts in 1976 to mark the nation’s bicentennial; Hopps considered that exhibition

to be the crowning achievement of his time there. At the Menil, Hopps focused on the innovative work that Rauschenberg created prior to his famous Combines. *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s* (1991–92) revealed pieces theretofore unknown that are now among the most celebrated of the artist's long and prolific career. Hopps went on to mount another Rauschenberg retrospective in 1997, an exhibition so massive that, when presented in Houston, it occupied galleries not only at the Menil, but also at the Museum of Fine Arts and the Contemporary Arts Museum. Walter Hopps, whose vast imagination, wide-ranging interests, and insatiable curiosity mirrored those of Rauschenberg, was perhaps the ideal curator for such a monumental project.



Robert Rauschenberg, *National Spinning / Red / Spring (Cardboard)*, 1971. Cardboard, wood, string, and steel, 100 × 98 ½ × 8 ½ in. (254 × 250.2 × 21.6 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Purchase, with funds contributed by The Brown Foundation, Inc., and the following Menil Board of Trustees: Louisa Stude Sarofim, Frances R. Dittmer, Estate of James Elkins, Jr., Windi Grimes, Agnes Gund, Janie C. Lee, Isabel S. Lummis, Roy Nolen, Charles Wright, Michael Zilkha. © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. Photo: Paul Hester

*The Curatorial Imagination of Walter Hopps* is curated  
by Clare Elliott, Associate Research Curator.

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## **PUBLIC PROGRAMS**

### **ARTIST TALK**

**Artists on Walter Hopps**

**Larry Bell, George Herms, and Ed Ruscha**

Friday, March 24, 6–7 p.m.

Main Building

### **ARTIST TALK**

**Robert Longo**

Thursday, April 13, 7–8 p.m.

Main Building

### **CURATOR TALK**

**Clare Elliott on**

***The Curatorial Imagination of Walter Hopps***

Sunday, April 16, 3–3:30 p.m.

Main Building

### **BOOK TALK**

***Artists We've Known***

**Mel Chin, Terrell James, and Don Quaintance**

Tuesday, June 15, 7–8 p.m.

Main Building

## **Exhibition Dates**

**March 24–August 13, 2023**

FRONT Andy Warhol, *Big Campbell's Soup Can, 19¢ (Beef Noodle) [Nineteen Cents]*, 1962. Casein and graphite on canvas, 72 x 54 ½ in. (182.9 x 138.4 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. © 2023 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Caroline Philippone. Photo: Paul Hester