

HYPERREAL GRAY FOY



An enormously skilled draftsman, Gray Foy (1922–2012) created a body of meticulously detailed drawings between the 1940s and the 1970s. Lucid in representation, these intricate works hover between reality and fantasy, memory and mystery. Two recent gifts have made the Menil Collection the foremost repository of the artist’s work. Drawn primarily from these new acquisitions, and complemented by select loans, *Hyperreal: Gray Foy* spans his entire career and is the first solo museum exhibition of Foy’s art.

Fascinated by Surrealism as a young artist in the 1940s, Foy once characterized his approach as “hyperrealism,” seeking to transcend visible reality through subjects imagined or devised from memory, while retaining the precise delineation of realism. The exhibition traces this notion of the hyperreal—of exceeding reality—in Foy’s chosen subjects, his exacting technique, and his meshing of dream states and naturalism. Visitors are encouraged to use magnifying glasses to look closely, as Foy’s drawings are replete with marvelous details nearly indiscernible to the unaided eye.

Born in Dallas, Texas, and raised in Los Angeles, California, Foy’s early works evoke the art of Giorgio de Chirico and Salvador Dalí. World War II disrupted his studies, and while working at an aircraft plant Foy committed himself to the practice of drawing, primarily in graphite. Returning to the same drawing over the course of many months, Foy released images from his mind onto paper in painstaking detail, knitting together motifs like fragments of memories. He explained that he began from a single point and expanded outward across each sheet, and his process of associative unfolding is evident in the dense, bewildering arrangement of *Dimensions*.

Foy continued his fine art training after the war, first in Dallas at Southern Methodist University, and then in New York City, where he enrolled at Columbia University. There, an expanded education, including classes in anatomy and botany, pushed his drawing in new phantasmagorical directions, as is evident in *Untitled [Nudes Emerging from Botanical and Avian Forms]*. Foy was represented in New York by Durlacher Bros. gallery, where he exhibited alongside Surrealist and Magic Realist artists Kurt Seligmann, Pavel Tchelitchev, and Peter Blume. From 1948 on, his drawings sold to collectors and entered museum collections across the country.

Foy’s fragmented bodies of the 1940s gave way to imaginative ecologies in the 1950s and 1960s. Botanical drawings of metamorphic vegetation such as *Grape Hyacinths and Fungi* appear as organic dreamscapes, uniting precise detail with ambiguous, poetic form. Also dating to this period are several



uncanny still lifes, including *Untitled [Cluster of Leaves]*, in which a bizarre bundle of leaf-matter appears animated, as if lit from within. Awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1961, Foy embarked on his largest work to date: *The Third Kingdom*. He intended this drawing of rock and mineral formations to be encountered like a scroll, revealed gradually. Taken together, these drawings approach the complexity of the natural world with a sense of wonder.

To support his artistic practice financially, Foy completed more than fifty designs for book jackets, record album covers, and magazine illustrations. A selection of the artist's original commercial designs is on view in the exhibition. Although Foy considered them separate from his independent drawings, many feature the same level of technical skill and inventiveness.

By the late 1960s, Foy was drawing less: the solitude essential to his creative process had been usurped by a host of factors including health issues, domestic responsibilities, and a nonstop social schedule alongside his life partner Leo Lerman, creative director for Condé Nast magazines. By 1975, he had effectively ceased drawing. Many of his artworks remained concealed in his apartment, unearthed after his death in 2012. A rigorous research project followed, culminating in 2018 with a gallery show and a major monograph on the artist, edited by Don Quaintance, a long-time Menil Collection associate, graphic designer, and independent art historian.

This exhibition is curated by Kirsten Marples,
Curatorial Associate, Menil Drawing Institute.

This exhibition is generously supported by Sheila Noeth
and Ted Dohmen; Barbara and Michael Gamson;
Caroline Huber; Marley Lott; Curtis & Windham
Architects; Nina and Michael Zilkha; and the City of
Houston through Houston Arts Alliance.

Copies of the large-format book *Gray Foy: Drawings
1941–1975* (2018) are on sale in the Menil Bookstore.

Public Programs

Curator Talk

Kirsten Marples on *Hyperreal: Gray Foy*
Sunday, May 21, 3–3:30pm

Writing Workout

Co-presented with Inprint
Saturday, July 15, 11am–12:30pm

Lecture

Robert Cozzolino on Gray Foy
Thursday, August 24, 7–8pm

Exhibition Dates

April 21–September 3, 2023