

Apparitions: Frottages and Rubbings from 1860 to Now is organized by the Menil Collection, Houston, and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and curated by Allegra Pesenti, Curator at Large, Menil Drawing Institute.

In Houston, this exhibition is generously supported by Clare Casademont and Michael Metz; John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation; Michael Zilkha; Frost Bank; UBS Wealth Management/UBS Private Wealth Management; Janet and Paul Hobby; David and Anne Kirkland; Marilyn Oshman; Michael and Diane Cannon; Scott and Judy Nyquist; and the City of Houston. Support for the related publication was provided by Furthermore: a program of the J.M. Kaplan Fund.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Apparitions and Curatorial Adventures

Monday, September 14, 7:30 p.m.

Exhibition curator Allegra Pesenti discusses the realization of *Apparitions* and explores the diverse works, sites, and cultures that she encountered during its preliminary stages.

What's the Rub?

Saturday, November 7, 8:00 p.m.

In conjunction with the exhibition, composer and percussionist Glenn Kotche, well known as the drummer of Wilco, presents this solo performance, which includes new work commissioned for this event. Seating is limited.

All public programs are free and open to the public.

RELATED PUBLICATION

Apparitions: Frottages and Rubbings from 1860 to Now

Allegra Pesenti, with contributions by Leslie Cozzi and Clare Elliott

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Front: André Breton, *Untitled*, 1949. Graphite frottage on paper, 10¹/₈ x 7³/₄ inches (25.7 x 19.7 cm). The Murray Family Collection. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Image courtesy of the Mayor Gallery, London

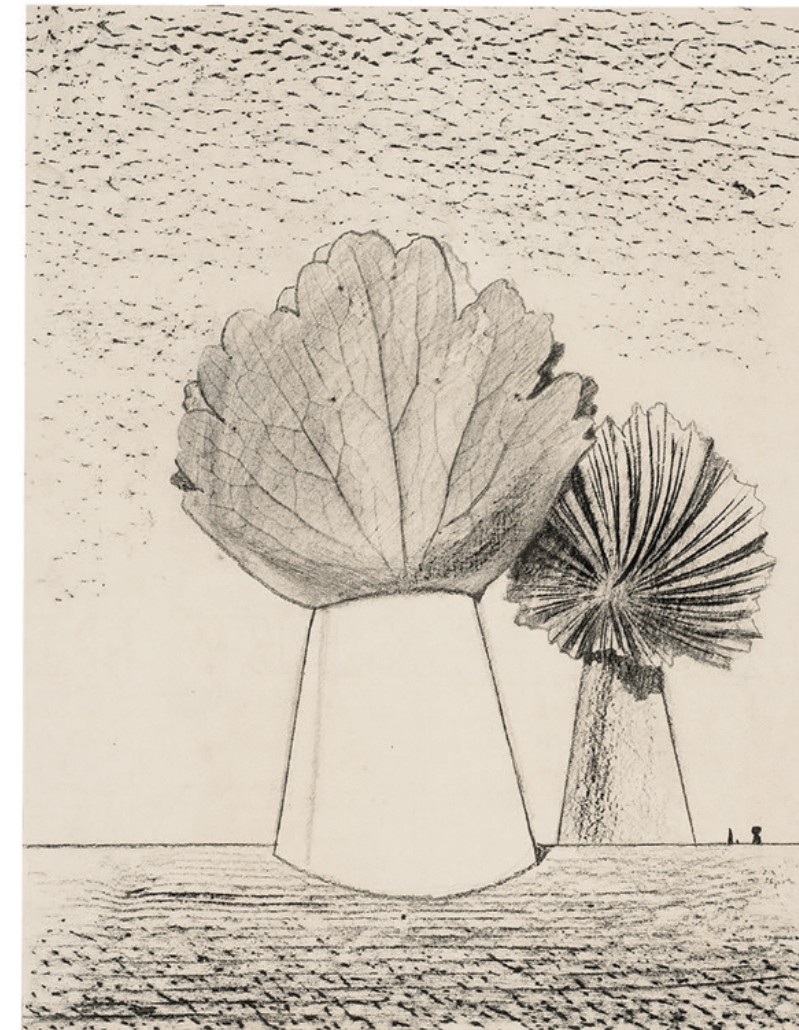
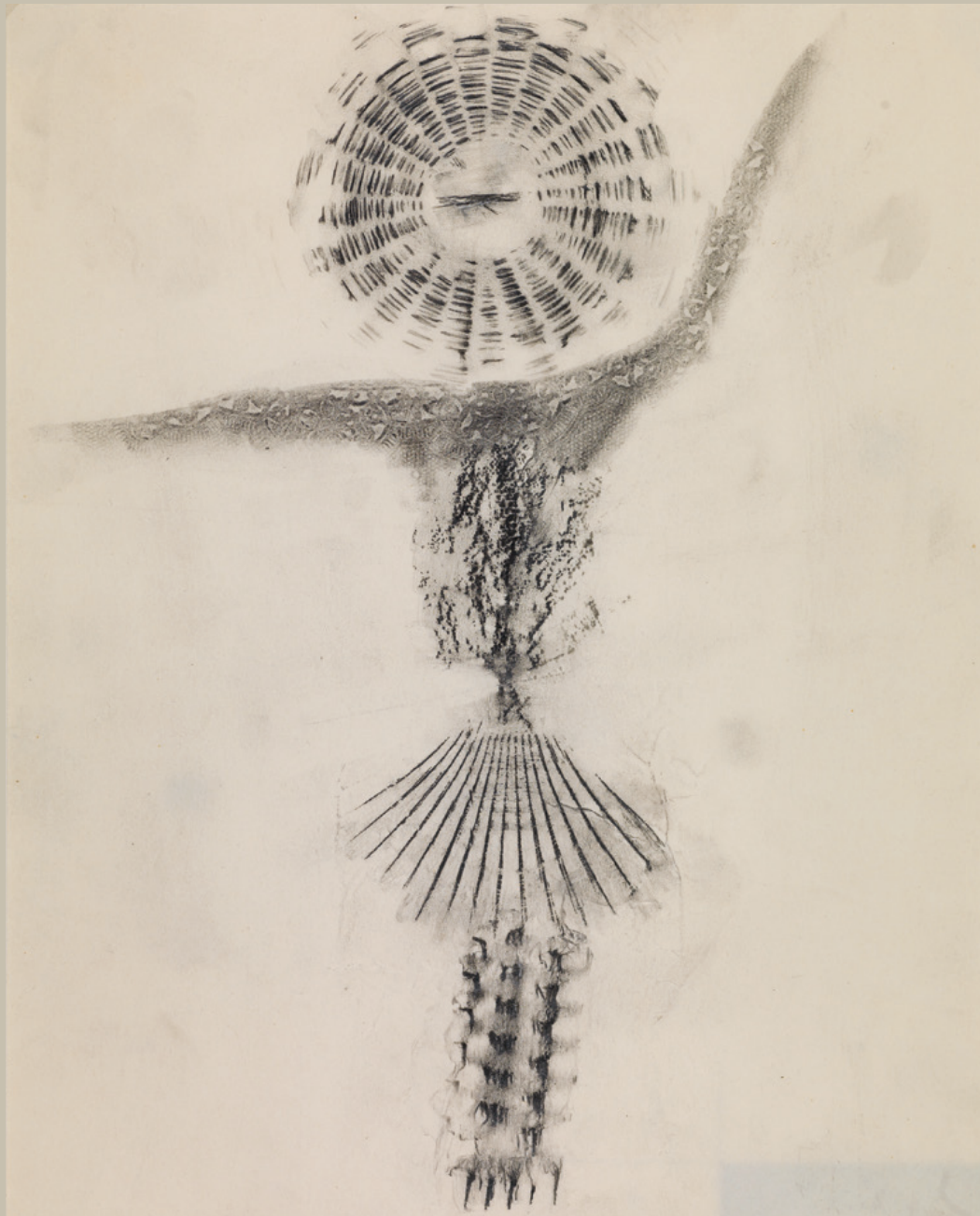
THE MENIL COLLECTION

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THE MENIL COLLECTION
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APPARITIONS

FROTTAGES AND RUBBINGS FROM 1860 TO NOW



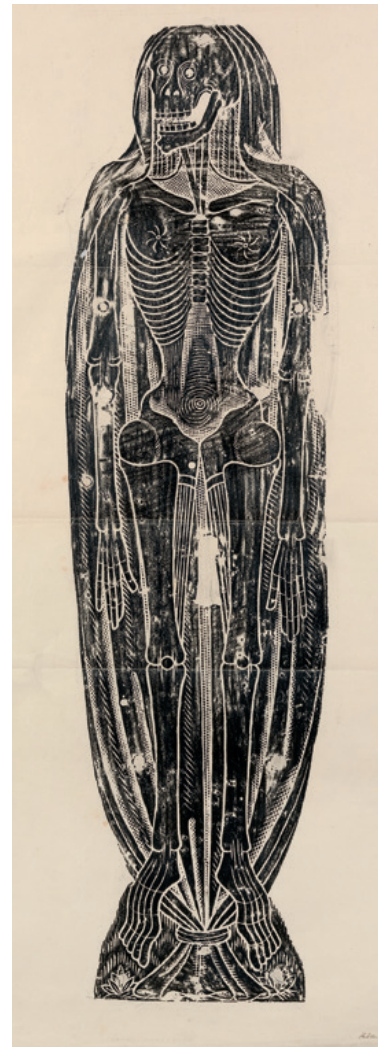
Max Ernst, *The Sap Rises, Rises (La sève monte, monte)*, 1925. Graphite frottage on paper mounted on paper, 8¹/₈ x 6³/₈ inches (20.5 x 16 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Photo: Paul Hester

INTRODUCTION

Rubbing—the technique of rendering an image by placing a sheet of paper over an object or textured surface and rubbing it with graphite or another marking agent—is one of the most ancient and enduring drawing practices. It was used in China as early as the sixth century to record notable inscriptions and designs on carved stones, and from this primal root it has evolved into an evocative and sophisticated form of artistic expression. It is also the forebear of frottage, which Surrealist artist Max Ernst claimed to have discovered in 1925 while gazing at the floorboards of a hotel room on the coast of France. Whereas a rubbing involves the reproduction of a particular item, a frottage is formed by a variety of rubbings executed on a single sheet that together produce imagery that is unrelated to their sources. Ernst created a plethora of imaginary forms and otherworldly creatures by lifting the textures of wood, leaves, crumpled paper, string, and other found material onto paper. As a technique dependent as much on chance as on choice, frottage became a fundamental element of Surrealist drawing. Since then, artists have adopted and reinterpreted these methods of draftsmanship, and they continue to be a source of experimentation in studios today.

This exhibition is the first to devote itself to these versatile techniques, bringing together a diverse yet singularly focused selection of drawings from the mid-nineteenth century to now. The relatively simple procedures of rubbing and frottage—which combine elements of drawing, printmaking, and sculpture—generate compositions that capture both the indexical and the more elusive properties of objects. They have an intrinsically evanescent and fugitive character, which led the French poet and painter Henri Michaux to refer to his own shadowy frottages as “apparitions.” Each of the works on view is distinguished by the individual gesture of its maker, and together they form a lexicon of the language of touch.

Shrouded Skeleton, ca. 1860. Wax rubbing on paper, 39 x 23¹/₈ inches (99 x 58.5 cm). Society of Antiquaries of London. Photo: Todd-White Art Photography





Eileen Agar, *Philemon and Baucis*, 1939. Collage of cut and pasted beige paper with chalk frottage, with gouache and chalk, on gray-green paper, 20½ x 15¼ inches (52 x 38.7 cm). The Mayor Gallery, London

FROTTAGE AND SURREALISM

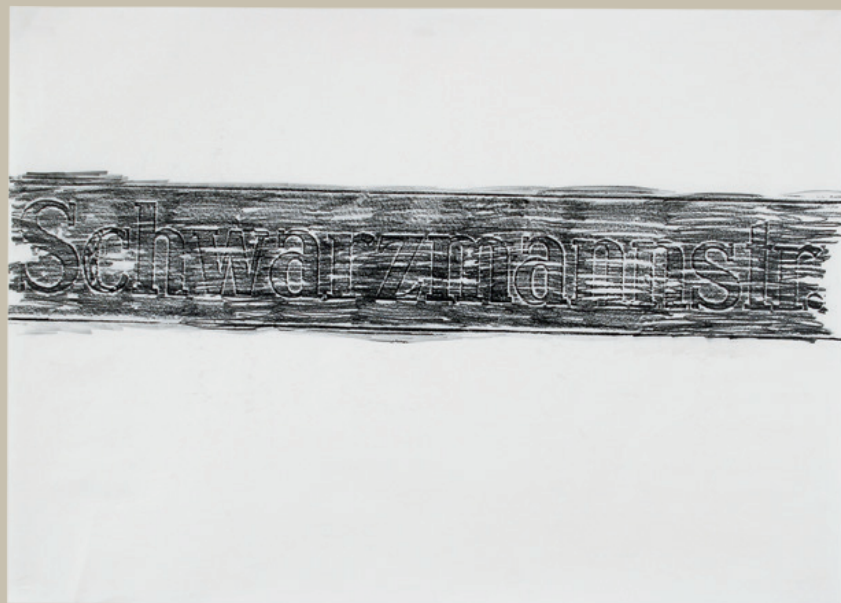
Drawing was an ideal medium for artists associated with Surrealism, the artistic and literary movement led by the French poet André Breton from 1924 through World War II. Writing in the wake of Sigmund Freud’s analytical interpretation of dreams, Breton advocated an uninhibited mode of expression and called on artists to explore the uncharted depths of the mind. With frottage, Max Ernst proposed a semiautomatic drawing technique that could invoke the imagery of the unconscious while relinquishing the conscious use of the hand. He used frottage consistently from 1925 on to create his own realm of fantastical figures and reverberating landscapes. Although the artist claimed that they were made without forethought, they are in fact carefully configured compositions of rubbings. Henri Michaux, the most prolific exponent of the technique in France aside from Ernst, evolved a looser and more spontaneous form of frottage. He approached the practice as a conduit to a parallel reality, much as he did his automatic writing and use of the hallucinogen mescaline. He experimented with it in an almost hypnotic manner, rubbing Conte crayon over textured objects or materials on page after page of his sketchbooks.

The technique became a font of experimentation for artists affiliated with the movement throughout Europe. Czech artist Jindřich Štýrský combined frottage with collage and other mediums to record his fetishist dreams, and the British painter Eileen Agar layered rubbings of tree bark in her grand and evocative *Philemon and Baucis* of 1939. American exposure of works by Ernst and other Surrealists led new generations of artists to adopt the technique from the 1950s onwards. The experimental compositions of the Hungarian-born and New York-based artist Sari Dienes and the doll-like, sculptural figure by the Chicago painter and printmaker Ellen Lanyon demonstrate the versatility of frottage and the ongoing legacy of Surrealist practice and ideology.

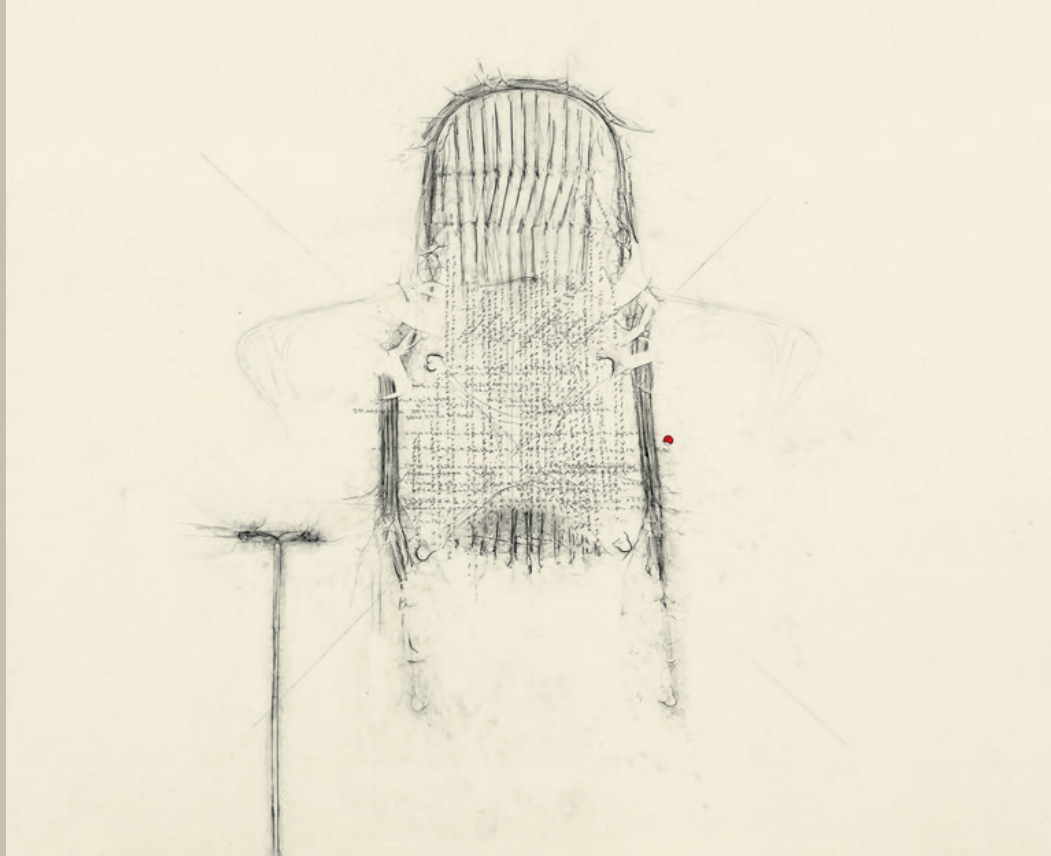
TRACES

The definition of *trace* as a surviving mark, sign, or evidence of an object or person encompasses the various aspects of mark making intrinsic to the technique of rubbing and its manifestations in the work of a diverse group of artists. By highlighting aspects that may not be visible to the naked eye, the trace can at times be more revealing than the subject itself, whether in terms of its history, its function, or its personal or social significance. Domestic objects assume a new presence as they are abstracted from their settings through the process of transfer. The indelible effects of time arise in Robert Overby’s ethereal, translucent rubbings of floors and walls, while Anna Barriball suspends time in her dense work *Silver Door with Flash Yellow*, 2011. Elements of nature have also been lifted onto the surface of paper through rubbing. In a large scroll that billows from the wall, Michelle Stuart’s traces of rubble from the ground evoke a star-studded sky, seemingly turning the world upside down. While Stuart was proposing an alternative form of abstraction that situated itself in the realm of Land Art in the 1970s, she also challenged the traditional boundaries of draftsmanship with her singular physical process in these types of monumental drawings.

Rubbings can be suggestive of a historical narrative but also manifestly autobiographical and deeply personal. Zarina applies the technique to visualize the memory of a specific place she visited in *A Few Steps in the Land of Confucius*, 2008. The work was drawn from a woodblock inspired by the stone path that leads to the Xi’an Beilin Museum, a former Confucian temple that now houses the largest collection of stone steles in China. It is the artist’s attempt to trace her trajectory and past, and to render an experience in a manner akin to writing a poem without words. Glenn Ligon’s *Schwarzmannstrasse*, 2001, is a rubbing of a sign for a street in Munich that translates to “black man’s street.” In this work, the artist records a history of place that is tied to his own and, in doing so, emphasizes what may be overlooked and perhaps invisible to another viewer. Through the indexical traces of all these explorations, there emerges the imprint of the artist’s identity.



Glenn Ligon, *Schwarzmannstrasse*, 2001. Graphite rubbing on paper, 28⅝ x 39¾ inches (72.7 x 101 cm). Sheldon Inwentash and Lynn Factor, Toronto. © 2015 Glenn Ligon. Image courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles



PHANTOMS

The basic function of a rubbing is to create a concrete impression of an object, yet paradoxically this type of drawing can also evoke the elusive spirit that might exist within an object or the human figure. While the works in this exhibition draw from material and physical bodies, many encapsulate a sense of immateriality. Their subjects oscillate between presence and absence like ghostly apparitions. Among the artists featured are several women from different European countries who adopted the technique in the 1970s to render intimate expressions of “being.” The Swiss artist Heidi Bucher, for instance, rubbed sculptural reliefs made out of her clothing to create spectral portrayals of the self. The fetishistic and eroticized impressions of the body made by the Polish artist Alina Szapocznikow are similarly volatile. Marked by her experience of being interned in Nazi concentration camps and her survival of tuberculosis, they reflect an urgent desire to capture the body and express both the spontaneity inherent in their making and the fragility of human existence. Czech artist Adriena Šimotová’s figures are afloat and groundless, yet poignantly present through their human scale and the aggressive gesture of their making. She said of her work, “I merely try to capture that almost uncapturable point at which something still exists, but is at the same time dying.”

In contrast to these figurative renditions, Alighiero Boetti’s eerie rubbing of an empty wicker chair emphasizes the absence of the sitter, although the artist’s presence is felt through the wiry description of his belongings. This haunting quality of the technique is also felt in Simryn Gill’s *Caress (Royal Quiet Deluxe I)*, 2010, a triptych of rubbings of an old typewriter. While not necessarily self-portraits, these subtle and tentative renditions of the artist’s obsolete machine are as anthropomorphic and autobiographical as Boetti’s work. They partake in a sense of melancholy intrinsic to all of these fleeting, phantom-like forms and their attempt to capture the passage of time.

MEMORY AND MORTALITY

The practice of rubbing is commonly associated with the popular and long-standing tradition of recording tombstone and memorial inscriptions on paper, which has been adopted by cultures across the world. Some, like the nineteenth-century rubbings of British funerary plaques, were not produced to memorialize the deceased individual but act rather as records of intriguing designs and as historical documentation of medieval costumes and customs. Others are made in cemeteries or at commemorative sites like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, and fulfill an impulse to make contact with the dedicated surface and an emotional need to register a person’s name in order to claim it and preserve it in memory. The invention of photography never replaced this basic form of impression, which continues to provide clearer and more legible results.

Artists have adopted the technique and its association with the themes of passing and mourning as the starting point for their own forms of memorialization. Morgan Fisher’s suite of rubbings of the covers of a photography journal from the 1950s recalls the bygone era of an artistic practice that has changed and evolved more than any other over the past century. Louise Bourgeois emulates the stark quality of tombstone rubbings in her Whitney Murders series, made in response to her exclusion from an exhibition. Traces of the terrors of World War II are lifted onto linen in Steven Steinman’s rubbing of the wall of a bombed building in Berlin, while past and present meet in Sari Dienes’s evocative assemblages of funerary imagery and found materials. As a group, the works described here read like a book of remembrances.

—Allegra Pesenti

Above, left: Alighiero Boetti, *Untitled*, 1990. Graphite rubbing with smudging and with tempera and wax on paper mounted on canvas, 106¼ x 118¼ inches (269.9 x 300.4 cm). The Rachofsky Collection, Dallas. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome. Photo: Kevin Todora



Right: Sari Dienes, *Peterboro*, ca. 1949–53. Collage with ink rubbing on paper, cloth, and torn cardboard mat, 32 x 23¾ inches (81.1 x 60.3 cm). Sari Dienes Foundation. © 2015 Sari Dienes Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer