

Claes Oldenburg: Strange Eggs

The Menil Collection

September 20, 2012–February 3, 2013

Claes Oldenburg: Strange Eggs is curated by Michelle White.

This exhibition is generously supported by Leslie and Shannon Sasser, Janie C. Lee and David B. Warren, Phillips de Pury & Company, and the City of Houston.

Cover: Claes Oldenburg, *Strange Eggs I*, 1957–58 (detail). Collage mounted on cardboard, 14¼ x 11 inches. Collection of Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen.
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The Strange Eggs, 1957–58, are a remarkable group of eighteen collages by American artist Claes Oldenburg (b. Stockholm, 1929). Completed over the course of two years shortly after he moved to New York City from Chicago, they constitute some of the artist’s earliest known work and have never before been exhibited in their entirety.

The collages represent a pivotal period of experimentation by Oldenburg, a moment poised between his figurative painting and a way of making and thinking generated by his interest in Surrealist techniques such as chance-based processes, automatic writing, juxtaposition, and the innovative use of found objects. Recognized as a key progenitor of American Pop Art in the 1960s, Oldenburg’s early inquiry into mysterious but ordinary material, and the ambiguous space between art and life, marks a transition to the artwork that would define the artist’s career. The Strange Eggs were a crucible for ideas to come.

Characterized by self-contained forms, or “eggs,” the eighteen collages consist of seamlessly melded fragments of photographic reproductions. While many of the amalgamations are unrecognizable, within some, original references are apparent: a piece of pie, the hind leg of a horse, a tree branch, the creased skin of a clenched fist, the texture of concrete. To create the Strange Eggs, Oldenburg collected and repurposed image fragments cut from magazine back issues that he purchased from secondhand stores on the Lower East Side.

At the time, Oldenburg was also composing poetry, constructing his writing from the sounds, colors, and images that he collected during long walks in Manhattan. He wrote lines, fleeting impressions, and tumbling thoughts on a 1927 typewriter he had set on a pedestal in his studio. Excerpts from two poems read:

knocking moonhorns
fast dancing in a gas dream
red spelling in the strange egg
(1956)

Black rendezvous with lemons
ink swelling through a forest streaked with old egg meat
where steaming snoring parrots play with blue flutes
of a dog’s beard
(1957)

Both the typewritten poetry and the metamorphic collages are mysterious gatherings of found material playfully yet skillfully pieced together to evoke the gritty, random, compelling, and often-harsh textures of modern life. The collected poems are titled “violent landscapes.”

Oldenburg was deeply influenced by Surrealist artists in the early twentieth century who pioneered the use of collage, including Max Ernst, one of the first to use scraps of photo-mechanical reproductions with recognizable imagery to create strange and wonderful compositions by morphing the unexpected. For the Surrealists, the interaction of diverse objects or arbitrary images had the revolutionary potential to produce a new way to see and understand the world. In this way, the Strange Eggs, with their mystery and bizarre juxtapositions, call to mind a famous quote by the late-nineteenth-century French poet Comte de Lautréamont, whom the Surrealists believed epitomized the avant-garde spirit. He wrote that a collision of disparate objects is as “beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella.”

Michelle White, curator