

*The Space Between
Looking and Loving*

*Francesca Fuchs
and the de Menil House*



MENIL FOUNDATION
8363 SAN FELIPE RD.,
HOUSTON, TEXAS 77019

January 7 1970

Dr. Werner Fuchs
Berkeley

Lecturer in Art
Department of Art
University of California
Berkeley, California, 94720

Dear Dr. Fuchs:

Bernard Bothmer suggested that you would be interested in the exchange of correspondence Herbert Hoffmann had with Mrs. Ridgway in reference to our marble torso of a youth, and perhaps you could alleviate the qualms which Herbert Hoffmann has deciding whether it is an Apollo or a Dionysos. I'm enclosing a set of photos of this marble which you are welcome to keep, if you wish.

The Institute for the Arts, Rice University, is preparing an exhibition of Greek, Roman, Etruscan, etc., art from Texas collections. It will be made mostly of pieces from the collection of Mr. Gilbert Denman in San Antonio, the Dallas Museum, the Houston Museum, the collection of our foundation - on extended loan to Rice University, and our personal collection. It will be called "Ten Centuries that Shaped the West" and hopefully it will open next October.

Sincerely

JdeM:ec
enc

John de Menil

cc: Zorina Najarian

APOLLO OR DIONYSUS? In 1964 John and Dominique de Menil acquired a torso of an Imperial Roman sculpture dated to the 2nd century CE. Probably an adaptation or copy based on a 5th–6th century BCE Greek original, the marble sculpture lacks enough discernable information to make a definitive identification. Is it a representation of Apollo or Dionysus? In January 1970 John de Menil wrote and sent photographs to the classical archeologist Dr. Werner Fuchs at the University of California, Berkeley, seeking his opinion on this question. Fuchs never replied to the letter, possibly because he already had returned to Germany after his visiting professorship in the United States, and his thoughts on attribution went unrecorded. Almost five decades later, Houston-based artist Francesca Fuchs found the black-and-white Menil Foundation photographs of the male torso in her father's personal effects. This discovery led her to find John de Menil's original letter in the museum's archives.

The Space Between Looking and Loving: Francesca Fuchs and the de Menil House is the artist's response to the unanswered letter and unexpected familial connection. Featuring new paintings by Fuchs, the exhibition explores the personal and relational histories of objects in domestic settings, especially those of the de Menils' house in Houston. On view with tokens remade from her childhood, rarely seen photographs of the de Menil house, and artworks from the museum, including the torso of Apollo or Dionysus, Fuchs's paintings move between her looking and loving, from the representation of an object's foundational truth to a personal devotion in the power of the painted image.

HOME OBJECTS Fuchs grew up in Münster, Germany. As a child, she made her own objects. The three painted koalas in the exhibition are recreations of a lost figurine Fuchs made during her childhood for her mother. While all are recognizable surrogates, her mother cherishes the koala with the bowl as much as the original. In 1996 Fuchs moved to the United States to become a fellow in the Core Residency Program at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH). The excavation and re-presentation of objects is a signature theme of her artistic practice. Over the last thirty years, she has made paintings of objects from her home: family mementos, curios, framed paintings, prints, and photographs—whatever their art historical significance. Fuchs begins by photographing an object. She then makes multiple sketches from the image. Reflecting on these

interpretive iterations and their relationship to the original, she continuously reworks the colors and details of the painted image until she recognizes the subject's essential objecthood. "In my paintings, in my objects, and in my words," Fuchs explains, "I try to use the bluntest language to reveal what is felt, not seen."

The de Menils made Houston their primary residence in the late 1940s, after moving from France to the United States during World War II. The couple's modern house, designed by architect Philip Johnson, soon became a home for their disparate collecting interests, educational and exhibition projects, and philanthropic initiatives. By the early 1960s it was an established hub of activity for university students, visiting artists, and Houston's burgeoning art community. A playful interior designed by couturier Charles James was the setting for the de Menils' ever-changing display of their rapidly growing art collection of objects from around the world. Between the early 1950s and late 1990s, a period bookended by the de Menils moving into their new home and the death of Dominique de Menil, the house and collection were the subject of numerous magazine articles and photographic essays. For example, photographs of the interior by Balthazar Korab illustrated the 1966 *Vogue* feature "Collectors' House: The de Menils' Affair with Art," written by then-MFAH director James Johnson Sweeney. Korab's photographs clearly conveyed what Sweeney referred to as the de Menils' "affair with" or love of art.



The de Menil House. Courtesy of Menil Archives.
Photo: Balthazar Korab

LOCATING AUTHENTICITY Fuchs's familial connection to the Roman torso moved her to seek out parallels in the way she and the de Menils lived with objects in their homes. Looking through hundreds of archival photographs and interviewing people about their memories of the house, she began to understand how artworks moved through the interior spaces. In the Menil Archives, she came across a group of 35mm slides by an unidentified photographer dating to 1952 and 1954. Among the first depictions of the de Menils' new house, these images provide insight into the thoughtfully curated spaces.



Some works not in the museum's collection, such as a Hellenistic-style statue of Aphrodite or Venus, can only be recalled through early photographs and now Fuchs's paintings. The statue of the Greco-Roman goddess occupied a permanent place in the house, prominently behind the Charles James–designed chaise longue. John de Menil's assistant, Elsian Cozens, shared a working space with Dominique in one of the repurposed bedrooms during the 1970s and recalled how fond they both were of Max Ernst's *Shell Flowers* (*Fleurs coquillages*) of 1933. It hung in their view on a magenta-colored felt wall in an adjoining hallway. The painting dates to the same period and shares formal affinities with Ernst's portrait of Dominique hanging in the museum's Surrealism galleries. It is also one of Fuchs's beloved paintings from regular visits to the museum. Her repaintings of *Shell Flowers* refer to both the framed painting itself and to a documentary photograph by Paul Hester that depicts Ernst's canvas in the hallway.

A “cut-out” collage by Henri Matisse was almost always on view. At some point, Matisse's *Black Leaf on Red Background*, 1952, was replaced by *Black Leaf on Green Background*, 1952. The latter was subsequently moved to the museum and included in the

inaugural exhibition in 1987. Artist William Steen, who was working as the framer at the museum, made a copy to replace it at the de Menil home. His version and Matisse's original are displayed in this exhibition, and Fuchs's painting *Green Matisse*, 2024, currently hangs in its place at the house.

Through her research, Fuchs noticed that certain works routinely appeared in images, often in different rooms or new arrangements. A 14th-century French statue of the Virgin and Child, which the de Menils acquired in 1949, was displayed in the home's entryway with *Still Life (Nature morte)*, 1928, by Fernand Léger. By the 1960s the statue had moved to the primary bedroom, where it was displayed with a different Léger and Wols's *It's All Over*, 1946–47, along with a pinboard and secretary desk in which Dominique de Menil saved her accumulated keepsakes. The constant presence of these and other objects in the home suggests the profound and changing connections the de Menils had to them, one that mirrors Fuchs's studied remaking of objects through the transformative power of painting. Her work pulls objects into a compelling narrative that signals an objective truth of representation and a subjective faith in recognition and memory. In the space between looking and loving, the authenticity of objects and their surrogates intermingle, and time collapses.

Houston, December 16, 2024

Dear John,

It was strange to find—years later, in the museum archives—that you had sent my father a letter. I found the three photos of the male torso in his effects wondering why he had them. A tiny connection across time, the letter from 1970. I visited the house with Paul Davis—your house, Dominique's house. It was in no way pretentious or big. The bungalow my family lived in in Münster, with its flat roof, open plan, and two giant windows to the outside, was likely modeled on a house like yours. We moved there in 1972. I grew up with my father's collection of antiquities—he was an archaeologist—not thinking much about the stele in our entry. It was just there. I would touch the figures as a welcome home. We had prints on the walls—Piranesi, Biese, and also a ceramic owl I made for my father when I was a child. I sat with Elsian Cozens, your personal assistant at the time, on the green upholstered settee of your home as we realized that she had typed the letter to my father, her initials on the bottom. I held her hand to touch her—a physical connection across fifty-five years.

I wondered which pieces you and Dominique really lived with, truly loved. I looked through the photos in the archives, responding to pieces I love and things I found mysterious. I worked from photographs, rephotographing sections from the images wherever I could see a repeat, the same painting or object in a new location, looking for things lost, replaced, things in the bedroom and your private spaces. I wanted to include the notes Dominique pinned to the felt door next to her bedroom desk—reminders, cards by her grandchildren—ephemeral and unimportant and things that matter deeply.

I think about the ways we spend time with things in our home and they with us. I tried to paint my love for the things you lived with.

The serendipity of writing you this letter five decades later astonishes me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Francesca', with a stylized, flowing script.

Francesca

The Space Between Looking and Loving: Francesca Fuchs and the de Menil House
is curated by Paul R. Davis, Curator of Collections, The Menil Collection.

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS

All events take place in the main building unless otherwise noted.

CURATOR TALK

Paul R. Davis

Sunday, August 17, 3–3:30 p.m.

PANEL DISCUSSION

A Conversation on the de Menil House

Thursday, September 11, 7–8 p.m.

ARTIST TALK

Francesca Fuchs

Thursday, October 9, 7–8 p.m.

All public programs are free and open to everyone.

Additional programming information can be found at menil.org/events.

Menil members enjoy additional events.

To learn more and join, please visit menil.org/support.

Exhibition dates

May 23–November 2, 2025

COVER Francesca Fuchs, *Magenta Ernst* (detail), 2024. Acrylic on canvas over wood panel, 37 × 22 in. (94 × 55.9 cm). All images of Francesca Fuchs artworks are courtesy of the artist, Inman Gallery, Houston, and Talley Dunn Gallery, Dallas. © Francesca Fuchs. Photos: Thomas R. DuBrock