

think it all star



fresh: Haim Steinbach and
Objects from the Permanent Collection

The Menil Collection June 28–August 31, 2014

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Getting Started

Since the late 1970s, the wide-ranging, formally and philosophically daring work of New York–based artist Haim Steinbach (b. 1944) has concentrated on the presentation of objects. His sculptural projects, which he calls *Displays*, feature all manner of things, from mass-produced consumer goods to thrift-store finds, works of art, and possessions borrowed from friends and acquaintances. Steinbach often arranges these items on angular, shelves of his own design made of colorful, plastic-laminated wood. Other times, he presents them as part of architectural structures or incorporates them into room-size installations. Occasionally, fragmentary texts found in magazines and books become objects and appear on gallery walls. Playful, provocative, and sometimes puzzling (“Take it easy,”¹ Steinbach says; keep looking), his artistic project is a multifaceted investigation of our deep-seated drives to make, collect, and display *things*.

The Menil Collection acquired one of Steinbach’s major works, *fresh*, 1989, shortly after its completion, but as with many of the museum’s sculptures, it has rarely been shown in the galleries. Taking the work as a starting point, the Menil invited this arranger of objects to apply his ideas to an exhibition emphasizing three-dimensional works of art from the collection. Utilizing works ranging from a 4th century BCE Greek amphora to African sculpture to Adam McEwen’s ca. 2009 blue metal gas can filled with water from Marfa, Texas; functional items from the museum’s workspaces; and selections from Steinbach’s own eclectic collection, *fresh: Haim Steinbach and Objects from the Permanent Collection* explores the poetry and politics of museum presentation.

Objects and Exhibitions

The experience of encountering one of Steinbach’s *Displays* in a museum is at once familiar and uncanny. Extracted from the superabundance of our culture, his *too-real* still lifes are both their ordinary selves and enigmatic riddles. “Any group of objects is a type of exhibit, a portrait, an identity





statement," Steinbach has said.² And each of his rebus-like arrangements is an invitation to speculate on why these particular objects have been brought together. The viewer must fill in the spaces around and between, drawing on his or her own store of memories and desires to conjure stories from them.

In this exhibition, the artist scales up his enterprise to gallery size, bringing a new perspective to the Menil Collection. He asks us to consider not only the dialogue between objects but also the visual language of exhibitions: the variety and density of works on view, the height at which they are hung and whether they're mathematically or visually centered, sightlines between galleries, and the space in its entirety, including corners and floors. Conventions of narrative, pacing, and even the quality of the objects on view are also questioned. Running counterclockwise, Steinbach has organized the galleries according to the general themes of the tabletop, geometry, travel, antiform, frames, and storage. In these groupings, works from different periods, regions, and ends of the high-low cultural spectrum become temporary Haim Steinbach *Displays* and resonate in unexpected ways.

Gallery: The Tabletop

The Menil Collection has a diverse group of small sculptures that rarely see the light of day, and how to best show a selection of them was a topic of much discussion with Steinbach. He eventually settled on the idea of two long tables in the center of the room: an antique wood table from the museum's library and a "ghost" version of the same dimensions that he designed. Orbiting by ancient Greek, Pop, and contemporary works and two plaster hat molds owned by the artist, Steinbach's surprising tabletop mixtures include a Persian mace and a group of twentieth-century sculptures from the Menil interspersed with electrical fixtures, industrial wax masses, toy figurines, and the shards of a broken plastic sculpture in the form of an anchor. The works are reminiscent of the long tables in his studio on which he piles things until they spark an idea. With their mad-scientist logic, Steinbach notes, his tabletop arrangements embody the famous phrase by nineteenth-century French poet Isidore-Lucien Ducasse that inspired so many Surrealists: "beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella."

Gallery: Geometry

The recent addition of several important works by Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, John McCracken, and Carl Andre from the estate of late Menil Trustee William F. Stern to the Menil Collection's holdings of Minimalist Art inspired Steinbach to consider reductive and geometric abstraction. The regular, rectilinear forms of the sculptures on view are echoed by two plastic milk crates borrowed from the curatorial offices, where they are used to move books. And their planar surfaces are counterpointed by Steinbach's shelf works *Untitled (2 Kongs) 1* and *Untitled (2 Kongs) 4*, a 1930 Man Ray photograph of a woman's posterior, and a *boli*, a mysterious, West-African power figure in the shape of a hulking beast that stands at the gravitational center of the gallery.

Gallery: Travel

During a planning visit, Steinbach stayed at the nearby Hotel ZaZa, where he was struck by two bottles of FIJI water placed in his room. These clear plastic containers, whose labels make them resemble tiny, tropical dioramas, and the experience of traveling to visit the Menil Collection became the organizing theme for a selection of works evoking journeys, sleep, and dreams—all revolving around a bed borrowed from the hotel. The bottles of water resting on the bed have formal echoes in the bubble-like forms in René Magritte's 1929 painting *L'abandon (Surrender)* and the Plexiglas vitrine covering an aluminum suitcase used to transport small works of art, which Steinbach found in the museum's basement. A tiny bud vase fitted with plastic flowers that adorned the dashboard of his parents' Volkswagen during a trip through Germany as they emigrated from Israel to New York City in 1957 hangs on a wall next to the bed, serving as the lodestar in a loose constellation of works that suggest the shifts in consciousness that can accompany travel.

Gallery: Antiform

Occupying the opposite end of the spectrum from the austere forms of Minimalism, sculptures incorporating free forms of abstraction also make up an important part of the Menil's holdings. To consider the ways in which artists create these highly expressive works, Steinbach has grouped three sculptures made from crumpled car bodies by John







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Chamberlain, an open form built from salvaged metal and wood by Mark di Suvero, and a pair of ambiguous, embracing, fake fur figures by Surrealist Dorothea Tanning. A plywood base designed by Steinbach supports the smallest sculpture by Chamberlain, contrasting two distinct formal languages—one emblemizing the dynamic, process-driven side of making art, the other its carefully considered, classicizing counterpart. These works by well-known figures are contrasted with *Totem*, 1993, a vertical work constructed from found metal, wire, and rubber by blind, self-taught artist Hawkins Bolden, and *Porcupine*, 1976, a spiky wooden creature created by religious visionary Felipe Archuleta.

Gallery: Frames

“All of my work is a kind of frame,” Steinbach says. “It is a device for calling attention to things, for transporting them from their usual contexts in order to see them afresh.” For this room-scale *Display*, he has transplanted the museum’s extensive collection of antique frames into the gallery, retaining its configuration on the walls of the framing shop. He also has designed a skeletal, diagonal wall that is “framed out” by metal studs—except for sections of drywall that support his work *fresh* on one side and diamond-patterned wallpaper at odds with the space’s prevailing vertical and horizontal lines on the other. The installation is completed by Pablo Picasso’s painting *Femme au chapeau assise sur une chaise* (*Seated Woman with a Hat*), 1938, which features a heavy ormolu frame; a corner-mounted work by Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Division and Multiplication of the Mirror*, 1975–79, consisting of sections of ornately framed mirror; and *Untitled*, 1966–67, a transparent sculpture made of coated glass by Larry Bell that, in a sense, frames a void.

Gallery: Storage

The experience of entering the Menil’s storage area for three-dimensional art is surprising; works from different cultures and times rest next to each other, creating unusual juxtapositions of form and feeling. Steinbach has selected small objects from the museum’s collections of African and European sculptures and placed them on plain metal shelving units



reminiscent of those in the basement. These are interspersed with books borrowed from the Menil's "Wee House," where the artist stayed while installing the exhibition, and selections from his studio, including the plastic jack-o'-lanterns that appear regularly in his work. This icon of Halloween, Steinbach says, is important to him because, in the United States at least, it is immediately recognizable: "It's of the culture. Everybody understands it." To this playful consideration of the impulse to collect and categorize the things around us—one of the fundamental objectives of museums—Steinbach has added a number of works that play with the institutional vocabulary. Dan Flavin's work *untitled [to Barbara Wool]*, 1970, is made of fluorescent light fixtures of the type that illuminate museum spaces; *Madame Récamier de David (David's Madame Récamier)*, 1967, a bronze sculpture by René Magritte incorporating a bent coffin for a seated figure, plays off the idea of museum as mausoleum; and *Untitled (After Walker Evans: #2)*, 1981, a Depression-era Walker Evans image photographed by Sherrie Levine, a contemporary of Steinbach's, suggests the endless chains of "readymade" influences connecting artists throughout history.

OOO

Each of the *Displays* in this exhibition trails countless layers of signification. One of the many ways to think about Steinbach's work is through the lens of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), a new philosophy aimed at moving away from a humanity-centered viewpoint toward one where individual objects and large classes of things—a toothbrush, the Florida Everglades, all the world's Styrofoam—are given equal weight in a holistic vision of the world. In his recent book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Houston-based OOO philosopher Timothy Morton describes the experience of being in a hyperobject, an inescapable, massively distributed system of things such as a climate or a city, as akin to swimming in a pool: "We produce effects in the water like diffraction patterns, causing it to ripple in particular ways, and it produces effects in us, causing our skin to get goose bumps."³ As anyone who has ever moved house knows, the *stuff* surrounding us, Steinbach's raw material, can be thought of as a hyperobject. Loaded with all kinds of significances—history, utility, monetary and sentimental values—our possessions act on us as much as we act on them.

Frame Gallery (Steinbach *Display*)



And to th



lacrimae rerum

Some have observed that there can be an emotional charge, often a melancholy, to objects—and to accumulations of them in shopping malls, museum collections, and Steinbach’s *Displays*.⁴ This may be what Virgil referred to in the *Aeneid* as *lacrimae rerum*, or the “tears of things.”⁵ We cannot help but anthropomorphize our possessions, to give them personalities and moods. We long for them and mourn their loss. We “Like” them on Facebook. We fill our garages with them. Some of us may even wonder if our tastes for things define us. And, of course, there is the obvious yet nonetheless slightly tragic fact that an object is, in a sense, immortal, and we are not (indeed, you can’t take it with you). Haim Steinbach gives us psychic leverage on the physical world. For a moment, his *Displays* allow us to hop out of the pool of materiality in which we continually swim. By creating new conversations about and between things, he gives us *fresh* new ways to experience their power over us and ours over them.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Haim Steinbach quotes are from conversations with the author in June 2014.
2. Haim Steinbach, interview with Alexander Tolnay, in *Haim Steinbach: North East South West* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2001), 53.
3. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 55.
4. See Mario Perniola, “Rituals in Exhibition,” in *Haim Steinbach* (Milan: Charta, 1999), 18, for a description of the melancholy aspects of Steinbach’s work.
5. For a rich discussion of this idea, see Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).



Haim Steinbach, *Cart and Plywood (Menil Loading Dock)*, 2014

fresh: Haim Steinbach and Objects from the Permanent Collection is organized by the Menil Collection and curated by Toby Kamps in collaboration with Haim Steinbach.

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Panel Discussion

Saturday, June 28, 5:00 p.m.

Timothy Morton, Rita Shea Guffey Chair in English at Rice University, and Bill Arning, director of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, join Haim Steinbach and Toby Kamps in a discussion of the exhibition.

Cover: Haim Steinbach, *(Display)* — with *Hiram Cigar-Store Figure*, *Books from the Wee House*, *Lucio Fontana*, *Yoruba Ere Ibeji Figures*, *Yoruba Figure with Pipe on Horseback*, *Yoruba Headdresses*, *Santo of the Holy Trinity*, *Santo with Nine Nuns and Cross*, *Santo of the Three Kings*, *Ox*, *Donkey*, *Pair of Shoes with Spikes*, *Various Objects from the Collection of Haim Steinbach*, 2014 (detail)

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THE MENIL COLLECTION

1533 Sul Ross Street Houston, Texas 77006 713-525-9400 menil.org