

Curated by Clare Elliott, Associate Curator

This exhibition is generously supported by Suzanne Deal Booth; John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation; Linda and George Kelly; Susan and Francois de Menil; Marilyn Oshman; and the City of Houston.

#### PUBLIC PROGRAMS

##### *The Story of City Lights*

Saturday, January 7, 7:00 p.m.

Paul Yamazaki, head book buyer at City Lights, discusses the early days of the renowned San Francisco bookstore with Associate Curator Clare Elliott.

##### *Alias: Art and Identity in Cold War Hollywood*

Tuesday, January 24, 7:00 p.m.

Art historian Monica Steinberg considers how Los Angeles-based artists explored the potential of working pseudonymously in an era when avant-garde art was linked with subversive politics.

##### *Bruce Conner: An Assemblage of Films*

Saturday, February 11, 7:00 p.m.

Sunday, February 12, 3:30 p.m.

Aurora Picture Show, 2422 Bartlett Street

The Menil Collection and Aurora Picture Show bring together a selection of short films by California artist Bruce Conner.

Free admission, tickets required; see [www.aurorapictureshow.org](http://www.aurorapictureshow.org).

##### *paratext*

Sunday, March 12, 4:00 p.m.

Byzantine Fresco Chapel, 4011 Yupon Street

The Menil Collection and Houston-based artist collective Alabama Song present an afternoon of poetry and sound that delves into the lasting legacy of the Beat generation.

*All public programs are free and open to the public. Menil members enjoy access to additional events, such as a noontime gallery talk with exhibition curator Clare Elliott on Friday, December 16. Visit the museum or [menil.org](http://menil.org) for more information.*

front: George Herms, *Greet the Circus with a Smile*, 1961. Mannequin torso, salvaged wood, feathers, tar, cement, cloth, plant material, paint, crayon, ink, paper, photographs, metal, plastic, glass, cord, mirror, electric light fixture, and phonograph tone-arm, 68 × 28½ × 20 inches (172.7 × 72.4 × 50.8 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Gift of Edwin Gregson. © George Herms

All photos: Paul Hester

## THE MENIL COLLECTION

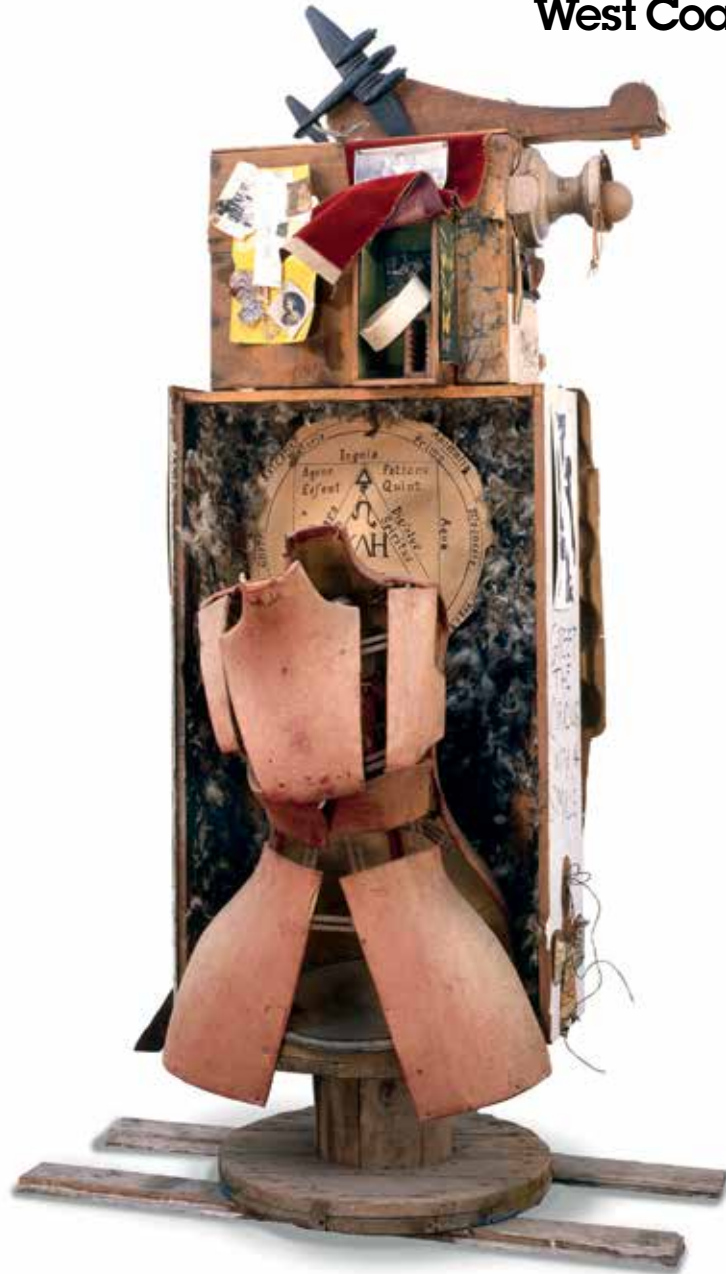
1533 Sul Ross Street Houston, Texas 77006 713-525-9400

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# Holy Barbarians

## Beat Culture on the West Coast



The Menil Collection November 18, 2016–March 12, 2017

Amid the confidence and abundance that pervaded mainstream American culture following the Second World War, a number of younger writers, artists, and musicians were questioning the optimism and conformity of the era. In 1948, Jack Kerouac described himself and his peers as “a beat generation,” unintentionally coining the designation, which carries a number of associations: a state of exhaustion; a physical or strategic defeat; a rhythmic unit in music or poetry; and finally as a fragment of the word “beatific.” Though never precisely defined, Beat culture emphasized spirituality, liberation—whether artistic, sexual, or political—experimentation, and rebellion against what were seen as hypocritical societal values. First appearing in the literary circles of New York, the movement took root in urban centers throughout the United States and found analogues in other art forms, including the visual arts. In California, artists began operating outside of established museums, schools, and galleries in both Los Angeles and in the San Francisco Bay area. Artists in the north continued San Francisco’s tradition of bohemianism, taking advantage of the region’s permissive atmosphere. Meanwhile in Los Angeles, much of the work being made was a reaction to the illusory perfection created and sold by Hollywood television studios and Disneyland. As was the literature from the East Coast, these artworks were imbued with an enigmatic spirituality and reflected the influences of jazz, poetry, and popular culture. They were made in a visually diverse array of media that emphasized spontaneity and innovation over aesthetic or technical concerns.

The cover of *The Holy Barbarians*, Lawrence Lipton’s 1959 book examining the lives of the beatnik community of Venice Beach, features a photograph of artist **John Altoon** (1925–1969). Partly due to his sudden early death (he suffered a fatal heart attack at the age of forty-three), Altoon is not well known today; during his lifetime, however, he was a highly regarded and charismatic presence in the Los Angeles art scene. A successful commercial illustrator, he struggled to find recognition as a serious artist. He worked in prolific spurts, producing up to twenty or thirty drawings a day and alternated between abstract, figurative, and hybrid compositions. Along the way Altoon developed an idiosyncratic and lyrical sense of line and color that distinguishes his compositions.



Wallace Berman, *Untitled*, 1956–57. Ink and shellac on torn parchment paper on primed canvas, 19½ × 19½ inches (49.5 × 49.5 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Gift of Caroline Huber and the estate of Walter Hopps. © The Estate of Wallace Berman

Artist, poet, and jazz aficionado **Wallace Berman** (1926–1976) achieved near-mythic standing among the artists practicing in California in the 1950s and ‘60s. While living in Los Angeles, he developed a distinct artistic voice that combined his interest in Surrealist art and film, his intensive study of the Kabbalah, and the possibilities he discovered in the assemblage art of Robert Rauschenberg. Both *Factum Fide*, ca. 1957, and *Untitled*, 1956–57, were included in the first and only solo gallery exhibition of Berman’s work during his lifetime: *Sculpture and Paintings by Wallace Berman*, 1957. Held at the groundbreaking Ferus Gallery, established by fellow artist Ed Kienholz and budding curator Walter Hopps earlier that year, the exhibition was investigated by the city’s vice squad and they arrested Berman on obscenity charges. The artist found the experience so traumatic that he declined subsequent opportunities to exhibit his work for years.

Berman’s near-absence from public view intensified his reputation as a mysterious, underground figure. His influence continued to grow via his journal *Semina*, published irregularly



Edward Kienholz, *George Warshington in Drag*, 1957. Oil on wood, 38¼ × 42 inches (97.2 × 106.7 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Gift of Caroline Huber and the estate of Walter Hopps. © Kienholz. Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA

between 1955 and 1964. Distributed via post, most of its volumes consisted of loose-leaf pages of text and image with no suggested order, leaving the sequence up to chance or to the reader. Over the course of its nine-issue run, nearly fifty artists, poets, and photographers, including Walter Hopps and Dennis Hopper, contributed to the publication. *Untitled (Art is Love is God)*, 1955, by **Robert Alexander** (1923–1987) attests to the iconic status Berman and *Semina* achieved. The small wood construction unfolds like a medieval portable altar and, when open, a photographic portrait of Berman is visible alongside his motto “Art is Love is God”—a precise encapsulation the artist’s faith in the creative process.

When **George Herms** (b. 1935) met Berman in 1955, he discovered a kindred spirit. Berman introduced him to the possibilities of assemblage, which soon became Herms’s preferred technique, although he continued to draw and paint. A jumble of weather-worn found objects and personal mementos, *Greet the Circus with a Smile*, 1961, illustrates the delight that Herms took in assembling detritus into works of lasting beauty. A different sensibility is seen in *Day of Bessie Smith*, 1962, a serene composition of

a paintbrush, seashell, and photograph that pays homage to the legendary blues and jazz vocalist. Following the example set by Marcel Duchamp, Herms frequently employed alter egos and pseudonyms (as did Berman and Bruce Conner from time to time), creating distinct biographies and aesthetic styles for each alias. The most prominent of these alternative identities was Paul Mistrie (a pun on the word *palmistry*), a motorcycle enthusiast, artist, and writer. Although Mistrie made appearances throughout the 1960s, only two of his assemblages are known to be extant: *Paul’s Piece* and *Wrench*, both 1961.

In addition to cofounding the Ferus Gallery, **Ed Kienholz** (1927–1994) emerged as a significant assemblage artist a few years prior to Herms. Born in Washington State, Kienholz moved to California in 1953 and without any formal training began to make vigorous abstract paintings enlivened with scraps of wood. These shallow reliefs gradually extended further into space; by the end of the 1950s, much of Kienholz’s work existed as free-standing sculptural assemblages that he called tableaus. *George Warshington in Drag*, 1957, and *Conversation Piece*, 1959, incorporate political critique of American history, and most of the artist’s work carries an implicit rejection of consumer culture through the unabashed vulgarity of the assembled items. Kienholz constructed the portrait *Walter Hopps Hopps Hopps*, 1959, from a signboard he found that resembled his partner in the Ferus Gallery. The appearance of the figure as a petty criminal—proffering works by Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Jackson Pollock as though they were illicit goods—pokes fun at the early scrutiny that the gallery provoked from the LAPD. The reverse of the figure includes a diversity of objects and ephemera compartmentalized according to perceived importance.

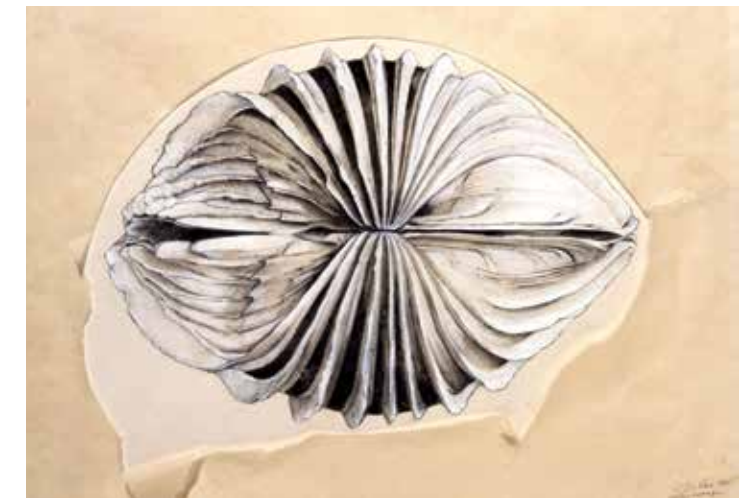
Both Berman and the Ferus Gallery played essential roles in bringing together artists working in Los Angeles and those active in the San Francisco Bay area, such as **Bruce Conner** (1933–2008), one of the better known California artists of the era. Conner moved to San Francisco after completing a fine arts degree at the University of Colorado in 1957. He began assembling found materials into freestanding, three-dimensional works, like *Crucifixion*, 1960, and hybrid painting/sculptures dominated by black tones, like *Untitled (Pearl Necklace)*, 1958, and *August 25, 1959*, 1959. Conner formed his creations from all manner of objects and at that time often shrouded them in nylon stockings. The weblike material,

with its uncanny ability to simultaneously conceal and reveal and its association with the female body, became almost a signature of the artist’s assemblages. A highly theatrical, almost macabre quality pervades these works, which he mostly abandoned making after 1964.

A close friend of Berman, Conner, and Hopps, **Jay DeFeo** (1929–1989) was a dynamic presence in San Francisco’s artistic community. She worked in a variety of media, mining the tensions between abstraction and representation and exploring both geometric and gestural forms. Like Berman, the artist spent much of her career as something of an underground figure, mythologized for the eight years she labored on a single monumental painting/



Bruce Conner, *Crucifixion*, 1960. Wood, corrugated board, wax, nylon, and thread, 21¼ × 15½ × 7½ inches (55.2 × 39.4 × 19.1 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Gift of Walter Hopps. © Estate of Bruce Conner / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Jay DeFeo, *After Image*, 1970. Graphite, gouache, and transparent acrylic on paper with cut and torn tracing paper, 14 × 19½ inches (35.6 × 49.5 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Gift of Glenn Fukushima in honor of the artist. © The Jay DeFeo Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

construction called *The Rose*, 1958–66. Simultaneous with the beginning of *The Rose*, DeFeo created a large work on paper with a similar arrangement of white, black, and gray forms radiating from a circular central element. Unsatisfied, she destroyed the composition, but kept several fragments. These pieces have been assembled in what is thought to be their original configuration and are displayed together here for the first time.

**W**hile never an organized movement, the artists of *Holy Barbarians* were affiliated through personal friendships and shared philosophies as well as actions, publications, exhibitions, and ideals. One of the primary connections between these figures was Walter Hopps, who championed their work in the face of an often indifferent and sometimes hostile audience. The legendary curator went on to become the founding director of the Menil Collection, and his legacy can be seen in the museum’s remarkable holdings of works from this group of artists. By the end of the 1960s the Beat generation had given way to later countercultural movements such as the “hippies,” all of which built on the Beats’ legacy of liberation and rebellion.

—Clare Elliott