

an affecting presence “seems as much to apprehend its witness as its witness apprehends it.”⁵

Armstrong has described meeting an alien affecting presence as “sometimes like hearing two men speaking earnestly in a foreign language.” You may not understand their words, but you are “aware of . . . the fact that meaning of some grave sort is embodied in their encounter.”⁶ The same is true of many of the objects in this exhibition. That there is an affecting presence is readily apparent, but its nature is not. Works conjure powerful but highly idiosyncratic responses, and not every experience is delicious. Much depends on the individual viewer, on one’s desire or reticence to engage. The interaction of an active viewer and an affecting presence is a dialogue. As Armstrong put it: “While the presence informs the man, the man, in his unique way, to some extent and in some fashion informs the presence.”⁷

NOTES

- 1 Dominique de Menil, introduction to *La Rime et la raison, Les collections Menil (Houston–New York)* (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1984), 11.
- 2 Robert Plant Armstrong, *The Affecting Presence: An Essay in Humanistic Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 25.
- 3 Hal Foster, “To Forge,” in *David Smith: The Forgings*, ed. by Ealan Wingate (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2013), 12.
- 4 See Guy Hedreen, “Involved Spectatorship in Archaic Greek Art,” *Art History* 30, no. 2 (April 2007): 217–46.
- 5 Robert Plant Armstrong, *The Powers of Presence: Consciousness, Myth, and Affecting Presence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 16.
- 6 Armstrong, *The Affecting Presence*, 44–45.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 25.

Affecting Presence is organized by the Menil Collection and curated by Curator of Collections Paul Davis.

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Thinking with Objects about Affect

Thursday, October 15, 2015, 7:00 p.m.

Art historian Patrick McNaughton and curator Christina Hellmich discuss the affective visual and cultural power of the objects on view with exhibition curator Paul Davis.

Conversation with Sam Gilliam

Friday, October 30, 2015, 7:00 p.m.

Curator Paul Davis talks with artist Sam Gilliam about his work and its relationship to *Affecting Presence*.

MEMBERSHIP

Menil members enjoy special events and unique experiences as well as provide critical support for our exhibitions and programs. Visit the museum’s reception desk or website for more information.

Front: Cloak (*Ahu’ula*). Hawai’i, Honolulu, ca. 1860. Feathers on vegetable fiber, 64 x 93½ inches (162.6 x 237.5 cm). The Rock Foundation, on long-term loan to The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Paul Hester

THE MENIL COLLECTION

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Affecting Presence and the Pursuit of Delicious Experiences



The Menil Collection
July 17–November 8, 2015

Affecting Presence and the Pursuit of Delicious Experiences is an experiment with two complementary ways of understanding our encounters with art. One stresses the primacy of the viewer; the other, the commanding agency of the artwork. Museum cofounder Dominique de Menil was an ardent believer in transcendent art experiences, and in her introduction to *La rime et la raison* (1984) she directs the reader to seek out a work's "delicious presence."¹ Meaningful contact is rarely immediate, however, particularly in the case of unfamiliar forms, and she emphasizes that time and energy are required of the viewer. The endeavor demands an inquisitive and open mind, one engaged in the critical process of perception. "Passivity," she concludes, "is fatal."

American anthropologist Robert Plant Armstrong acknowledged the important role of an active and well-informed viewer, but he asserted that objects themselves make significant contributions to the exchange. They are not inert and silent, they have life histories and agency. They impress their being upon the viewer. During the 1970s and early 1980s, Armstrong developed his conception of an object as an "affecting presence," a core principle for appreciating different aesthetic achievements across cultures. He understood sculpture, painting, craft, music, poetry, literature, speech, and other manifestations of intentional creativity as "presences" saturated with material and communicative energy that compel us to respond:

The affecting presence acts as subject, asserting its own being, inviting the perceptor's recognition and, in culturally permitted ways, structuring that subsequent relationship which someone has called the "transaction."²

Presenting an eclectic selection of work from the Menil's permanent collection and on loan from members of the de Menil family, the exhibition initiates such "transactions," and explores what happens when we encounter empowered objects in our pursuit of the delicious. Works on view highlight the power of abstraction—a reduction of form or the absence of representation—as an artistic means used across time, place, and culture to make present the ineffable forces that shape human experiences. Distorting, minimizing, renouncing, or refining recognizable visual references, abstraction can generate divergent views on whether or not an object qualifies as an affecting presence and can prompt multiple avenues of access.

The works are loosely organized around the foundations of visual communication: color, line, shape, surface, rhythm, symmetry, etc. These groupings heighten our recognition of the objects' particular formal qualities and intercultural resonances. Paintings and sculpture by Frank Bowling, Constantin Brancusi, Eduardo Chillida, Sam Gilliam, and other artists who made important contributions to abstract art during the twentieth century are presented alongside a variety of nonrepresentational works from earlier eras

and other cultures, showcasing the rich history of this aesthetic practice. The sinuous form and human size of David Smith's *Forging III*, 1955, is perhaps the most basic example of formalism—a line. Yet the sculpture's frontality and scale impose its presence on the viewer, which led art historian Hal Foster to refer to Smith's series of ten *Forgings* as "assertive apparitions."³ In comparison to *Forging III*, the neighboring fifth- to third-century BCE bronze statuette is diminutive. The ancient sculpture reduces the human figure to a vertical undulation, a line punctuated by circular markings. It is a compelling presence, not an assertive one. Sharing the same space in the gallery, however, the two sculptures suggest an affinity for an affective form deeply rooted in the experience of objects.

Some groupings are by use as well as by form, illustrating the wide variety of affective works with similar functions. One section, for example, presents a selection of vessels from disparate historical periods and cultures, all of which were used to consume life-sustaining nourishment and, often, fortified liquids that facilitated altered states of consciousness. The undecorated minimalism of most puts the focus on the potency and purpose of their contents. Conversely, the *kylix* on view thoroughly asserts its presence and becomes an agent of transformation. A vessel for drinking wine, the *kylix* replaces the visage of the imbiber with that of an allegorical figure when lifted to the face for a drink.⁴ Simultaneously, the disembodied glaring eyes beguile the observer, evoking Armstrong's observation that



David Smith, *Forging III*, 1955. Stainless steel, 66⁷/₈ x 9³/₄ x 9³/₄ inches (169.9 x 24.8 x 24.8 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. © 2015 Estate of David Smith/VAGA, New York. Photo: Paul Hester