

Abstraction
after Modernism
Recent Acquisitions



The founders of the Menil Collection, John and Dominique de Menil, began collecting abstract art in the 1940s. They thought it offered the viewer a heightened experience. “In a world cluttered with images,” Dominique de Menil said, “only abstract art can bring us to the threshold of the divine.” This exhibition presents abstract paintings, works on paper, and sculpture created from the mid-20th century to today and acquired by the museum over the past fifteen years. In these selections, artists focused on formal elements—such as line, texture, color, and shape—to move beyond representation and to communicate ideas, emotions, and theories that responded to their present moments.

Abstraction emerged as a core tenet of modernism, an intellectual movement with foundations in the late 19th century. In response to an industrializing society and a time of great political upheaval, many artists believed that abstraction could present an alternative and more profound way of perceiving reality. Following World War II, the modernist movement of Abstract Expressionism rose to prominence in the United States and was led by Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman, among others. Defined by gestural lines, drips of pigment, or passages of saturated color, the artists’ work, according to Pollock, was about expressing “feelings, rather than illustrating” the world around them.

Succeeding generations of artists continue to draw on modern abstraction as a vital and sincere form of art-making, represented here through innovative and unexpected techniques. Robert Rauschenberg foregrounded organic material, pushing dirt into a frame for *Pink Clay Painting (to Pete)*, 1953, while Richard Serra used gravity to curve loops of salvaged rubber in *Triangle Belt Piece*, 1967. Beginning in the 1960s, Sam Gilliam folded and draped canvas soaked and splattered with pigment and other materials found in his studio. The Houston-born artist Dorothy Hood formed complex patterns by repeatedly pressing a flat surface into her still-wet medium for *Clouds*, 1970.

Artists have also used abstraction to address social issues about race and belonging. In her drawings, Marcia Kure used gold leaf and pigment derived from kola nuts—precious materials that trace the African diaspora. Mona Hatoum's *Turbulence (black)*, 2014, composed of about 17,000 glass marbles organized in a potentially treacherous circle on the floor, nods to her experience with exile and, more broadly, the ongoing instability of displaced communities around the globe.

Leslie Hewitt arranged her series of sculptures *Untitled (Where Paths Meet, Turn Away, Then Align Again)*, 2012, specifically for this presentation. The flat, thin, and bent metal components seem abstract, yet the blank surfaces also resemble enormous sheets of paper waiting to be inscribed. For Hewitt, the emptiness is a metaphor for forgotten or unwritten histories.

Renowned for his use of simple materials like wood, paper, and fabric, Richard Tuttle also installed his work for this show. Since the 1960s, Tuttle has explored new permutations of abstraction, in deep awareness of the past, noting that “if modernism defined abstraction so significantly, we have to deal with that before thinking afresh.” One way he pushes against this history is by taking a provocative approach to how he places art, from putting it directly on the floor to hanging it at unexpected heights on the wall. Through his decisions, Tuttle wants to intensify viewers’ perception of the space and their movement within it.

As the de Menils grew their art collection, they were influenced by the philosophy of Father Marie-Alain Couturier, a Dominican priest who served as one of their advisors. In 1945, Couturier wrote that abstraction could illuminate the ineffable and create a place for the spiritual after World War II. The works on view reflect the enduring belief, shared by many contemporary artists, that the language of abstraction can be a deep and direct expression of the world around us.

Michelle White, Senior Curator, The Menil Collection, and
Kelly Montana, Assistant Curator, Menil Drawing Institute

Abstraction after Modernism: Recent Acquisitions is co-curated by Michelle White, Senior Curator, The Menil Collection, and Kelly Montana, Assistant Curator, Menil Drawing Institute.

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Public Programs

ARTIST TALK

Michelle Stuart

Thursday, May 2, 12–1 p.m.

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FILM

Framing Abstraction: Short Films by Women 1920–1970

Friday, August 9, 8–9 p.m.

Main Building

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Exhibition Dates

April 26–August 25, 2024