

Claes Oldenburg: Strange Eggs

*Rarely displayed collages offer insight into sculptor's
extraordinary take on the everyday*

On View at the Menil Collection September 20, 2012 – February 3, 2013



Houston, August 28, 2012 – For more than fifty years Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929) has surprised, humored, and disoriented audiences with his unconventional use of media and scale to depict ordinary objects. The latest exhibition at the Menil Collection, *Claes Oldenburg: Strange Eggs*, will showcase a remarkable group of collages by the Swedish-born American artist. These works, amalgams of commercial advertisements and newspaper and magazine images, are some of Oldenburg's earliest known pieces and represent a pivotal moment of experimentation in his prolific career.

Completed over the course of two years after Oldenburg moved to New York City from Chicago in 1956, the exhibition's eighteen collages feature self-contained forms that the artist made by seamlessly melding fragments cut from magazines purchased near his apartment on the Lower East Side. While many of the arrangements are unidentifiable, within them some original references remain: a piece of pie, the hind legs of a horse, a tree branch, the creased skin of a clenched fist, the texture of concrete. The process of combining art and everyday life would later define Oldenburg's work.

Born in 1929 in Stockholm, Sweden, Oldenburg grew up in Chicago where his father was Consul General of Sweden. After studying literature and art history at Yale University and later taking classes at the Art Institute of Chicago, Oldenburg moved to New York and eventually became part of a group of artists challenging Abstract Expressionism by returning to "realism," working with found objects and figurative images. As an innovator of New York's nascent Pop Art movement, he orchestrated *happenings* (anti-narrative, theatrical pieces staged in offbeat places) in the late 1950s and early 1960s. His *happenings* were performed in fabricated environments created in

his studio and galleries and staged around soft props that were early incarnations of the large-scale, sagging sculptures of mundane objects, such as *Floor Burger* (1962), which the artist later developed.



In 1965, Oldenburg began to make small collages and drawings of imagined outdoor monuments, becoming increasingly concerned with the relationship between structure and site. His first large-scale outdoor sculpture to be realized was *Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks*, installed at Yale University in 1969. The project led Oldenburg to focus almost exclusively on the permanent installation of large-scale monuments in public places. Many of these works were made in collaboration with Dutch writer and art historian Coosje van Bruggen (1942-2009), whom Oldenburg married in 1977. Over the next several decades the Oldenburg/van Bruggen team executed more than forty works in various urban settings across Europe,

Asia, and the United States.

Oldenburg and van Bruggen's gargantuan sculptures of everyday objects are an attempt to, in the artists' words, "communicate with the public, but on our own terms, even if the images are stereotypical." Examples include a garden hose with more than 400 foot-long steel coils (*Gartenschlauch (Garden Hose)*, 1983); the 52 foot-long *Spoonbridge and Cherry*, 1988; the 123 foot-long *Flying Pins*, 2000; and the 143 foot-long bow and arrow of *Cupid's Span*, 2002.

Claes Oldenburg: Strange Eggs will be installed in the galleries housing the Menil's collection of Surrealist art, setting up a conversation between Oldenburg's work and that of forebears such as Max Ernst, René Magritte, and Yves Tanguy. Viewers will recognize the artists' shared desire to create startling and evocative juxtapositions using material from the everyday world to alter the way we think about reality.

"It is a particular privilege to be able to present, for the first time, these important early works by Claes Oldenburg," said Menil Curator Michelle White. "*Strange Eggs* intriguingly hints at this pivotal American artist's interests early in his career, and illuminates his brilliant view of the American landscape. These collages – following presentations of the artist's works in exhibitions organized by the Menil Drawing Institute – have found an ideal setting and context in this museum, in our Surrealist galleries."

The Menil has long celebrated Oldenburg and van Bruggen's deliberate and imaginative approach to making art. In 2009, the Menil Drawing Institute organized the exhibition, *Drawings On Site: Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen*, in cooperation with the artists. The show centered on Oldenburg and van Bruggen's highly interactive and multi-tiered creative process, showcasing visualizations of both feasible and unfeasible large-scale sculptures. ***Claes Oldenburg: Strange Eggs***, organized by Michelle White, Curator at the Menil Collection, offers a similarly rare glimpse into the artist's early investigational works that were harbingers of the colossal objects to come.

The Menil Collection, which opened in 1987, is widely considered one of the most important privately assembled collections of the 20th century. The Menil's holdings, ranging from the prehistoric to art of the present day, are housed in a modern landmark designed by the renowned architect Renzo Piano. In the quarter-century since it opened to the public, the Menil has established an international reputation for presenting acclaimed exhibitions and producing many scholarly publications; pioneering partnerships with other cultural and educational institutions across Houston, Texas and the United States; and conducting groundbreaking research in the conservation of modern and contemporary art. The Menil charges no admission fees.

The exhibition is generously supported by Leslie and Shannon Sasser, Janie C. Lee and David B. Warren and the City of Houston.

Captions: Claes Oldenburg, [Strange Eggs X](#), 1957-58. Collage, mounted on cardboard. Collection of Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen. Claes Oldenburg, [Strange Eggs II](#), 1957-58. Collage, mounted on cardboard. Collection of Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen.

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