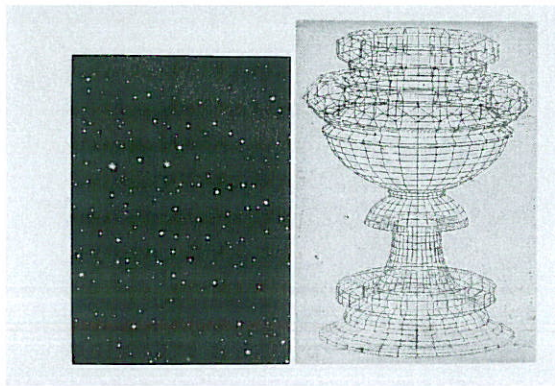


Imaginary Spaces: Selections from The Menil Collection

On view at The Menil Collection August 22, 2008 – March 1, 2009

Free public program: Saturday, August 23, 6:30 p.m. –
Gallery Talk and Film Screening with Peter Mowris



Vija Clemins - Constellation-Uccello 1

Houston, July 7, 2008 -- Imaginary spaces can be found throughout the history of art and literature—from urban and architectural plans that exist only on paper to picturesque landscape painting to great prose works such as Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*.

Drawn from The Menil Collection's diverse holdings, *Imaginary Spaces* examines three centuries of paintings, sculpture, and works on paper that depict invented landscapes and hypothetical or "built" environments. The exhibition will locate common thematic threads through approximately 30 works, including, among others, Giorgio de Chirico's "metaphysical" paintings of haunting cityscapes, architectural sketches for an unrealized museum from the "New York Five" architect John Hejduk, and Michael Heizer's 1969 pen-and-ink drawing for sculptural space in the deserts of the American West.

Imaginary Spaces draws its inspiration from a series of exhibitions organized by Dominique and John de Menil in the 1960s. Four decades later, the themes of these shows are much relevant, particularly 1964's "Out of This World: An

Exhibition of Fantastic Landscapes from the Renaissance to the Present,” and its thematic predecessor, “Visionary Architects: Boullée, Ledoux, Lequeu” (which explored drawings of unrealized structures from three of 18th-century France’s notable architects whose careers all but vanished after the Revolution). It was during this period that Dominique de Menil was preparing an unrealized exhibition, “Dream Monuments,” a cross-cultural examination of monuments, ranging from the impossible and absurd to iconic landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower.

As an extension of their research, the de Menils turned to contemporary artists who were creating large-scale works that would later be seen as part of the nascent “Earth Art” or “Land Art” movements. They invited to Houston central figures such as Claes Oldenburg, Dennis Oppenheim, Michael Heizer, and Christo to imagine site-specific projects for Texas. As a result of these relationships, The Menil Collection is today rich in works that deal with the creation of hypothetical environmental projects, some of which will be on display in *Imaginary Spaces*.

Other works in the exhibition will delve deeper into the recesses of the imagination, presenting fantastic buildings and landscapes unfeasible beyond the confines of paper or canvas. Known during his own time for his uncanny ability to “reconstruct” the ruins of Venice and Rome in his engravings, 18th-century artist and engineer Giovanni Battista Piranesi would influence the Surrealists with his unsettling series of etchings entitled *Carceri d’Invenzione* (*Imaginary Prisons*), three of which will be on view. Allegedly started in the throws of a fever-laden illness, Piranesi’s etchings portray dark, underground structures filled with labyrinthine walkways, unfinished stairways, and bewildering machinery—invented spaces far beneath the sunny Italian cityscapes of his more popular work.

German artist and visionary architect Hermann Finsterlin would similarly awaken the creative spirit and celebrate what he calls the “grace of phantasy” through spaces inspired by nature’s organic curves and crystalline forms. In 1915, he embarked on a series of architectural drawings portraying engrossing enigmatic structures, several of which will also be on view. Going against the strict geometrical doctrines of the Bauhaus, whose architectural style dominated Western Europe in the early 20th century, Finsterlin conjured buildings shaped like blooming cacti and snail shells.

Against this historical backdrop, *Imaginary Spaces* will suggest new ways of understanding hypothetical structures, landscapes, and sculpture—actively engaging these works in a centuries-long dialogue on notions of space in the realm of the imagination. Rather than isolating these works in limited contemporary debate on postmodern artistic practice, the exhibition explores how artists, within their unique historical and cultural contexts, have long been drawn to the possibility of using invented space to paradoxically confront their own time.

Organized by Menil Assistant Curator Michelle White, *Imaginary Spaces: Selections from The Menil Collection* will be on view beginning August 22, running through March 1, 2009.

FREE PUBLIC PROGRAMS

GALLERY TALK & FILM SCREENING

“Outlandish and Otherworldly: A Foray into Imaginary Spaces”

Saturday, August 23, 6:30 p.m.

Peter Mowris, University of Texas Research Fellow-in-Residence at The Menil Collection, will lead a gallery tour that uses work in the exhibition *Imaginary Spaces* to consider concepts of space in twentieth-century art. The talk is followed by the film program described below.

“Space in Early Twentieth-Century Cinema”

Saturday, August 23, 8:00 p.m.

Outdoors at the east end of the museum*

Co-presented with Aurora Picture Show.

Following the gallery tour of *Imaginary Spaces*, Peter Mowris will introduce a selection of early twentieth-century film shorts-directed by artists like Fernand Léger, René Clair, and Hans Richter that experimented with the abstract depiction of space in the cinema of that period.

For further information and images, please contact the press office, 713.525.9469, or

press@menil.org

The Menil Collection, located within Houston’s Museum District, is open Wednesday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Admission and parking are free.