

Maurizio Cattelan

On View at The Menil Collection February 12 – August 15, 2010

The artist's first solo show in the U.S. since 2003

Comedians manipulate and make fun of reality. Whereas I actually think that reality is far more provocative than my art. – Maurizio Cattelan

Houston, December 18, 2009 – Born in the university town of Padua in 1960, Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan is known for his playful yet disconcerting use of materials, objects, and actions – and for manipulating their larger contexts and meaning. In his work the artist unleashes critiques on a range of issues, from nationalism and organized religion to art history and to the very concept of an art museum. Cattelan's uncanny juxtapositions uproot and invert conventional understandings of the world around us.

Organized by Franklin Sirmans, the Menil's curator of modern and contemporary art, the exhibition, ***Maurizio Cattelan***, presents the U.S. debut of recent large-scale works and site-specific installations as well as four new works. The artist's first solo show in this country since 2003, it also marks his return to sculpture. In Cattelan's sculpture, the ability of images to embody social issues – social, political, moral -- is powerful. Cattelan's free use of images in the public realm and consciousness is daring; as he once told *The New Yorker*, "I do not know exactly why, but it seems to me that images do not belong to anybody but are instead there, at the disposal of all."

The 47th Venice Biennale (1997) established Cattelan's significance as an Italian artist and heir to Arte Povera, which challenged art-making conventions by employing the most ordinary, "poor" materials. By combining the familiarity and accessibility of Pop Art and the unpredictability of Dada and Surrealism with



iconic and controversial imagery (for example, corrupt Popes, headless horses, Nazi salutes), the disturbing aspects of Cattelan's work are lightened somehow by their absurdities – while still being powerfully subversive.

For the last five years the artist has focused on publishing and curatorial work. Projects have included the 2002 founding of The Wrong Gallery (and its subsequent display at Tate Modern), and on collaborations such as *Permanent Food* (an occasional journal comprising a pastiche of pages torn from other magazines) and *Charley* (a series on contemporary artists). Cattelan also served as curator of the Caribbean Biennial in 1999 and the Berlin Biennial in 2006.

Deeply involved in the country of his birth and its history -- especially with regard to art and politics -- Cattelan functions in the world of global art and images. He lives in New York but maintains an apartment in Milan, where he began his career as artist-provocateur (and where he met Menil curator Franklin Sirmans, who at the time was working at *Flash Art* magazine).

Cattelan often first visualizes his works in two dimensions—seeing how it will look on the printed or digital page—perhaps because of the daunting figurative and literal weight of making sculpture. At the heart of his endeavors has been the desire to create a body of images that “lives in your head,” in the subconscious, which Cattelan maintains are triggered not so much by seeing his work in the flesh but rather through reproductions in print and on a computer screen. The creation of images, as opposed to physically tangible lasting objects, drives his artistic production, as evidenced by his statement in a 2005 interview in *Sculpture*: “It feels strange to talk about sculptures. It’s not so much a question of means as of images...More than anything else, I listen to the murmur of images.”

Cattelan's work ranges in tone from the melancholic and contentious to the decidedly irreverent. This variety is manifest in the monumental and unsettling *memento mori*, *Untitled* (2007): a suspended taxidermied horse with its head buried in the wall. In a new sculpture for the Menil exhibition, *Untitled* (2009), the horse is prostrate. This horse, unlike the others in Cattelan's oeuvre, is accompanied by language – a sign, protruding from the carcass, saying “INRI” (indicating the Latin phrase, *Jesus Nazareus Rex Iudaeorum* -- “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews”).

The Menil exhibition, which will remain on view for much of 2010, will focus on recent large-scale works first seen in Europe in 2007 along with recent sculptures. Cattelan has also created other works in response to his site visits to the Menil, which included the museum's renowned Surrealist holdings. While a “solo” show, **Maurizio Cattelan** at the Menil is in a real sense also a group show, featuring a range of objects--mostly from the 1960s and 70s--that Cattelan, in collaboration with Sirmans, has selected from the Menil's large permanent collection. Together, artist and curator have “raided the icebox,” harking back to a show by that name inspired by John de Menil: touring the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) Museum's storage rooms in 1969, de Menil suggested that an artist mine the collection to create an exhibition. For that task he suggested Andy Warhol, whose “Raid the Icebox I with Andy Warhol” was shown at RISD and then at the Rice University art museum, an institution then run by the de Menils in Houston. Coming full circle, Warhol's work has now been selected by Cattelan for this exhibition.

Prints by Warhol (an artist, to Cattelan, “who proved that you can be revolutionary without being militant”) mingle with works by Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, Bruce Nauman, Ed Ruscha, James Lee Byars, and Francis Bacon. Because Cattelan's lineage recalls the Arte Povera movement in Italy, the exhibition will also include several pieces by Alighiero e Boetti (on loan from a private collection), a mirror painting by Michelangelo Pistoletto (which until recently hung in John and Dominique's Houston home), as well these artists' forerunner, Lucio Fontana.

Cattelan's work in particular represents an ideal link between the Menil's past and present. By engaging living artists with the collection -- inviting them to keep "raiding the icebox" -- the Menil continues to ponder the expanding role, engagement, and resonance of contemporary art at the museum.

Rather than filling a room by itself, Cattelan's work will be exhibited throughout the museum: some quietly inserted into the nooks and crannies of Antiquities and Surrealist galleries, others more prominently placed, such as the monumental sculpture *All* (2007), installed in one of the largest galleries. Topping it all off, so to speak, is Cattelan's *Untitled* (2003), depicting a "drummer boy," which will be perched on the roof of the Menil's Renzo Piano building (echoing the Günter Grass novel, "The Tin Drum," the piece, to some observers, is an audible warning or call to arms).

Cattelan shares much with John and Dominique de Menil, including their binary foundations in America and Europe and a belief in the power of art to communicate beyond geographic boundaries. Cattelan's presence at the Menil provides a nuanced vision that helps us understand the world at present. In 2010 Cattelan will extend the founders' original intent, as prophesized in his statement, "I see that art has a great potential to refer to a broader debate, to go out there and reach an incredible audience."

Exhibition Catalogue

Maurizio Cattelan: Is There Life Before Death?

by Franklin Sirmans

The catalogue features new works by Maurizio Cattelan and several of his large-scale pieces dating from 2003 to 2007. Considered within the context of the Menil's holdings—with a focus on postwar art—the book provides a rare opportunity to appreciate Cattelan's works against the backdrop of twentieth-century art.

Published by the Menil Collection; available at the Menil Bookstore and distributed internationally by Yale University Press.

128 pp., 50 color illustrations
\$30.00, Hardcover

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Photo caption: Maurizio Cattelan *Untitled*, 2003 Body in resin, synthetic hair, clothes electronic device, bronze drum 31-1/2 x 33-1/2 x 22 inches Courtesy Rachofsky Collection, Dallas, TX
© Maurizio Cattelan Photo: Michael Bodycomb

**For further information and images,
please contact the press office, 713.525.9400, 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 always free.
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