

FRANK BOWLING

Molly Glentzer, 'After excruciating six months, Houston arts patrons have beloved Menil back', Houston Chronicle, 18 September 2018



Frank Bowling, *Middle Passage*, 1970. Photo by Michael Ciaglo, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Rebecca Rabinow fretted recently that when the Menil Collection reopens to the public after a six-month renovation, many visitors will wonder what took so much time.

Of course, that's the idea of the whirlwind update that has kept this Museum District hallmark shuttered since late February. During a recent tour, the venerated museum corridors looked like a Piet Mondrian painting, covered with a patchwork of brown Masonite and geometrically pleasing lines of blue painter's tape.

Underneath that protective covering, the museum's original pine floors looked as fresh as they did the day Renzo Piano's landmark building opened 31 years ago. During the renovation, every wall has been rebuilt, new lighting and fire-detection systems have been installed, bathrooms have been redone, and every gallery has been reconfigured.

"It has been a museumwide, Herculean effort over the last six months," said Rabinow, director of the Menil. "If we did it right, you won't notice the effort. But things you don't notice take the most effort of all."

Following media and patrons' previews that begin Tuesday, the doors will reopen to the public on Saturday.

Check off another unveiling within the Houston Museum District, one of the nation's largest concentrations of cultural institutions. According to district director Julie Farr, the area south of downtown is undergoing an \$800 million transformation with projects that have either been completed since January, are underway or planned to begin.

Houston has more than two dozen museums overall, so a six-month closure at an intimate institution may not sound life altering. But Piano's 31-year-old building has never been just a museum, still driven by the ethos and vision of its founder, the humanitarian-minded Dominique de Menil.

For many Houstonians, especially across the arts community, the Menil is a reverential place and a center of personal gravity. It's also accessible and quiet — one of de Menil's edicts was, "no boutiques and no blockbusters."

Some regular visitors felt adrift all spring and summer.

"I've missed that on any random, bad workday, I could slip over at lunchtime and in minutes and for free, start time traveling in that cool, meditative oasis of art," said artist Renata Lucia. "I didn't appreciate how much I benefited from it until I couldn't go."

H A L E S

The Menil also draws thousands of out-of-town visitors annually, which helps to account for the large uptick in attendance this year at other art buildings across the 30-acre Menil campus from March to August. More than 13,500 people visited the Cy Twombly Gallery during that period, an increase of 146 percent. Attendance also doubled at Richmond Hall, which holds a permanent light installation by Dan Flavin, and the Byzantine Fresco Chapel, where there's a temporary show by Francis Alys.

Practical needs prompted the \$2.3 million upgrade to the main Menil building, including lighting and fire detection improvements, nicer bathrooms, walking paths and the widening of the loading dock.

Refinishing the pine floors, whose black stain had worn to a zebra stripe-like patina, was one of the biggest projects. And because that required removing artworks from galleries, one area at a time, Menil director Rebecca Rabinow saw an opportunity to re-think each space. She wanted to make better use of the museum's 17,000-piece collection, which has nearly doubled since de Menil died, pushing more objects into storage.

"The permanent collection is extraordinary, and maybe under-known," Rabinow said. "We set out to change that."

The result is more Menil 1.5 than 2.0.

Much the same:

Dominique de Menil has been gone nearly 21 years, but when envisioning the reconfigured Menil, Rabinow respected the namesake's ideas.

"We didn't swap large areas of the collection," Rabinow said. "The basic groups are exactly where she put them."

The two long corridors on either side of the central foyer are still there, too; although every temporary wall beyond them was rebuilt. Crews also removed three decades' worth of paint layers from load-bearing walls, uncovering two forgotten windows in the process.

Showing off rooms that were nearly ready, give or take a prep table here or still-to-be-placed sculpture there, Rabinow was as enthusiastic as a kid opening presents at Christmas as she pulled back the "drapery" of craft paper that hung over many paintings.

The reboot has brought out dozens of works that have never

been displayed in the Menil building before or not been seen by the public for decades — including works by the likes of Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris and Fernand Leger.

Signature Menil artists such as Rene Magritte, Max Ernst, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko have more breathing space in new galleries. But Rabinow is equally proud that women artists and artists of color are now better represented and integrated, so that a visitor might also discover Perle Fine, Jeanne Reynal and Joe Overstreet. A new, featured room called "Contemporary Focus" will open with sculptures by Leslie Hewitt, while Claes Oldenberg gets the spotlight in another new gallery called "Contemporary Close-up."

"There's nothing that was not thought out," Rabinow said. "We wanted to make statements all the way through."

In fact, the only work on view in the foyer, where Rabinow wants to set a tone, is Frank Bowling's "*Middle Passage*," a monumental work the de Menils purchased in the early 1970s but never displayed. Because "*Middle Passage*" speaks to ideas about slavery, the Guyana-born artist's family and contemporary art history, it unites the collections, Rabinow said.

New rooms devoted to Byzantine icons and the de Menil's "Image of the Black in Western Art" collection have been added to the east wing galleries. And many fascinating objects now appear to float in the air in their glass cases, so viewers can see their undersides.

All across the museum, works are positioned to create visual connections from one room to the next. "Sometimes it's just a hint of a repeated color, sometimes it's a different artist interpreting a figure in a different way, and sometimes it's an echo of a line. It rewards close looking if people want to do that," Rabinow said. "We were also thinking about visitor flow."

"The whole point of coming to the Menil is the underscoring of the belief that art is important to the human condition. You don't want people to have to dead-end in spaces and turn around. And the few times they do, you want them to see something different. So there's always a sense of discovery."

District development:

A block away, the new Menil Drawing Institute is set to open in early November, concluding the initiatives of a \$115 million capital campaign that also yielded new park spaces, an energy building and endowment funds.

H A L E S

A short distance away, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's campus expansion project accounts for more than half of the district's renaissance. Its new Glassell School of Art building opened in May; the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Center for Conservation will be fully operational this month; and the Kinder Building, expected to become an architectural signature for the city, is due in 2020.

The Holocaust Museum Houston also is expanding. The Houston Museum of Natural Science unveiled its new Weiss Energy Hall last March, and the Houston Zoo recently launched a \$150 million campaign to rebuild animal enclosures. Several other big renovation projects are in the early fund-raising stages and not yet public.

But this week, it's about the Menil's return. For museum regulars, the most important thing about returning to that campus' main building won't be what's new, but what has been retained. Rabinow knows that.

"It's all very subtle," she said. "So while we have redone every inch of this place, everything was done with full respect for the spirit of the Menil. It will appear fresh and clean, but the feeling won't change. It will just feel magical."