



Finding Stories with Splashes of Paint

The Menil Collection and Houston Writers
in the Schools

HARRIET RILEY

I Want the World To
DANA H.

I want the world to know
it is more than just a blank canvas.

I want the world to see
it is more than just a color.

I want the world to feel
different textures.

I want the world to understand
the difference between nothing
and something.

I want the world to think
about illusions.

Harriet Riley is a freelance writer focusing on nonfiction articles and personal narrative. She is a writer-in-residence in the Houston inner city schools with Writers in the Schools. She has taught undergraduate writing classes at the University of West Florida in Pensacola where she lived for eleven years before moving to Houston in mid-2007. She's also worked as a nonprofit director, hospital marketing director and newspaper reporter. She has her M.A. in print journalism from the University of Texas at Austin and her bachelor's degree in English and journalism from the University of Mississippi.

Robert, a young student in a Houston WITS third-grade (?) classroom, was very clear: he did not like to write. Even the writer-in-residence in his classroom could not get him to put pencil to paper, no matter what he tried. So it was a surprise to everyone, even Robert, when, on a class field trip to the Menil Collection, a Houston art museum, Robert suddenly began to write with an enthusiasm he'd never shown before. At the end of the visit, the leader noticed Robert had written pages and pages of poems and stories. Amazed, she asked him what had allowed him to write there when he had never wanted to in the classroom. He thought about it for a moment then replied, "I just needed to write lying on my stomach looking at the art."

The freedom to look at things differently is part of what makes Writing at the Menil, the two-decade-long collaboration between the Menil Collection and Houston's Writers in the Schools, so unique. "You find your story at the Menil," says WITS's executive director, Robin Reagler. "Students use the art as a map to follow a journey within themselves. It's a very special kind of work that comes out of this project because the art is surreal and abstract and involves a world of

shape and color without representation.”

The Menil Collection

Students with Writers in the Schools have been visiting the Menil almost since it opened its doors to the public in 1987. The Menil’s founder, Dominique de Menil, and her husband, John de Menil, came to the U.S. from France, fleeing World War II and settled in Houston, where they played a central role in the civic, cultural, and social life of the city, and amassed an extensive collection of modern art. The museum contains over 16,000 of their paintings, sculptures, decorative objects, prints, drawings, photographs, and rare books. Fewer than 500 of these works are on view at any one time. The pieces constantly rotate in and out of the museum, creating a fresh environment each visit.

Mrs. de Menil, who died in 1997, envisioned a museum for her collection that would allow visitors to have a more intimate experience with art. She rejected the typical docent experience where “knowing” people told “unknowing” people what to think about art. The Menil has no docent tours, no explanatory cards next to the art and no audio guides to the collection. When you visit, you are on your own.

“Her intent was to keep the mind unencumbered and not to tell visitors in advance what they were seeing,” says Karl Kilian, Director of Public Programs at the Menil. “The experience was meant to be between the individual and the work of art. She called it ‘a period of mutual interrogation.’” Mrs. de Menil wanted visitors to have their own relationships with the art.

The design of the museum itself was intended to foster this relationship between visitors and the art within. Designed by world-renowned Italian architect Renzo Piano, the Menil is built on a human

scale. Visitors walk straight into the art-filled lobby at ground level, and the main hallway runs through the building like a street. Visitors walk down it and enter smaller rooms off to each side. The art is displayed in natural light, also at the request of Mrs. de Menil. Piano fulfilled this request by creating slats in the ceiling that allowed the natural light to come into the building at an angle. Gardens at the center of the building let more light into the building. The low scale of the museum and the quality of the light make the gallery experience feel like a visit to a home.

“An intimacy is created between the individual and the art,” says Reagler. “Our children are walking into a space where the imagination is allowed to take over.”

For young students, the effect is magical as they relax in a light-filled building that feels comfortable and natural.

“Part of the magic of the Menil is the space—the white walls and natural light,” says Menil/WITS writer Maryanne Gremillion. “The students don’t feel overwhelmed or rushed during their visit.” The art is deliberately and intentionally displayed in such a

way that evokes viewers’ natural response. The space contributes to the experience.”

The visits, by design, are informal and unstructured. The students recline on the large ottoman in the lobby. They lie on the floor. They stare up at the Calder mobiles. They hug their clipboards and pencils to their chest as they dance in front of the artwork. They sit “criss-cross applesauce” in the middle of the 20th century room laughing at what the children call the “hairy cheese.” “This sets up a different relationship between the children and the art,” says Kilian. “The smaller size of the building gives a familial sense to the children. It’s all about accessibility at the Menil.”

Oviditatur as ipsam suntur?
 Bus, si quid et volora
 natasped modion corro
 omnist molut autem. Reri
 dem nonsequi omnimint
 ut officid endendenis
 explici atures di si adMet et
 eaquam amus est, odisque

Writers in the Schools

The relationship between the Menil and WITS was initiated by Mrs. de Menil along with the creators of WITS Houston, Phillip Lopate and Marv Hoffman, two years after the collection opened. “Writing at the Menil is an extraordinary and important part of our mission,” says Aline Wilson, Director of Advancement at the Menil. “It’s our pride and joy.” Mrs. de Menil chose Writers in the Schools because of its strong, well-crafted writing program, Wilson says.

At the Menil, the WITS writers ask students open-ended questions with no right answers. “We don’t try to tell students what art means. They tell us,” Reagler says. WITS writers ask students questions like “If you could eat it, what would this painting taste like?” The writing prompt is all about surprise. “When a kid tries to surprise you back, it creates the best work,” adds Reagler. “Students in public schools have fewer and fewer opportunities to be creative. It’s very freeing for them to visit a space where the imagination takes over. Young people need to feel like they are making choices.”

The art in the large collection, which rotates in and out of the galleries in a seemingly random fashion, includes Surrealist works by Max Ernst, Rene Magritte, and Man Ray, as well works by Cubists Fernand Leger, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. There are American modern art works by Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, Cy Twombly and Mark Rothko, and others. The de Menils also later added works from classical civilizations, from the Byzantine Empire, and objects from Africa, the Pacific Islands, and the Pacific Northwest.

The prevalence of surreal and modern art in the collection affects the children’s imaginations, accord-

ing to Ryan Dilbert, a WITS writer-in-residence at the Menil.

“The art here makes students actually think about what art is,” says Dilbert. “The youngsters create meaning from the art. It’s also important for students to write on location and get out of their usual space.

“It’s fun because you get to literally see the kids’ eyes open in a different way,” says Autumn Hayes, a first-year WITS/Menil writer.

The Menil Visit

The collection is always free and open to the public, but the students in the Writing at the Menil program arrive before the museum opens its doors, creating

an intimate private experience with complete freedom to see and respond to the art without other visitors around. “They are untutored, unmonitored,” said Kilian. “It’s about the writing, not the meaning of the words.”

Most of the writing lessons as part of the Writing at the Menil program are structured so that students first respond to the art and share their thoughts verbally. In this

process, they realize that there is never just one way to view the art. Each person taps into their emotional side and thinks about how the artist was feeling when he or she created the piece. The whole experience is intended to build a sense of cohesiveness among the group.

When they begin to write, the students view the art as a reference point for their own feelings and writing. They look back and forth between the work of art and their writing and “find the story within the art that is also within their heart,” says Reagler.

“I think the greatest thing about taking kids through the Menil is how it opens up their idea of ‘art’ and ‘meaning.’ The visit helps them realize art

Oviditatur as ipsam suntur?

Bus, si quid et volora
natasped modion corro
omnist molut autem. Reri
dem nonsequi omnimint
ut officid endendenis
explici atures di si adMet et
eaquam amus est, odisque

Igenia et occum dererum aceatem endi bla
nonsed ene aut occum et voluptia quaspicia nus
resto et vel magnatur? Um intiunt officiati officid
ucianis everum, conetusam ut labori a nullendit
voluptatem sinctur, ut liqui te nihicimet expelessin
prepero

isn't about communicating a simple meaning so much as opening up new questions, exploring new space, and interacting with an audience," notes WITS/Menil Writer Ryler Dustin. "The students write poems that aren't afraid to create more questions than answers for the reader. They realize the questions can be the point."

Menil/WITS writer Gremillion said the students are not so much describing art as "letting the art speak to them."

The student visits to the Cy Twombly Gallery, housed in a separate building on the Menil campus, are a perfect example of how the Menil affects student writers. "Children gasp when they enter this gallery," says Gremillion. WITS writer Rebecca Wadlinger notes that when she takes students to the Twombly gallery, "our conversations usually start out with 'It's all squiggles!' and 'Look at that scribble scrabble!' and the students claiming, 'I could do that!' But when we take some time to talk about what we see in the art, and how it makes us feel, the conversation changes. Students become excited and invent grand narratives of loss, departure, and celebration." One of her students, she adds, wrote that Twombly "told a life story with splashes of paint."

In addition to the Cy Twombly Gallery, the campus of the Menil also includes the Rothko Chapel, outdoor sculptures and parks and the Dan Flavin light installation at Richmond Hall. On each visit to the Menil, program writers divide the students into small groups of no more than eight and each group visits at least three galleries during their time at the museum.

"A lot of these kids have never been to a museum," says WITS writer Dilbert. "The visit to this eclectic environment really opens them up. They learn to

create their own meaning from the art and it, perhaps, changes their feeling about art forever."

Leaving the Menil

Reagler says WITS writers often close their time at the Menil by asking students to imagine if they lived there, where they would they sleep, play, eat meals. The children always respond enthusiastically because the building feels like their own space. "They write about the art as if they own it," says Reagler, fulfilling de Menil's dream of a collection where visitors would develop their own relationship and interpretation of art.

The students are clearly touched by the art they've seen at the Menil, and they, in turn, leave their own mark through their inspired responses to it. In fact, as a way of emphasizing that visitors to the Menil bring something of themselves to the art they view, Mrs. de Menil requested that the floors of the museum be made of pine, so that the mark of each and every visitor would be recorded in the soft wood.

"Perhaps only silence and love do justice to a great work of art," Mrs. de Menil once wrote. The silence and love shown by the thousands of school children who have visited the museum through the years is a testament to her vision. 🙏

