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## **New Menil Collection exhibit highlights evolution of abstract expressionism**

**The exhibit also shows 40 new acquisitions from the past 15 years.**

By [Brittanie Shey](#) April 27, 2024



"Triangle Belt Piece" by Richard Serra (1967)

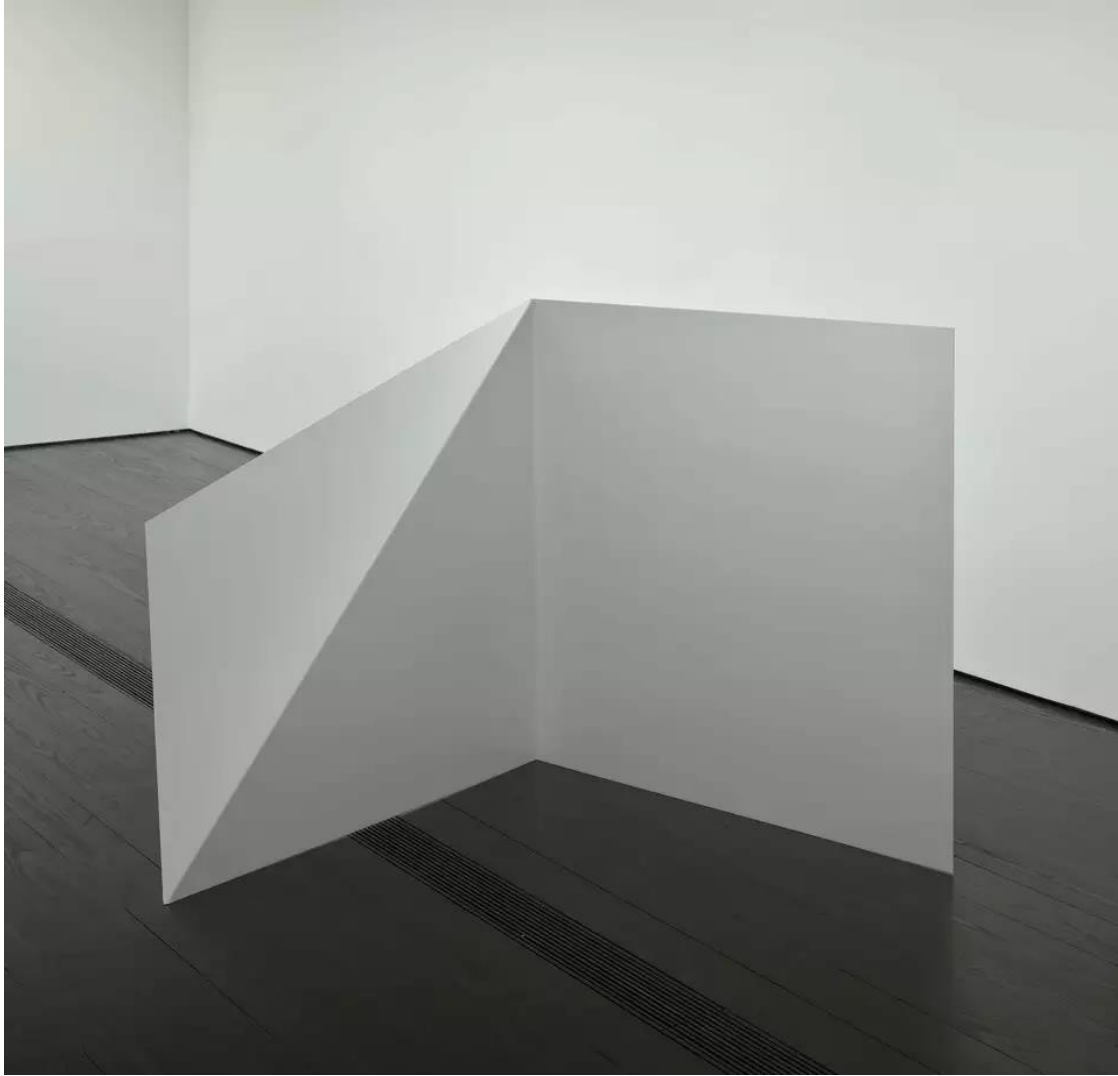
In the first room of the new [Menil Collection](#) exhibit "[Abstraction after Modernism: Recent Acquisitions](#)," a sculpture from recently deceased artist [Richard Serra](#) hangs on the wall. The work is made from thick rubber industrial belts, dark brown and floppy, but structured at the same time. Triangle Belt Piece, made in 1967, is a direct response to the dripping, gravity-influenced works abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock was making a decade before. At the same time, the lines and flow of Triangle Belt Piece hint at the monumental metal sculptures Serra would later become known for.

Triangle Belt Piece is a perfect example of "Abstraction after Modernism"'s thesis: highlighting how artists have continued to explore nonrepresentational art in the decades following abstract expressionism's mid-century heyday. The show also is made up of new acquisitions—40 in total—that the Menil has collected over the last 15 years. They include drawings, sculptures, paintings, collages and [other forms](#).

"Artists are still working in this mode," co-curator Kelly Montana said during a recent preview of the show. "(It) includes lots of different approaches, some of which may surprise you."

Dominique and John de Menil were major patrons of the abstract expressionism movement, collecting works from artists including Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko. "In a world cluttered with images," Dominique was once quoted as saying, "only abstract art can bring us to the threshold of the divine." In keeping with the de Menils' passion for civil rights, the exhibit also explores ways in which abstract art could be a tool to talk about social issues.

One of the most striking installations in the show is a series of works by 47-year-old New York artist [Leslie Hewitt](#). Hewitt, who was present at the walkthrough, is one of two artists with an entire room dedicated to their works. The other is Richard Tuttle. The museum invited both Tuttle and Hewitt to install their own artworks in the show.



"Where Paths Meet, Turn Away, Then Align Again" by Leslie Hewitt (2012)  
Menil Collection

Inspired in part by the Menil's [extraordinary archive of photographs documenting the Civil Rights movement](#), Hewitt created five large pieces of sheet metal, powder-coated white and then folded in various ways—some in half, some dogeared. The project, called "Where Paths Meet, Turn Away, Then Align Again," explores gaps in history where the contributions of minorities may have been overlooked. The gallery layout requires viewers to walk around the sculptures, choosing either to engage or avoid them. Visually, the works evoke ephemeral objects—folded bits of paper, perhaps, or the corners used to secure photographs inside a scrapbook.

Hewitt said the work is also about the tension between two dimensions and three dimensions, which is something Serra was exploring in his Belt series—attempting to take a Pollock painting and turn it into three dimensions.

"It's such an honor to be in conversation with multiple artists from so many generations," Hewitt said. Afterward, Montana referred to these links in the show as "visual rhymes."

Some of the galleries are arranged by theme, including one dedicated to artwork that explores natural forces, and another that consists of works on paper, including an incredible 16-foot drawing by Agnes Denes that seems to shapeshift depending on where you stand when looking at it. In the room dedicated to Tuttle, the artist has played with the concept of installation itself, situating a series of works right up into the corner of the gallery, where visitors must stand shoulder-to-wall to view it. (Look out for the tiny work of art installed in the threshold to the gallery as well.)

The show also has some significant Houston connections. One is a collage by Project Row Houses co-founder [Rick Lowe](#). Another is a large painting, called "Cloud," by the artist Dorothy Hood. The work was commissioned in 1970 by the Houston Seafarers Union for display in their [Port of Houston clubhouse](#), where sailors meet for meals, socialization, and relaxation after being away at sea. For years, the 10-by-8-foot painting hung above a ping pong table at the center before it was gifted to the Menil. Co-curator Michelle White said viewers might even be able to see ping pong ball dents in the canvas if they look closely.

White explained that gift is another reason why "Abstraction after Modernism" is such an important show for highlighting the legacy of the Menil Collection and its founders.

"Part of this story is that the Menil is actively building its collection," White said. *"Abstraction after Modernism" runs through Aug. 25. Find out more at the [Menil website](#).*