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Archives of American Art

Celebrating 175: Mel Casas, Clippings, 1980-1987

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staff was expanded, with John Wisdom in charge of early European art and J. Patrice Marandel curating 19th-century European art. (Marandel recently moved to the Detroit Institute of Arts.)

The Contemporary Arts Museum's administrative problems during the '70s were even more severe. Directed by James Harithas from 1974 to 1978, the CAM sponsored a steady stream of locally controversial exhibitions that, together with the devastating flood of 1976 that destroyed many works of art, threatened the future of the museum.

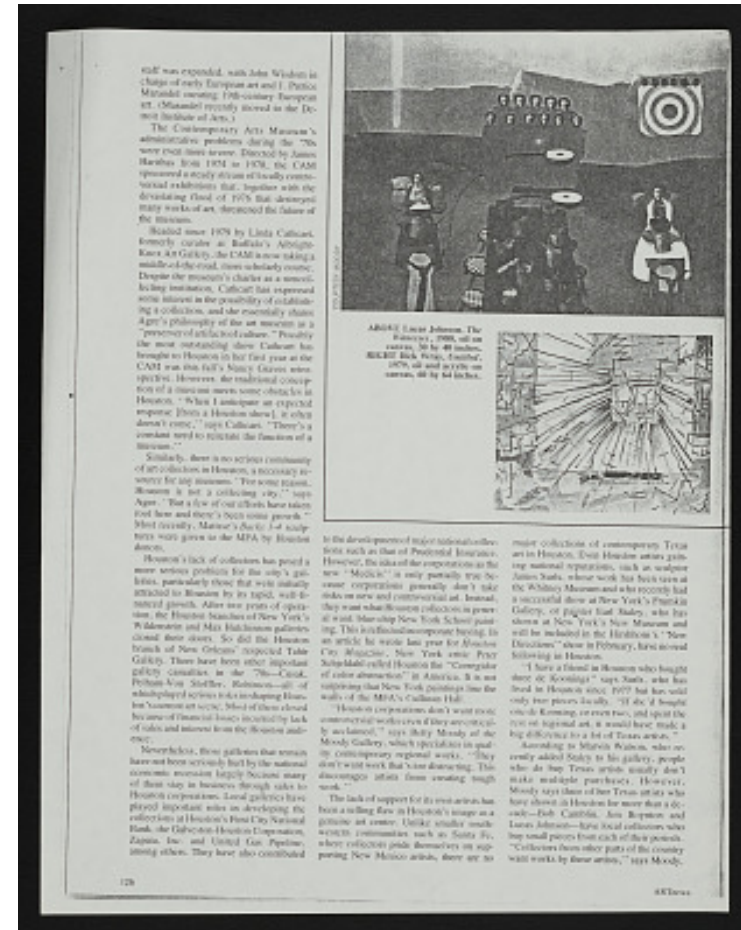
Headed since 1979 by Linda Cathcart, formerly curator at Buffalo's Albright Knox Art Gallery, the CAM is now taking a middle-of-the-road, more scholarly course. Despite the museum's charter as a noncollecting institution, Cathcart has expressed some interest in the possibility of establishing a collection, and she essentially shares Agree's philosophy of the art museum as a "preserver of artifacts of culture." Possibly the most outstanding show Cathcart has brought to Houston in her first year at the CAM was this fall's Nancy Graves retrospective. However, the traditional conception of a museum meets some obstacles in Houston. "When I anticipate an expected response from [from a Houston show], it often doesn't come," says Cathcart. "There's a constant need to reiterate the function of a museum."

Similarly, there is no serious community of art collectors in Houston, a necessary resource for any museum. "For some reason, Houston is not a collecting city," says Agree. "But a few of our efforts have taken root here and there's been some growth." Most recently, Matisse's Backs 1-4 sculptures were given to the MFA by Houston donors.

Houston's lack of collectors has posed a more serious problem for the city's galleries, particularly those that were initially attracted to Houston by its rapid, well-financed growth. After two years of operation, the Houston branches of New York's Wildenstein and Max Hutchinson galleries closed their doors. So did the Houston branch of New Orleans' respected Tahir Gallery. There have been other important gallery casualties in the '70s—Cusak, Pelham-Von Stoffer, Robinson—all of which played serious roles in developing Houston's current art scene. Most of these closed because of financial losses incurred by lack of sales and interest from the Houston audience.

Nevertheless, those galleries that remain have not been seriously hurt by the national economic recession largely because many of them stay in business through sales to Houston corporations. Local galleries have played important roles in developing the collections at Houston's First City National Bank, the Galveston-Houston Corporation, Zapata, Inc. and United Gas Pipeline, among others. They have also contributed to the development of major national collections such as that of Prudential Insurance. However, the idea of the corporations as the new "Medicis" is only partially true because corporations generally don't take risks on new and controversial art. Instead, they want what Houston collectors in all want: blue-chip New York School painting. This is reflected in corporate buying. In an article he wrote last year for Houston City Magazine, New York critic Peter Schjeldahl called Houston the "Corregidor of color abstraction" in America. It is not generally surprising that New York paintings line the walls of the MFA's Cullinan Hall.

"Houston corporations don't want more controversial works even if they



are critical- ly acclaimed.'" says Betty Moody of the Moody Gallery, which specializes in qual- ity contemporary regional works. "They don't want work that 's too distracting. This discourages artists from creating tough 16 work.'

The lack of support for its own artists has been a telling flaw in Houston's image as a genuine art center. Unlike smaller south- western communities such as Santa Fe, where collectors pride themselves on sup- porting New Mexico artists, there are no major collections of contemporary Texas art in Houston. Even Houston artists gain- ing national reputations, such as sculptor James Surls, whose work has been seen at the Whitney Museum and who recently had successful show at New York's Frumkin Gallery, or painter Earl Staley, who has shown at New York's New Museum and will be included in the Hirshhorn's "New Directions" show in February, have no real following in Houston.

"I have a friend in Houston who bought three de Koonings" says Surls, who has lived in Houston since 1977 but has sold only two pieces locally. "If she 'd bought one de Kooning, or even two, and spent the rest on regional art, it would have made a big difference to a lot of Texas artists.

According to Marvin Watson, who re- cently added Staley to his gallery, people .. who do buy Texas artists usually don't make multiple purchases. However, Moody says three of her Texas artists who have shown in Houston for more than a decade-Bob Camblin, Jim Boynton and Lucas Johnson-have local collectors who buy small pieces from each of their periods. "Collectors from other parts of the country want works by these artists," says Moody.

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