

**THOMAS J. LAX RECEIVES THE MENIL COLLECTION'S  
2015 WALTER HOPPS AWARD FOR CURATORIAL ACHIEVEMENT**



**HOUSTON, TX, April 30, 2015** — Josef Helfenstein, Director of the Menil Collection, today announced that Thomas J. Lax, Associate Curator in the Department of Media and Performance Art at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, has been chosen as the seventh recipient of the biennial Walter Hopps Award for Curatorial Achievement. Established in 2001 in honor of Menil Founding Director Walter Hopps (1932-2005), the award recognizes curators in early to mid-career who have made significant contributions to the field of contemporary art. In conjunction with the award, which confers a stipend of \$20,000, Mr. Lax will deliver a public lecture at the Menil Collection in the fall.

In a museum career that to date spans only some eight years, Lax has won widespread attention and respect for his prolific and innovative work focusing on performance art, dance and video, and socially engaged art practices in all media. He was selected to receive the Walter Hopps Award out of an international field of seven candidates considered by a distinguished panel assembled by Mr. Helfenstein and Toby Kamps, the Menil's Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art.

The members of the 2015 selection panel were Carlos Basualdo (the Keith L. and Katherine Sachs Curator of Contemporary Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and curator at MAXXI, Rome), Melissa Chiu (Director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden), and Helen Molesworth (Chief Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles).

Carlos Basualdo stated, "Lax's exhibitions exemplify a fresh approach to the notion of identity, which is one of the primary questions grounding contemporary art today. His work conveys a refreshing disregard for established hierarchies and existing categories and an enticing sense of adventure."

Helen Molesworth also noted that his exhibition "*When the Stars Begin to Fall* suggested that there is a sense of 'deep time' in African American culture that stretches back to the middle passage, through the antebellum period, into the long Jim Crow years, all of which inflect to today's ideas, dreams, and realities concerning blackness. Lax's accomplishment was to choose visual and performing artists who demonstrated how these histories still inflect our present ideas. That he did so by avoiding traditional hierarchies--by refusing to make distinctions

between work made outside or inside the established art world, between historical or new material—furthered his expansive ideas about American identity.”

Toby Kamps stated, “After reviewing this cycle’s very strong field of candidates, our panelists were unanimous in conferring the 2015 Walter Hopps Award on Mr. Lax. As they eloquently stated, they felt they were selecting not only a representative of a younger generation of curators but someone whose approach to the field is original and experimental.”

Josef Helfenstein stated, “As Lax showed with his remarkable exhibition *When the Stars Begin to Fall: Imagination and the American South*, his work is at once profoundly thoughtful and intensely exciting. He makes border-defying connections that are as compelling as they are unexpected, and brings to the surface meanings that are both lasting and urgent. On behalf of all of us at the Menil Collection, I congratulate him on this richly deserved award.”

Previous recipients of the Walter Hopps Award are Adam Szymczyk, Maria Lind, Eungie Joo, Hamza Walker, Roger M. Buergel, and Cuauhtémoc Medina.

Thomas J. Lax joined The Museum of Modern Art in 2014 as Associate Curator in the Department of Media and Performance Art, following seven years as Assistant Curator at The Studio Museum in Harlem. While at the Studio Museum, he organized more than a dozen exhibitions as well as numerous live performances and public programs. Most recently, these included the Studio Museum’s exhibition *When the Stars Begin to Fall: Imagination and the American South* (2014, on view at the ICA Boston through May 20, 2015) and its presentation of the traveling exhibition *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* (2013). In 2008, he developed and launched the Studio Museum’s *VideoStudio* program, an ongoing series of exhibitions of time-based art. In 2011, he initiated *Studio Lab*, a think tank and short-term residency program. At the Studio Museum, he also organized *Ayé A. Aton: Space-Time Continuum* (2013); the New York presentation of *David Hartt: Stray Light* (2013); *Fore* (2012, with Lauren Haynes and Naima J. Keith); *Ralph Lemon: 1856 Cessna Road* (2012); *Lyle Ashton Harris: Self/Portrait* (2011); a collaboration with the Goethe-Institut, New York, *OFF/SITE* (2010); *Mark Bradford: Alphabet* (2010); and *Kalup Linzy: If it Don’t Fit* (2009); among others. Mr. Lax is a faculty member at the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance at Wesleyan University’s Center for the Arts. He serves on the Advisory Committee of the Vera List Center for Arts and Politics, on the Arts Advisory Committee of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and on the Advisory Board of Recess and is a member of the Catalyst Circle at The Laundromat Project. He received his AB from Brown University and his MA in Modern Art from Columbia University. A lifelong resident of New York City, Mr. Lax currently resides in Brooklyn.

Walter Hopps began his career in Los Angeles, where in 1957 he co-founded the Ferus Gallery and was instrumental in bringing the first postwar generation of the city’s artists to international prominence. Among the seminal exhibitions he organized as curator and director of the Pasadena Art Museum were the first retrospectives of Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Cornell; he also mounted the first exhibition devoted to Pop Art, 1962’s *New Painting of Common*

*Objects.* Over the years, as director of the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., the Menil Collection in Houston, and as commissioner and curator of the São Paulo Biennial and Venice Biennale, Hopps presented work by artists including Barnett Newman, Frank Stella, Robert Irwi, and Diane Arbus. In 1997 Hopps organized a Robert Rauschenberg retrospective for the Menil Collection, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York (where he held the title of adjunct senior curator of twentieth-century art). One landmark event following another, 2003's *James Rosenquist: A Retrospective*, curated by Hopps and Sarah Bancroft, opened at the Menil Collection and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

### **About the Menil Collection**

A legacy of the late philanthropists John and Dominique de Menil, the Menil Collection opened to the public in 1987. Housed in the first United States building designed by the Italian architect Renzo Piano, the main museum anchors a thirty-acre “neighborhood of art,” as the late architectural historian Reyner Banham described the Menil campus. Sharing this park-like enclave with bungalows, great live oaks, and outdoor sculpture are the Cy Twombly Gallery (also by Renzo Piano); a site-specific Dan Flavin installation at Richmond Hall; and Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's *The Infinity Machine* at the Byzantine Fresco Chapel, now a venue for long-term installations by contemporary artists. Presenting regular rotations of artworks from the growing permanent collection, the Menil also organizes special exhibitions throughout the year; presents a full calendar of lectures, gallery talks, film screenings, and other public programs; publishes scholarly books; and conducts pioneering research in the conservation of modern and contemporary art. The museum is open Wednesday through Sunday, from 11a.m. until 7p.m., and closed Mondays and Tuesdays. Admission is free of charge.

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