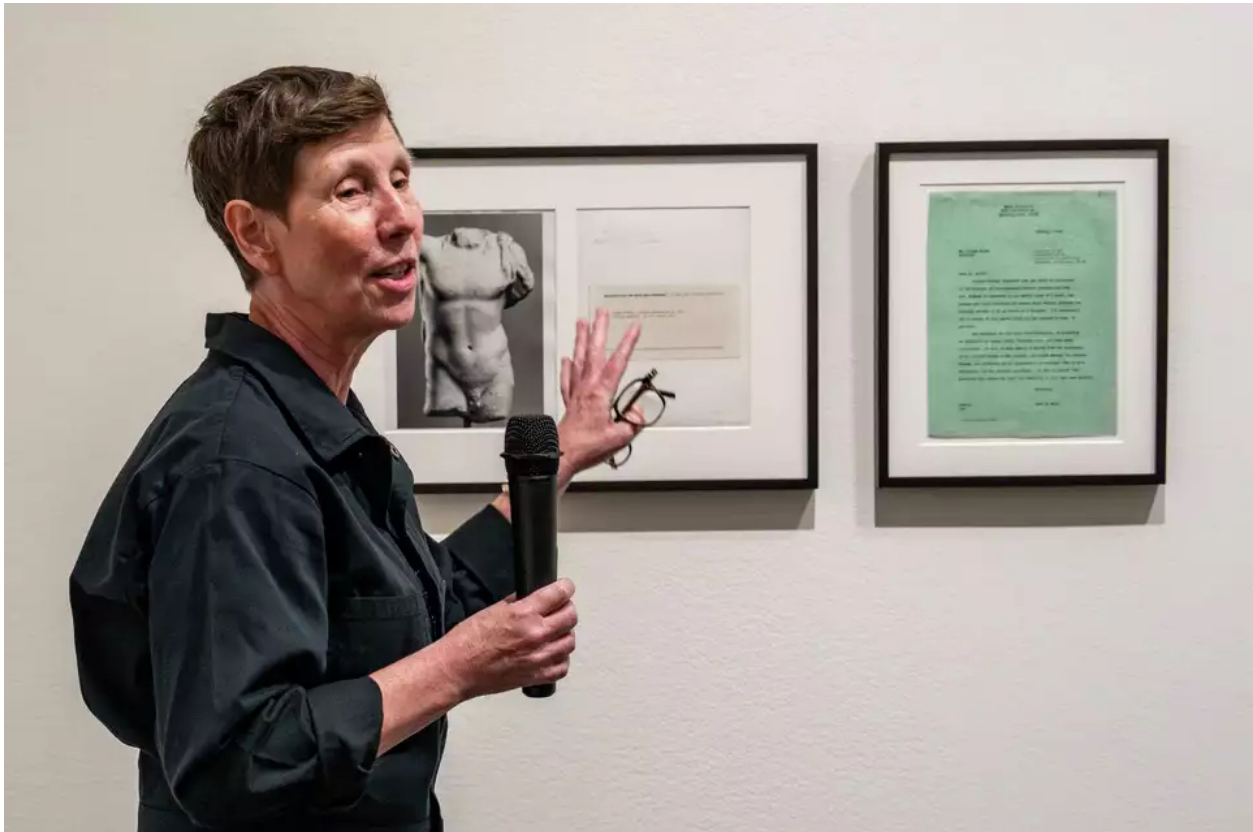


## A letter written by John de Menil to a Houston artist's father in 1970 inspires a new Menil exhibit

'The Space Between Looking and Loving: Francesca Fuchs and the de Menil House' is on view at the museum.

By [Amber Elliott](#), *Staff writer*  
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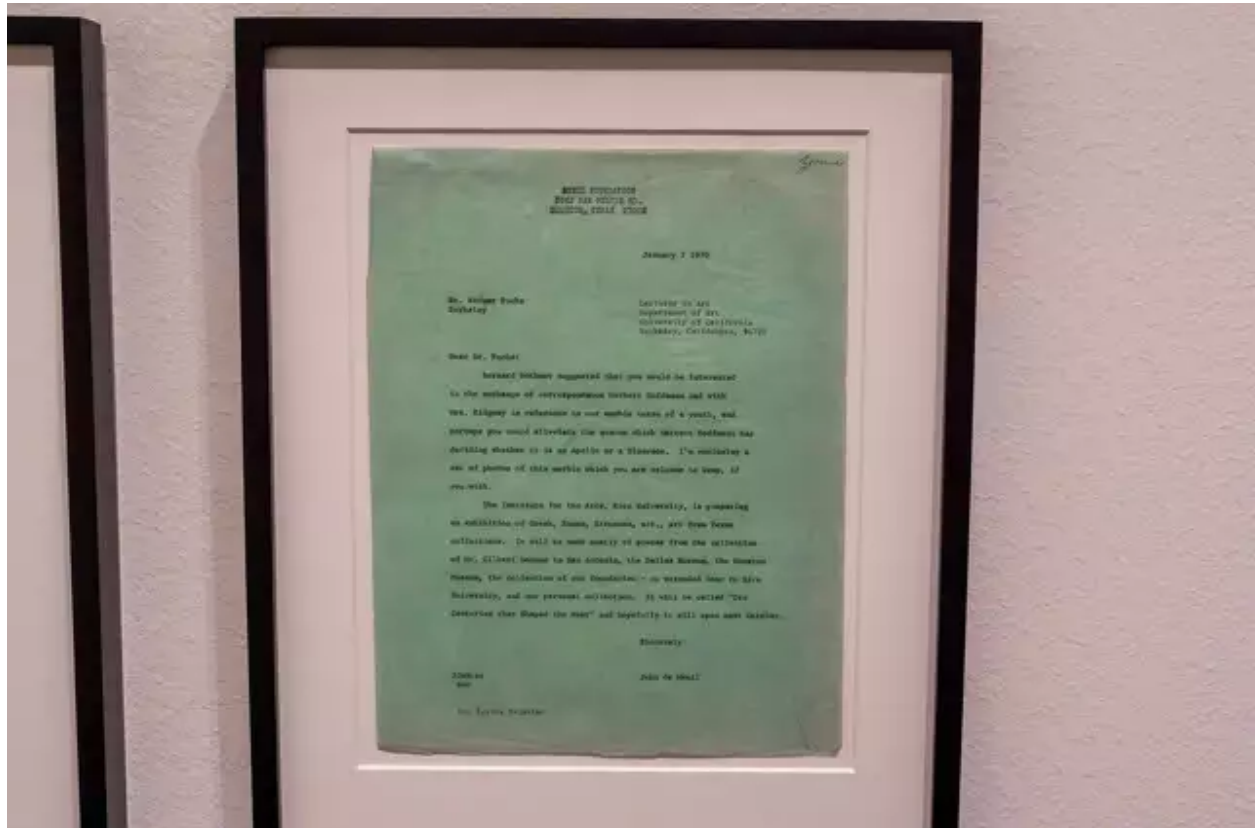
Artist Francesca Fuchs provides commentary on her new exhibition, *The Space Between Looking and Loving, Francesca Fuchs and the de Menil House*, at the Menil Collection in Houston, Thursday, May 22, 2025. Kirk Sides/Houston Chronicle

The jewel box gallery in the east wing of the Menil Collection's main building is the closest visitors can get to Dominique and John de Menil's Houston home — for now, at least.

The Menil House residence, an approved Houston Historic Landmark, is currently undergoing construction. The project will sensitively restore the grounds and make essential updates to the dwelling. Targeted areas include demolition and upgrades to the driveway, parking, fencing,

entry gates, drainage and detention; restoration of masonry features including the walls, terrace, decorative fountain and garden pathways; landscape reconstruction of footpaths and lighting, in addition to new shrub and tree plantings; replacement of the existing roofing membrane and skylights; and installation of a new roof-mounted dedicated outside air unit and generator.

Programming for Menil members, private museum fundraiser and research scholars is anticipated for 2026.



Carbon Copy of Letter from John de Menil to Werner Fuchs, January 7, 1970 is seen in the Space Between Looking and Loving, Francesca Fuchs and the de Menil House exhibition at the Menil Collection in Houston, Thursday, May 22, 2025.

Until then, "The Space Between Looking and Loving: Francesca Fuchs and the de Menil House," on view Friday through Nov. 2, is about living with objects, and better understanding our lives through objects. Francesca Fuchs, a German-born, Houston-based artist, explores an unanswered letter and unexpected familial connection in the show. After she unearthed a paper trail gone cold between her father and John de Menil some 50 years ago, the discovery led to more questions than answers. And a lot of new artwork.

"What do we think of an objects' importance and why?" she asks. "There is a sort of democracy in a house."

Much of the exhibit centers around a marble, male torso. In 1970, John de Menil sent a letter with enclosed photographs to Dr. Werner Fuchs, Francesca Fuch's father and then-art lecturer

at the University of California at Berkley, inquiring whether the 2nd-century BCE. Imperial Roman sculpture was an adaptation of a 5th or 6th-century BCE Greek original of Apollo or Dionysus. Werner Fuchs never replied, most likely because he had already returned to Germany.



Torso of Apollo or Dionysos, Imperial Roman, 1st-2nd century is seen in the Space Between Looking and Loving, Francesca Fuchs and the de Menil House exhibition at the Menil Collection in Houston, Thursday, May 22, 2025.

His daughter found the black-and white Menil Foundation photographs, and John de Menil's original letter subsequently, five decades later. That correspondence and torso, plus rarely seen photographs of the de Menil house, and Francesca Fuch's paintings inspired by the latter, comprise "The Space Between Looking and Loving."

The artist considered hundreds of images from the de Menil's Philip Johnson-designed home in Briarwood before landing on a select few. After logging many hours pour over museum archives, she asked curator Paul R. Davis is she could see it in person.

The show opens with a wall of yellow panels painted to resemble panel floors which she has nicknamed "Fuchs faux." "I'm ripping off Charles James' fake wood in the house, but really, this is my language," Francesca Fuchs explains.

American couturier Charles James famously designed much of de Menil home's interior furnishings. Some of his original paint color samples from Dominique de Menil's dressing room and sketches of chaise lounges hang in the exhibit.

"There are very, very particular languages of color and texture that were fascinating to me." Francesca Fuchs says. "It's all very stark. In the kitchen, they hung a 'cut-out' Matisse."

Her find led to formative questions: "Which objects did they really want to live with over time? What objects did they love?"

She painted her rendition of the "cut-out" work by Henri Matisse (initially "Black Leaf on Red Background (1952)" that was replaced by "Black Leaf on Green Background (1952)" based on a photo she referenced from the museum's archive. Davis notes another Matisse in de Menil's utility room alongside a Max Ernst and black-glazed water vessel (hydria with gilded details classical period, 4th century BCE).

"This is one of the first ancient objects they collected in 1949," Davis says. "A little un-dated love note was tucked in here."

Francesca Fuchs adds that serendipity plays a big role in "The Space Between Looking and Loving." She incorporated several iterations of the same objects throughout; her paintings of paintings that already exist are meant to capture her own emotion and the energy the original works put into the world.

"The Max Ernst and my painting of the Max Ernst are in view of each other. That was important to me," she says.

The artist's interest in the de Menil home focuses more on the family's private spaces such as the couple's bedroom, John de Menil's office, and the corridor connecting their children's bedrooms.



A detail of Pinboard from Dominique de Menil's Dressing Room Door, ca. 1970's-1997 is seen in the Space Between Looking and Loving, Francesca Fuchs and the de Menil House exhibition at the Menil Collection in Houston, Thursday, May 22, 2025.



A door leading into Dominique de Menil's bedroom tells an imaginative story. Here, the prolific collector and philanthropist pinned ephemera from her life. There's a crepe recipe, schedule of Sunday church services around Houston and objects her children made. Francesca Fuchs suggests the latter can have the same importance as artworks appearing in the show.

"The door promotes close looking, which we are always trying to do at the museum," Davis says. "It creates a dialogue around the meaning of accumulation."

A series of three "Koala Bears" that Francesca Fuchs sculpted in the likeness of objects from her own childhood add a personal layer. The artist suggests listening to the audio recording for the full backstory.

She closes the loop that began in 1970, and inspired "The Space Between Looking and Loving" with a letter of her own in the exhibit's guide. It begins, "Dear John."



Artist Francesca Fuchs, left center, and Curator Paul Davis, right center, provide commentary on the new exhibition, *The Space Between Looking and Loving*, Francesca Fuchs and the de Menil House, at the Menil Collection in Houston, Thursday, May 22, 2025.

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