

The Art of the Matter

The MFAH's Edward Mayo and sculptor Jim Love recall a critical era in Houston's arts



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Edward Mayo, left, and Jim Love, right, reminisce atop Love's *Portable Trojan Bear* (1974), a site sculpture in Hermann Park.

The middle of the 20th century was a crucial time in the history of Houston's arts community. It was in the 1950s and 1960s that the city's artists and arts professionals began making the transition from a group consumed by local concerns to one with national and international aspirations; in many ways, it was during this time that Houston's arts, for better and worse, grew up. And it was in this period that a number of the seeds of Houston's current art scene were planted.

To get a sense of what those decades of change were like, Cite sat down with two witnesses from the era, sculptor Jim Love and former Museum of Fine Arts, Houston registrar Edward Mayo. Love, a native of Amarillo, attended Baylor University, where he studied theater, and the University of Houston, where he took courses in architecture. Beginning in the mid-1950s, Love became known in Houston first for his stage designs for the Alley Theater and Houston Grand Opera, and then for his distinctive metal sculpture. Today, his pieces are prominent in Hermann Park, at Hobby Airport, and in the MFAH's sculpture garden, among other places. Mayo is a Houston native who attended Rice University as an architecture student, but who made his mark in the city's art world through a quarter-century of work at the MFAH.

Together, Love and Mayo share an intimate understanding of the arts in Houston. Last October, they met with Cite editorial board members Lynn M. Herbert and Karl Kilian for a conversation, excerpts from which follow.

Cite: It was in the 1950s that the Contemporary Arts Museum was founded, partly in reaction to what was going on at the Museum of Fine Arts. Why did that happen? What was the mood in the art world then?

Edward Mayo: The reason CAM got started is that the artistic community in Houston felt that James Chillman,¹ who was then director of the Museum of Fine Arts, was not doing anything for contemporary art. So a number of people like Walter Farmer, Alvin Romansky, John de Menil, and Carol Straus got together and got CAM going.

Jim Love: In the early days of the Contemporary Arts Museum it was mostly volunteer activity. The only two paid people were Ellen Sharp, who was the secretary, and Frank Dolejska, who was

the technician.

Cite: Edward, you were one of those volunteers, is that right?

Mayo: In the late 1940s I went to work for the architect Thompson McCleary. Then when my mother died, that gave me an excuse to take a leave of absence, from which I knew I would never return. For two years I lived in a fool's paradise of not working, and that's when I did most of my volunteering. I volunteered at the Contemporary Arts Association, as it was then called. It was downtown at 302 Dallas when we started. Then in 1954 the CAM building was cut in two and moved to the corner of Holcombe and Fannin.²

Love: I was here when they did that, though I wasn't working for the CAM at the time and so didn't go on that little trip. It was after midnight, I think.

Mayo: They had to move it after midnight because of the traffic.

Cite: During the time that you were a volunteer at CAM, was there the kind of enthusiasm you can get when you've launched something new?

Mayo: There was a lot of enthusiasm for the volunteers. The volunteers loved doing it. I got so I spent my full time there. It was great fun.

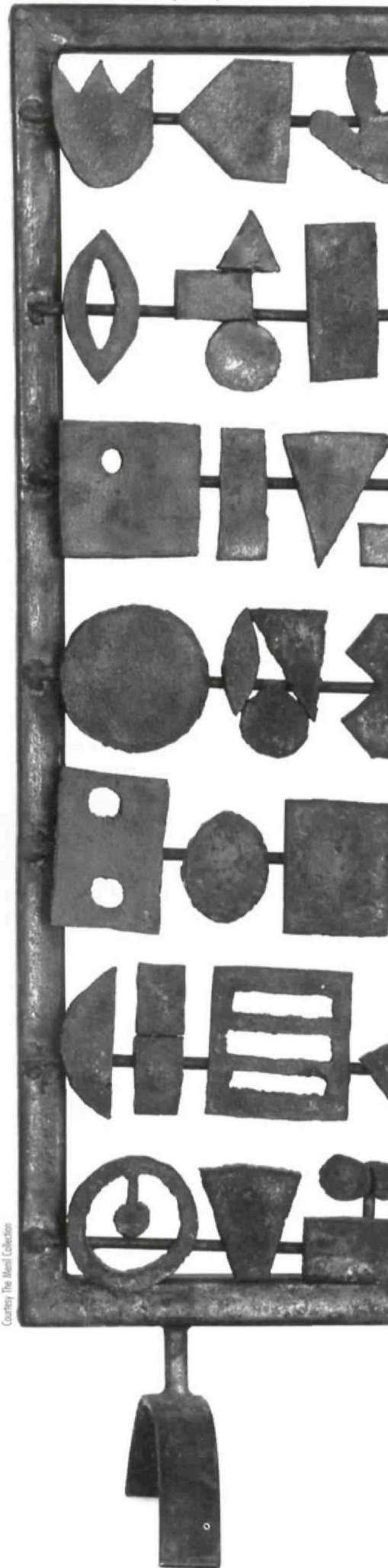
Love: There was a lot of fun in those early days. The volunteers would pick a show and be responsible as chairmen of the show.

Mayo: They would assemble the idea of the show. Someone would have the idea, and then they would put it together. I was only involved with one idea I remember — it was always someone else's idea. But a certain group decided we would do modern art from Houston collections. Today, if you saw what was in the exhibition, you'd wonder why it was called modern art; it surely didn't look like modern art as we think of it now. But it got to be a lot of fun for a lot of people, and it was a serious project for the de Menils, who knew what they wanted in the way of art.

Cite: So the de Menils were involved from the very beginning?

Mayo: They were involved in the early

Detail of *Screen* (1957), 31¾ by 19½ inches, a cut-and-welded steel sculpture by Jim Love.



Courtesy The Menil Collection

Right: Jim Love's set for Houston Grand Opera's *Salome*, 1956. Far right: Love (face to camera) welding the set for the Alley Theatre's production of *The Glass Menagerie*, 1955.

years when CAM was downtown. John de Menil left CAM on two occasions. As I recall, he once gave the CAM a check for \$5,000 and resigned.

Cite: It was around this time that Jermayne MacAgy, CAM's first paid director, was hired, wasn't it?³

Love: John and Dominique de Menil brought her to Houston in 1955. She had been working in San Francisco, at the Palace of the Legion of Honor. When she was hired there was a large piece of friction. A lot of those who were at the CAM in the volunteer era resented her. MacAgy wanted to be in charge of everything, and that didn't sit well with some people.

Cite: Were they resentful because the de Menils were the ones who hired her, or because MacAgy was a strong person, or because she was the first paid director?

Love: They resented it because there was no more room for volunteer action. There were volunteer workers, so to speak, but that faded out because, in my experience, they were not particularly dependable. When I worked at CAM somebody would say they were going to come and paint at such-and-such a time, and I would have to get the paint ready, I would have to put it in the roller and pan and so forth, I'd clean up after them. It ended up being easier to do it myself.

Cite: How active were the de Menils in things then?

Love: They were pretty active. MacAgy was pretty headstrong — she made decisions about what to show and so forth, and they were just backing her up. When I entered the picture, the de Menils were paying for a lot of what the CAM did. They paid for some of the salaries, mine included. MacAgy wanted to do catalogues, and the de Menils paid for them. MacAgy's catalogues were always expensive, and she got more and more ambitious with them. There was also no space at the museum for crates, packing or unpacking — that was my job — and it finally got to the point where we were having boxes delivered to the de Menils' house.

Cite: The de Menils' house?

Love: They had a three-car garage, with

three spaces there. And I unpacked and packed in that little garage for a lot of the time, because that was the only covered space available.

Cite: It's been written and said that Jermayne MacAgy's exhibitions generated tremendous enthusiasm. Could you feel that at that time, working with her? Could you sense a change in the Houston arts community?

Love: Well, I think that it got more sophisticated. I think there were more people buying art. Personally, I was fortunate in that the de Menils were buying my things from the first, and what I felt that did was give other people permission to do the same. I guess the people who were hesitant sort of wanted permission to like something. Not everyone, of course, but a lot. And I think that when the de Menils were enthusiastic about something it served that purpose. Although they were always resented by certain — I never did know what the element was that was resentful, but there was that, always. But I think that in the main, the town was appreciative, because there were some fantastic shows, both at the CAM and at the University of St. Thomas. The de Menils and MacAgy both ended up at St. Thomas because of fights they had at CAM. They finally got

tired of the CAM fighting, and John de Menil sort of threw up his hands and said, "Okay, we'll leave." And the de Menils offered MacAgy — it sounds cruel, but they offered MacAgy to the MFAH, but the MFAH had to have a board meeting, and it was going to take a year to decide. Chillman was gone, and there was no director at this moment, and they couldn't make up their minds. Then whoever it was in charge of St. Thomas said, "Would you like an art department?" and John said "Yes," and it got settled in five seconds, so they all ended up there. There in Jones Hall at the University of St. Thomas was where their gallery was.

Cite: Was there much of a gallery scene in Houston then?

Love: MacAgy and Katherine Swenson were friends, and Swenson already had a gallery going called New Arts. When she started she had used New York art dealer Andre Emmerich as a source of material, because what she was showing was pre-Columbian. It was on consignment from Emmerich, all those pieces. Then when MacAgy came to town Swenson decided she'd like to spread out, you know, get a little more art involved. Some of it was local art, which MacAgy would pick.

Cite: Was the gallery always called New Arts?

Love: No, it was called the Andre Emmerich Gallery when I first got involved with it. I had my first show there in 1958, and Swenson had other people as well. MacAgy was familiar with a number of West Coast artists such as Hassel Smith and Walter Kuhlman, and Swenson started having shows with those people. Andre Emmerich complained because they were not the same artists he was showing in his gallery in New York, and said he didn't want his name involved anymore. That's when she started calling it the New Arts, after he wanted his name removed.

Cite: What about Ben Dubose? He had the gallery at the Bute Paint Store?

Mayo: Dubose started at the Bute Paint Store downtown, and then he moved out to West Gray, and then he finally took the store over and got rid of the paint.

Love: For a long time there was sort of a two-space place there on West Gray, and the paint was still on the right side. That was when Dubose was selling work by David Addickes. I think he was determined to put an Addickes in every house in Houston, and I suspect he came very



Courtesy Houston Grand Opera



Courtesy Alley Theatre

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close to it. Dubose called everybody "chief." That way he didn't have to remember any names.

Mayo: He was a character. He didn't sell a wide variety of art. He sold only the kind of art he liked, and it was mostly decorative.

Love: But he was good. Boy, was he a salesman.

Cite: Was there a sense of community at

this point? Would people go to openings? I mean, was there a network building or in place?

Love: There were about 30 people who went from place to place. They'd go to the same places every time.

Cite: When did that group of 30 start growing?

Mayo: It was growing at this time, I really think it was. Though it might not

have been growing very fast.

Cite: Were there crossovers? Were people who were going to the Alley Theatre or to the Houston Grand Opera also going to art openings?

Mayo: I don't think we knew, but there probably were.

Cite: Was there cognizance of a pecking order in the art galleries?

Mayo: Well, we all thought there was a pecking order, whether it was right or not. I believe that probably the New Arts was considered the top purveyor of contemporary art. And then there was the Cushman Gallery. Lucy Smith was the brains behind the Cushman Gallery. The Cushmans had the money, but Smith picked what they had to sell.

Cite: Was it a mixture of local artists and people who had been brought in?

Mayo: I don't think there were any local artists at the Cushman Gallery. There were some less well-known artists, people we don't know at all now.

Cite: Did any new galleries open in that period?

Mayo: Polly Marsters had a gallery. It

was on Main Street. Her gallery was called the Houston Artists Gallery. It was the first gallery in town that specialized just in Houston artists.

Cite: How long did that last?

Mayo: I doubt it lasted more than five years.

Love: Marsters was strong in the contemporary arts, and she was strong against Jermayne MacAgy.

Cite: MacAgy as carpetbagger, or as strong-willed woman?

Love: MacAgy as the replacement of the old idea.

Cite: Was there interaction among artists in Houston then? Were there groups or gatherings, or were people doing their own thing?

Love: There were never any of that to my knowledge. If artists ever got together, it was not related to art. We didn't congregate.

Mayo: There was some later group that used to meet at Chaucer's, which was in the basement of the Plaza Hotel. It might have included David Jones, who did beautiful calligraphy all over his paintings, often lots of writing. He taught at Rice.

Cite: Jim, how did your career as a sculptor start? Wasn't that around this time?

Love: Women have always gotten me involved in things. A girl got me involved in the theater at Baylor, and then there were these two sisters living in the same compound as me in Houston, and they were doing ceramics. They were involved in the Contemporary Arts Museum and so forth.

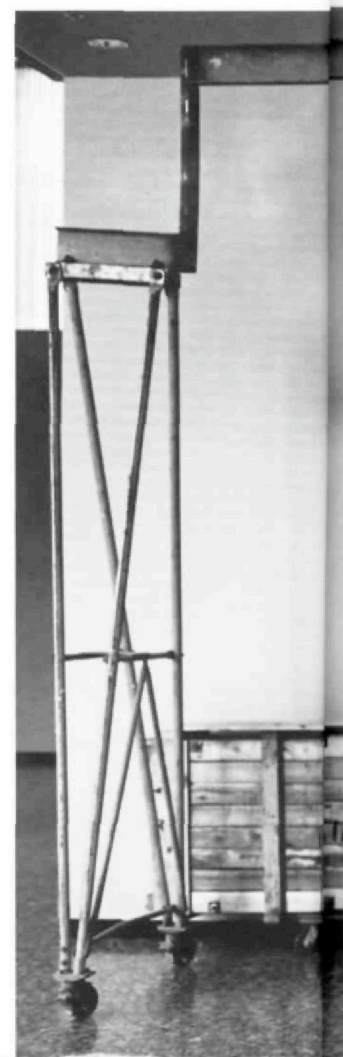
Mayo: Yes, the Howard sisters, Sally and Jane. I always saw them together because they did their ceramics together. They did big ceramics, some wonderful things, all of which have been destroyed.

Cite: So these ceramics got you interested in making sculpture?

Love: That, in combination with a set I built for the Alley. In about 1955 I went to the Alley Theatre. Nina Vance at the



Hickey & Robertson Photography



Alley needed somebody to do lighting, and I told her I didn't know a thing, not one thing, about lighting. And I was hired to do lighting. Then I stayed a couple of years. But they didn't pay, so I finally got disgusted and quit. Before I got around to it, Vance called me and wanted to know if I would do sets, which I didn't know about either. And I agreed to that, so I did sets at the Alley for about a year or two.

I can remember I did *The Rainmaker* and a few other plays. I remember that for one I decided to paint the entire floor of the Alley bright red, starting when you came into the first two doors. The whole floor was painted red, and I was well at it one day when Nina Vance came in. She got sick and had to go home. It just destroyed her, but it worked for the play very well. It was a comedy, and people were in a very festive mood right from the beginning.

Cite: This was an early act of artistic expression, you think?

Love: I don't know. But the last set I did was for *The Glass Menagerie*, and I wanted to do that out of steel. I had no money, but I talked a welding company into coming in and doing the welding in exchange for tickets and advertising in the program. So this outfit sent a welder over and was there for several days, and they furnished the material, and we did this set out of steel, and then I had drapes, gauze dipped in different colors

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draped over it. Anyway, I got curious about welding at that time, and bought a little acetylene rig. And that got me working in metal. And so there was a local show at CAM, the Art Rental they called it, and I decided to make something for it. I made a little screen thing.

Mayo: It was about two and a half feet...

Love: Freestanding, yeah, it was on its own. It had little legs.

Cite: The big sculpture that's on view at the Alley, *Area Code* (1962), was it the same sort of thing, except a lot larger?

Love: I did that to enter in a show judged by James Johnson Sweeney of the MFAH and a painter, and it got rejected. It was an area show. A large area, not just Houston.⁴

Cite: What was your first public commission?

Love: I guess the *Portable Trojan Bear* (1974) in Hermann Park. It was given to the city by the Main Street Happening, which is now the International Festival. But the bear was a commission, in a sense. Dominique de Menil talked me into doing it. I was trying to figure out whether or not I wanted to do it, and she said that I should make something for the kids to play on. And I did.

Cite: How did your commission at Hobby Airport, the airplane made out of oil drilling equipment, come about?

Love: That was Isabel Wilson. She must have been the president or chairman of the Municipal Arts Commission. She asked me to do something for Hobby.

Cite: And the piece that's in the MFAH sculpture garden, the enormous ball?

Love: That came through my dealer at the time, Janie Lee. I just made a smooth ball to put out there to show what it

would be physically like. Roughly the size of the finished piece. And then MFAH board member Caroline Law agreed to pay for it.

Cite: Is there anything about those times, any aspect of the art scene, that when you look at Houston today, that you miss?

Love: When Jermayne MacAgy died, that was an enormous loss for me, as much as John de Menil's death. Because she and I had a working relationship that was very smooth. Somehow we really clicked. We fought a couple of times. In fact, we hung a show once without speaking. But we really worked well together, and that was very rewarding. That was my art education, because I didn't have any, as was unpacking and packing and seeing things. The first time I unpacked a Mondrian in person, all I could say was "Goddamn, that is ... good stuff." I was so fortunate because of the quality of stuff I was around all those years.



Far left: John de Menil (standing left) and Jim Love (standing right) display paintings at an Art Investments dinner in the early 1960s. Left: Edward Mayo (left) and MFAH curator Thomas P. Lee prepare for the installation of Anthony Caro, an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, December 1975.

Mayo: And she was the cause of the quality.

Cite: Edward, is there anything that you miss from that era?

Mayo: Let's see. I miss being young, how about that? Well, there were MacAgy's lectures at the University of St. Thomas. She was a first-rate lecturer. The fact that there was this public person who was doing these sort of continuing education lectures that artists, potential collectors, students, all kinds of other people went to, this whole community catching up at once kind of thing, kind of epitomized a sort of a vortex which we don't have anymore. We have lots of lectures now, but not that central force. MacAgy knew it all. She was involved with contemporary art, but she knew her art history without question, and her lectures showed that. And she had an ornate, individual method of expression that made you feel at home at her lectures. She had good slides, and Jones Hall at St. Thomas was a good place to give a lecture. It had good natural acoustics.

Love: The de Menils brought a lot of people to Houston in those years, too.

Cite: Didn't they bring in Marcel Duchamp?

Love: Yes. On a weekend in 1957, New York came to Houston for the American

Federation of the Arts conference, and that weekend Marcel Duchamp was here. The fact of Duchamp showing up simply to give a lecture, that was something.

Cite: There was a group called Art Investments in the early 1960s. Can you talk a little about that?

Love: There was a time when John de Menil was trying to get other people to buy art. He got together ten people, and they put in \$10,000 apiece, as I remember. And then de Menil would buy ten things, and then each one of these people could have one of the pieces for a period of time. They would have a meeting at dinner every so often, I don't know whether it was every three months or what, and I'd hang the stuff around where the dinner would be, and each person would pick a new thing. And then in some cases I would go out to whoever's house and put it up. I don't know if it was ever considered a success, I don't know if any of those people turned into buyers on much of a scale or not. I don't remember even who very many of them were.

Cite: What do the two of you think about what might be called the de Menil invasion? When did they quit being seen as outsiders?

Mayo: They never have. I think they were always considered kind of outsiders.

Cite: Did some of that let up when John de Menil died, and Dominique was doing things on her own? Were they perceived differently in the city by the time The Menil Collection was about to emerge?

Love: I've had a feeling for a long time that that place is dearly loved by the people of Houston, after The Menil Collection got built and there were a few shows in it.

Mayo: You're talking about the building?

Love: Well, not the architecture per se so much as the going in there and seeing the sculpture and things.

Cite: Edward, when did you start at the Museum of Fine Arts?

Mayo: January 15, 1961. James Johnson Sweeney started as director in March of that year. I didn't know a lot about being a registrar. James Chillman, who hired me, handed me a book, *Dorothy Dudley's Museum Registration*, and I had to have a hernia operation at that time, so I read it while I was recuperating. I finally met her, Dorothy Dudley. She was the real deal, a doyenne of museum registrars at the Museum of Modern Art. Wonderful lady.

Chillman hired me at almost the exact time that the board of trustees hired Sweeney. Sweeney was involved with a course he was giving at Harvard with his own works of art, things that he owned, as examples of what he was teaching. Some of those pieces stayed at Harvard as long as he was teaching there, and then when he moved to Houston, some of them moved here, into his apartment. Sweeney really picked up the Museum of Fine Arts and turned it around. He gave it a — you know, a lot of the people who resented him had no idea that this was really happening. But it did happen. I think a lot of people who resented what he was doing at the time now appreciate that it happened, because it was really a giant step forward.

He had one problem, which was that he didn't have enough money to do what he really liked to do. He had his printing designed by Herbert Matter in New York, which was all right, but he also had Sterlit Press print it all, and the local board members couldn't understand why he couldn't get things printed in Houston.

I remember he showed me two invitations — he had had one printed in New York, and then had another printed here, and he said, "They cannot see the difference." And I must say, the difference was very, very subtle. But it was there. He had an absolutely phenomenal eye. And Sweeney was a one-man band. He had no curator, didn't want any. He did it all.

Cite: And the museum got rid of him because he wasn't out in front shaking hands?

Mayo: I think it was because they were tired of the kind of art that he was purveying.

Cite: For his 1962 show *Three Spaniards: Picasso, Miró, Chillida*, he had a beautiful pool built in the front of the museum for Picasso's *Bathers* to be placed around.

Love: And that Olmec head, that was That took the Navy and several governments' involvement. There was a crane out in front of Cullinan Hall, and the crane had to hold the head all night while the base was being installed.⁵

Mayo: While the cement was setting.

Love: To nest it, you know, the crane let it down there to form its little nest, and then picked it back up and let the cement set for however long, however many hours.

Mayo: It was a heroic level for Houston. ■

1. James Chillman served as director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston from 1924 to 1953.
2. At the time, the Contemporary Arts Museum was housed in small, slope-roofed structure designed in 1949 by MacKie & Kamrath.
3. Jermyne MacAgy was born in Cleveland in 1914. She attended both Radcliffe and Western Reserve University, and also studied museum management with Paul Sachs at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum. In 1941 she began working at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco. She served as both assistant and acting director there prior to moving to Houston.
4. Prior to moving to Houston in 1960 to become the third director in the history of the MFAH, James Johnson Sweeney was director of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Earlier, he had been director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at New York's Museum of Modern Art.
5. The Olmec head was a nine-foot-tall, 32,000-pound stone carving placed on the lawn in front of Cullinan Hall. Part of the 1963 MFAH exhibit *The Olmec Tradition*, the massive head was shipped to Houston from Mexico with the assistance of the U.S. government, the Mexican government, and the Mexican Navy.