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# ARTS & THEATER

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## Early Houston art scene is having a moment

Under-appreciated Houston artists are being rediscovered by scholars and collectors

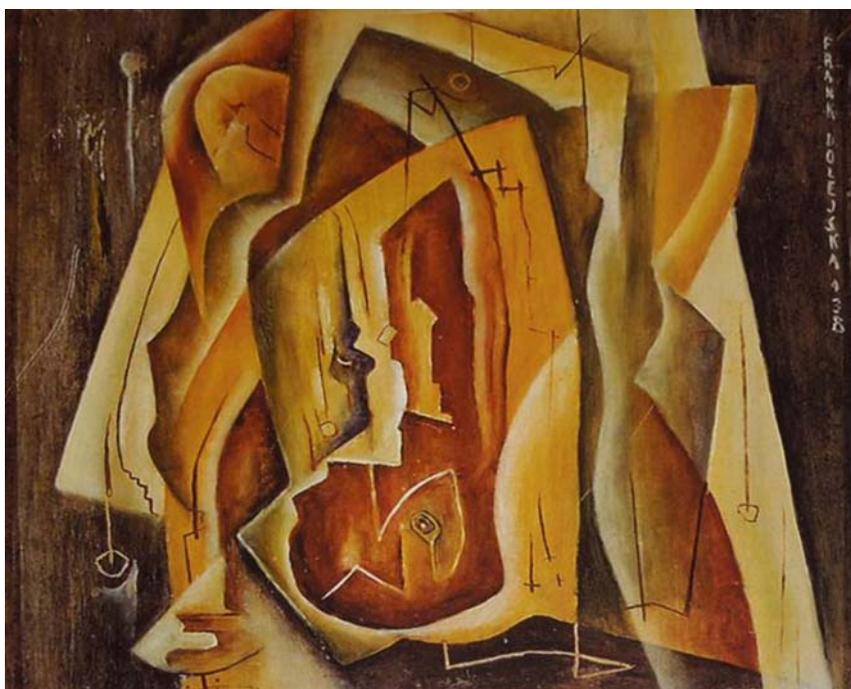


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By Molly Glentzer  
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Art trends are driven by what's new, but a curious moment is happening. What's new is quite old.

Some of the most-talked about art right now was created by under-appreciated 20th-century artists who didn't live in New York, where titans of abstract expressionism such as

Private Collection

Frank Dolejska's "As Never," painted in oil on masonite in 1938, is one of few remaining works by one of the masters of early Texas modernism. Dolejska, who lived in Houston and was active in the early Contemporary Arts Association, destroyed much of his work during a period of depression.

Jackson Pollock have long defined postwar American art.

The picture is playing out vividly in Houston.

Although museums haven't yet mounted the kind of intense survey that would illuminate the city's entire art history, three current gallery shows hint there's much to learn. Some of the early figures still are alive and working, being rediscovered in their 80s.

Even the Houston Fine Art Fair, which continues through Sunday at NRG Center, caught the spirit. It commissioned former Houston Chronicle art critic Patricia Covo Johnson to curate a Houston Artists Hall of Fame exhibition.

Johnson's show features 15 artists who were active in Houston from the late 1960s into the '90s "because that impact continues," she said. For visual cohesion within the confines of a fair booth, she limited her show to relatively monochromatic works on paper and some rarely seen sculptures.

An Arts Brookfield exhibition curated by Sally Reynolds at One Allen Center reaches further back, from 1935 to 1965. A show at the University of Houston-Downtown's O'Kane Gallery incorporates the story of theater director Margo Jones. Her ambitious play selections influenced some of the city's early modern artists - including Gene Charlton, Forrest Bess and Robert Preusser.

Richard Stout, 80, may be having the biggest moment of all. He's represented prominently in the Arts Brookfield show, and his works fill the walls of William Reaves Fine Art's roomy new gallery. Although Stout has worked steadily since the 1950s, he hasn't had a major gallery show in 13 years. Reaves' exhibition also features Stout's friend and fellow Beaumont native David Cargill, 85, a little-known sculptor.

If it weren't for Reaves, Stout said, "we'd be nowhere."

Like other Houston artists of his generation, Stout often fills large canvases 5 or 6 feet tall that reflect that oil-boom period's exuberance. During his first decade or so in business, Reaves jammed such works - including paintings by Dorothy Hood and Charles Schorre - into a low-ceilinged building on Brun. His new Westheimer gallery accommodates them better. Reaves has collected early Texas art for years.

"There has been renewed interest. We have a great staff, and there are great artists. Because of that, we've seen a modicum of success," he said.

Reaves co-founded the Center for the Advancement and Study of Early Texas Art, a group that's helped build archives and supported projects like Katie Robinson Edwards' revelatory new book, "Midcentury Modern Art in Texas" (University of Texas Press, 392 pp., \$60). Edwards wrote the first scholarly survey



to delve into the state's midcentury art scene after seeing the private collection of Austin attorney Robert Summers in 2007.

"I was blown away. I didn't know this work existed," she said. "I went to school in Texas but got trained in New York, California and European art history."

Edwards knew she'd found an under-explored niche, and she's still discovering painters who worked in the state. "There will definitely need to be a volume two," she said.

### *Artistic city*

The Arts Brookfield show takes some of its cues from Edwards' book, although Reynolds wrote one of her own years ago. The work remains fresh, Reynolds said. "It holds up beautifully. I'm delighted that this work is being seen with new eyes."

Houston always has been the most artistically productive city in Texas, casting away its conservative beginnings as early as 1900 when a group of women led by Emma Richardson Cherry - an internationally shown artist who moved to Houston in 1893 - founded the Public School Art League, Edwards writes.

In 1924, on the day the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston opened, Cherry's attitude was obvious: "Many are educated; few are cultured," she said. The museum became a major nexus for outreach but also featured local and regional artists.

Ruth Pershing Uhler, who taught there, painted murals at the Julia Ideson library building and City Hall in the 1930s. Cherry encouraged protégée Ola McNeill Davidson, another museum teacher, to study internationally, and the tone was set. Houston's early abstract artists had strong ties to prestigious schools, too - including the Cranbrook Academy of Art and the Rhode Island School of Design.

"There was ambition and quality right from the get-go. That's infectious, when people are willing to look at the experience of young, talented people and how they're reading the land," Stout said.

He finds it remarkable that in the 1930s, young Houston artists were meeting László Moholy-Nagy at the Art Institute of Chicago. Davidson also gave students like Preusser, Bess, Charlton, Frank Dolejska and Carden Bailey exposure to collectors in a two-story converted garage space she named Our Little Gallery.

Nina Cullinan, one of the museum's founding patrons, also co-founded the Contemporary Arts Association and made sure it was invited to use the new Mies van der Rohe galleries she'd helped to build. That group - including many artists - soon founded the Contemporary Arts Museum, one of the first institutions of its kind in the U.S. John and Dominique de Menil were influential, too.

The city's universities also were developing art departments. It still was a segregated environment, but the arrival of John Biggers at Texas Southern University was among the transformational developments at a

time when blacks were allowed only to visit the museum on Mondays.

Still, it wasn't easy to survive. Houston was the boonies as far as the rest of the art world was concerned. Uhler and Dolejska burned much of their work during bouts of depression, making their paintings rare today.

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When Meredith Long opened his gallery in 1959, he didn't intend to show locally made art.

Within a few years, he was selling Impressionist and early-modern art to Houstonians who'd been buying that kind of work in New York. Once a month he'd fly to the East Coast, load up on canvases by the likes of George Pearse Ennis or Theodore Robinson, bring them home and sell them.

Then he overheard a Houston artist comment that an artist had to be dead to be shown in Long's gallery.

"It made me think, if they're here, and they're good, you should support them," he said.

By taking on Jack Boynton, Stout and numerous others, Long helped establish Houston as a city where an artist could make a living.

When Stout graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1957, he took a bus home to Beaumont that would make a lot of stops. He wanted to find a good place to land, a city with excellent classical music and museums.

The bus went through St. Louis, Mo., and Tulsa, Okla., which he found too small. Then Dallas - too swell. Almost home, he landed in Houston. Leopold Stokowski was conducting the Houston Symphony. World-famous architect Mies van der Rohe had designed a new wing for the Museum of Fine Arts.

A friend took Stout to a party at the Spring Branch home of artists Henri Gadbois and Leila McConnell.

"I met everyone, it seemed, at that party," he recalled. "There was something about the graciousness of the life I felt good about."

He even liked the steamy climate and the seemingly endless, flat landscape, which already inspired his work.

Stout paints beautifully, in a style that might be called romantic abstraction. Early on, he was driven by memories of lazy boyhood days on Bolivar Peninsula, where his family had a bay house.

Stout's art quickly found an audience. After he won an International Hallmark Award in 1960, he also showed at New York's Wildenstein Gallery. He found a good teaching job at the University of Houston

after earning his master's degree from the University of Texas.

"I was lucky. If I'd waited another 10 years, I couldn't have been so established," he said. "I came in a period when you really had to want to be an artist; you were pretty off the charts, particularly in Texas."

Art historian Pete Gershon notes that Houston's art scene seems to churn on 20-year cycles. The testosterone-fueled '70s brought change that would influence developments still unfolding today.

"Things seemed to get a lot more Texan," Gershon said

That's when James Harithas gave local talent a bigger presence at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, when the city began to acquire public sculpture, when James Surls founded Lawndale Art Center, and when studios could be carved cheaply into huge, unairconditioned warehouses near downtown.

For one of the first shows at Lawndale, Surls and Bert Long showed more than 500 small pieces by "just about every artist who was working in Texas and Louisiana," Gershon said. "It was a particularly dynamic period where the city was having a very profound on the artists and the artists were having a profound effect on the city."

That period climaxed with the landmark 1985 exhibition "Fresh Paint" at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. That was the last time a major institution offered a serious survey of what might be called a "Houston school."

But things are stirring. In October the Fred R. Jones Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma will unveil "Macrocosm Microcosm: Abstract Expressionism in the Southwest." And Reaves said the Art Museum of South Texas in Corpus Christi wants to reprise the "Bayou City Chic" exhibition his gallery mounted last year.

Reynolds has been happy to see some of the city's finest artists visiting the Allen Center show and absorbing it.

"It's important to have a strong sense of what's been done, what's preceded you and where you're coming from," she said.

*'A New Visual Vocabulary: Developments in Texas Modernism from 1935-1965'*

*When: 8 a.m.-6 p.m. Mondays-Fridays, through Oct. 8*

*Where: One Allen Center Gallery, 500 Dallas*

*Tickets: Free; [artsbrookfield.com](http://artsbrookfield.com)*

*'Pursuit of the Sublime'*

*When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, through Oct. 25*

*Where: William Reaves Fine Art, 2143 Westheimer*

*Tickets: Free; 713-521-7500, [reavesart.com](http://reavesart.com)*

*'The Left Bank on the Bayou: Avant-garde Art and Theater in 1930s Houston'*

*When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Fridays, noon-5 p.m. Saturdays, through Oct. 16*

*Where: O'Kane Gallery, One Main*

*Tickets: Free; 713-221-8042, [uhd.edu](http://uhd.edu)*



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