

## What a Tease

Maurizio Cattelan creates a building-wide scavenger hunt at the Menil.

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Mockery, tribute or both?



Cattelan's summation of Dada, perhaps?

**Where:**

The Menil Collection, 1515  
Sul Ross, 713-525-9400.

**Details:**

Through August 15.

**Subject(s):**

["Maurizio Cattelan", The Menil Collection](#)

It's tempting to think that artist [Maurizio Cattelan](#) is putting one over on The Menil Collection. The Italian sculptor's works often tease art-world conventions and mock institutional authority. In a 2009 [Interview Magazine](#) article, he said, "I think it's time for artists to get over auction houses, galleries, and high-production-value exhibitions and start using our voices again."

What's happened, though, in the delightful exhibition "**Maurizio Cattelan**," is a perfect harmony of two voices, the artist's and the institution's.

Always smart in its approach to curation, the Menil has allowed Cattelan to make selections from the collection to display in juxtaposition with his own works, as well as install pieces within the museum's permanent exhibits. The result is a building-wide scavenger hunt that yields some pretty thrilling

moments. And ironically, the Menil plays the trickster by figuring out an ingenious way to make patrons who only show up for the rotating exhibits check out the permanent ones again.

There may not be a more perfect place for this experiment. Cattelan is a self-taught artist and was influenced greatly by surrealism. His works can appear to goad outrage and scandal while being aloof to their potential to offend — questioning the meaning of imagery. Perhaps his best-known work, *The Ninth Hour*, is an effigy of [Pope John Paul II](#) stricken by a meteor (according to [Wikipedia](#), it sold at [Christie's](#) for \$3 million) which provoked ire from Catholics and Poles. Cattelan may have intended to say simply that no one, regardless of power and divinity, is immune to ridiculously bad luck. But people, and especially religious institutions, can be pre-emptively defensive, and some assumed that Cattelan was handing out punishment. Double meaning or no meaning, Cattelan likes to ride a line between irony and ambiguity, so his pieces feel right at home in a room full of Magrittes or catty-corner to a Warhol.

If one begins exploring the Menil at the west side of the building, Cattelan literally spells it out for us by choosing to display [Joseph Kosuth's](#) 1967 painting *Titled*. In white letters on a black canvas is the definition of the word "meaning." The majority of the Cattelan works on display are untitled, so introducing the definition of "meaning" seems to imply "abandon all hope of."

Nearby is Warhol's *Camouflage Last Supper*, which I'd never seen before, and it's spectacular. Cattelan also neatly arranged [James Lee Byars's](#) *The Halo*, a huge brass ring, with [Michelangelo Pistoletto's](#) *Two People*, a mirror with a life-size man and woman painted on its surface. Stand in the right spot, and the ring is perfectly framed within the image.

The exhibition's major work is Cattelan's *All*, nine human figures lying horizontally on the floor that appear to be covered with white sheets — at least, that's what your brain tells you when you walk into the room. Closer inspection reveals a material of significantly greater substance.

Another Cattelan work resides near a selection from Warhol's *Electric Chair* series. (You have to look for it.)

Inside the surrealism galleries, find the hanging, upside-down hand with its fingers cut off (except for the middle one). Cattelan's summation of Dada, perhaps? And don't miss *Untitled* (2007), hiding in a corner gallery. It's a taxidermied horse, lying on its side, with a wooden sign sticking out of its rib cage. Painted in black on the sign are the letters "INRI," short for the Latin equivalent of "[Jesus of Nazareth](#), King of the Jews," which is traditionally seen on crucifixes. The outrageousness of such a large animal on the floor of a gallery, coupled with the provocative religious reference, makes for a gripping image. It's perfect among the surrealists.

Another striking Cattelan work appears in the galleries that contain Renaissance Era religious iconography. Installed on a wall next to a wooden sculpture of the [Virgin Mary](#) and baby Jesus is an open art-packing crate. Fastened down to avoid any damage in shipping is an effigy of a woman in crucifix pose. Her hands have been bolted into the crate through her palms. It's grotesque, but in a way, it's weirdly solemn. We can't see her face, so it's difficult to register pain. And no blood, either. Placing the work within the context of an exhibit of religious artifacts amplifies the potential for "how dare yous," suggesting a premeditated attempt at offense, but it's countered by what feels like a sincere stab at absurdity.

In the center of a room filled with medieval paintings of Bible scenes sit two taxidermied yellow Lab dogs with a baby chick between them. One dog is lying down but alert; the other sits up. They could be protecting the chick; they could be cornering it. Mostly, the juxtaposition is just plain puzzling. Look at the 400-year-old painting; look at the dogs. After a few minutes, you might bust out laughing — I'll take a guess and say it's Cattelan's intention to make you crack up in a room full of Jesus pictures.

Another series of galleries contains more of the Menil's modern and contemporary collection along with three other Cattelan sculptures. In my opinion, the creepiest of the bunch is one that was finished just this year. Two diminutive replicas of the artist, wearing suits, lie side-by-side on a little bed. It seems to be a blatant riff on the replication techniques used by Warhol (his double *Mona Lisa* isn't far away); it's a 3-D self-portrait in miniature. Nearby is a broom propping a blank canvas against a wall. Hey, one of [Robert Ryman's](#) white paintings is in the next room! At some point, Cattelan seems to imply, mockery eventually turns into tribute. Intentions are blurred. Meaning is meaningless.