

TEACHERS & WRITERS MAGAZINE

TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING  EDUCATING THE IMAGINATION

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SPECIAL ISSUE

A Poem as BIG as New York City

*Excerpts from T&W's New Book
Creating a Poem to Celebrate Your Community
Community Poem Project Exercises*

Also in this issue:

*Interview with Verlyn Klinkenberg
The Menil Collection and Houston WITS
Teaching Artist Snapshots
A Kid Named A.*



WHAT'S INSIDE

EVERY TEACHERS & WRITERS residency culminates with an anthology, and the publication of these modest books never fails to excite and inspire the young writers whose work graces their pages. It's not often, however, that we get the chance to share our students' work with a larger audience, so we are delighted to announce the publication this month of *A Poem as Big as New York City: Little Kids Write about the Big Apple* (Universe Publishing). The book grew out of a wide-ranging series of T&W workshops in which young people wrote about growing up in New York City. Their work was collected, edited, and illustrated to create this vibrant work of imagination. "If anyone wants to know the reasons for bringing young people to art," says writer Walter Dean Myers in his foreword to the book, "they will find those reasons here." Following a glimpse of the writing and art you'll find in the book, we offer detailed suggestions and exercises to help you create your own community poem project.

Elsewhere in the issue, Sarah Dohrmann interviews Verlyn Klinkenborg about his new book, *Several Short Sentences About Writing*, diving into a lively discussion about the role of silence, rhythm, and creativity in writing. Harriet Riley explores the extraordinary twenty-year partnership between Houston Writers in the Schools and the Menil Collection, a Houston art museum, that has inspired thousands of children to write the stories they see in "splashes of paint." Our teaching artist snapshot for this issue features Buffalo, New York, writers Gary Earl Ross and Celia White, and we close with a short piece by Michael Copperman on the frustrations and rewards of encouraging his writing students to think for themselves.

In describing the work in *A Poem as Big as New York City*, Walter Dean Myers praises the student writers' ability to "celebrate the ordinary and transform that ordinary into the rich stuff of life." We eagerly look forward to helping a new crop of budding writers do just that in the school year ahead.

— Susan Karwoska



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Fall 2012 Issue

A Poem as Big as New York City

<i>Foreword</i>	3
Walter Dean Myers	
<i>Poem Excerpt</i>	4
<i>Creating a Poem to Celebrate Your Community</i>	5
Amy Swauger	
<i>Two Exercises for Community Poem Projects</i>	9
Sarah Dohrmann	
Interview with Verlyn Klinkenborg	13
Sarah Dohrmann	
Finding Stories with Splashes of Paint	19
<i>The Menil Collection and Houston Writers in the Schools</i>	
Harriet Riley	
IN THE CLASSROOM	
<i>Writing in the Museum</i>	23
Harriet Riley	
TEACHING ARTIST SNAPSHOTS	
Gary Earl Ross & Celia White	24
Buffalo, New York	
<i>Classroom Snapshots</i>	28
Gary Earl Ross and Celia White	
ENDNOTE	
A Kid Named A.	30
Michael Copperman	
T&W Blackboard	32



Finding Stories with Splashes of Paint

The Menil Collection and Houston Writers in the Schools

HARRIET RILEY

I Want the World To

DANAH H.

I want the world to know
it is more than just a blank canvas.

I want the world to see
it is more than just a color.

I want the world to feel
different textures.

I want the world to understand
the difference between nothing
and something.

I want the world to think
about illusions.

ROBERT, A YOUNG STUDENT in a Houston WITS elementary school classroom, was very clear: he did not like to write. Even the writer-in-residence in his classroom

Harriet Riley is a freelance writer focusing on nonfiction articles and personal narrative. She is a writer-in-residence in the Houston inner-city schools with Writers in the Schools. She has taught undergraduate writing classes at the University of West Florida in Pensacola, where she lived for eleven years before moving to Houston in mid-2007. She's also worked as a nonprofit director, hospital marketing director, and newspaper reporter. She has her MA in print journalism from the University of Texas at Austin and her bachelor's degree in English and journalism from the University of Mississippi.

could not get him to put pencil to paper, no matter what he tried. So it was a surprise to everyone, even Robert, when, on a class field trip to the Menil Collection, a Houston art museum, Robert suddenly began to write with an enthusiasm he'd never shown before. At the end of the visit, the leader noticed Robert had written pages and pages of poems and stories. Amazed, she asked him what had allowed him to write at the Menil when he had never wanted to in the classroom. He thought about it for a moment then replied, "I just needed to write lying on my stomach looking at the art."

The freedom to look at things differently is part of what makes Writing at the Menil, the two-decade-long collaboration between the Menil Collection and Houston's Writers in the Schools, so unique. "You find your story at the Menil," says WITS's Executive Director Robin Reagler. "Students use the art as a map to follow a journey within themselves. It's a very special kind of work that comes out of this project because the art is surreal and abstract and involves a world of shape and color without representation."

“The space creates an intimacy between the individual and the art. . . . The children walk into a space where the imagination is allowed to take over.”

The Menil Collection

Students with Writers in the Schools have been visiting the Menil almost since it opened its doors to the public in 1987. The Menil’s founder, Dominique de Menil, and her husband, John de Menil, came to the US from France, fleeing World War II. They settled in Houston, where they played a central role in the civic, cultural, and social life of the city, and amassed an extensive collection of modern art. The museum contains over sixteen thousand of their paintings, sculptures, decorative objects, prints, drawings, photographs, and rare books. Fewer than five hundred of these works are on view at any one time. The pieces constantly rotate in and out of the museum, creating a fresh environment each visit.

Mrs. de Menil, who died in 1997, envisioned a museum for her collection that would allow visitors to have a more intimate experience with art. She rejected the typical docent experience where “knowing” people told “unknowing” people what to think about art. The Menil has no docent tours, no explanatory cards next to the art, and no audio guides to the collection. When you visit, you are on your own.

“Her intent was to keep the mind unencumbered and not to tell visitors in advance what they were seeing,” says Karl Kilian, director of public programs at the Menil. “The experience was meant to be between the individual and the work of art. She called it ‘a period of mutual interrogation.’ Mrs. de Menil wanted visitors to have their own relationships with the art.”

The design of the museum itself was intended to foster this relationship between visitors and the art within. Designed by world-renowned Italian architect Renzo Piano, the Menil is built on a human scale. Visitors walk straight into the art-filled lobby at ground level, and the main hallway runs through the building like a street. Visitors walk down it and enter smaller rooms off to each side. The art is displayed

in natural light, also at the request of Mrs. de Menil. Piano fulfilled this request by creating slats in the ceiling that allow natural light to come into

the building at an angle. Gardens at the center of the building let in more light. The small scale of the museum and the quality of the light make the gallery experience feel like a visit to a home.

“The space creates an intimacy between the individual and the art,” says Reagler. “The children walk into a space where the imagination is allowed to take over.”

For young students, the effect is magical as they relax in a light-filled building that feels comfortable and natural. “The students don’t feel overwhelmed or rushed during their visit,” notes Menil /WITS writer Maryanne Gremillion. “The space contributes to the experience.”

Visits to the Menil, by design, are informal and unstructured. The students recline on the large ottoman in the lobby. They lie on the floor. They stare up at the Calder mobiles. They hug their clipboards and pencils to their chests as they dance in front of the artwork. They sit “criss-cross applesauce” in the middle of the 20th-century room, laughing at what the children call the “hairy cheese.” “This sets up a different relationship between the children and the art,” says Kilian.

Writers in the Schools

The relationship between the Menil and WITS was initiated by Mrs. de Menil along with the founders of WITS Houston, Phillip Lopate and Marv Hoffman, two years after the collection opened. “Writing at the Menil is an extraordinary and important part of our mission,” says Menil Director of Advancement Aline Wilson. “It’s our pride and joy.” Mrs. de Menil chose Writers in the Schools because of its strong, well-crafted writing program, Wilson says.

At the Menil, the WITS writers ask students open-ended questions with no right answers. “We don’t try

to tell students what art means—they tell us,” Reagler says. WITS writers ask students questions like “If you could eat it, what would this painting taste like?” The writing prompt is all about surprise. “When a kid tries to surprise you back, it creates the best work,” adds Reagler. “Students in public schools have fewer and fewer opportunities to be creative. It’s very freeing for them to visit a space where the imagination takes over. Young people need to feel like they are making choices.”

The art in the large collection, which rotates in and out of the galleries, includes Surrealist works by Max Ernst, René Magritte, and Man Ray, as well works by Fernand Léger, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso. There are American modern art works by Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, Cy Twombly, Mark Rothko, and others. The de Menils also later added works from classical civilizations, from the Byzantine Empire, and objects from Africa, the Pacific Islands, and the Pacific Northwest.

The prevalence of surreal and modern art in the collection affects the children’s imaginations, according to Ryan Dilbert, a WITS writer-in-residence at the Menil.

“The art here makes students actually think about what art is,” says Dilbert. “The youngsters create meaning from the art. It’s also important for students to write on location and get out of their usual space.”

“It’s fun because you get to literally see the kids’ eyes open in a different way,” says Autumn Hayes, a first-year WITS/Menil writer.

The Menil Visit

The collection is always free and open to the public, but the students in the Writing at the Menil program arrive before the museum opens its doors, creating an intimate private experience with complete freedom to see and respond to the art without other visitors around. “They are untutored, unmonitored,” said Kilian. “It’s about the writing, not the meaning of the words.”

Most of the writing lessons as part of the Writing at the Menil program are structured so that students first respond to the art and share their thoughts verbally. In this process, they realize that there is never just one way to view the art. Each person taps into their emotional side and thinks about how the artist was feeling when he or she created the piece. The whole experience is intended to build a sense of cohesiveness among the group.

When they begin to write, the students view the art as a reference point for their own feelings and writing. They look back and forth between the work of art and their writing and “find the story within the art that is

also within their heart,” says Reagler.

“I think the greatest thing about taking kids through the Menil is how it opens up their idea of ‘art’ and ‘meaning.’ The visit helps them realize art isn’t about communicating a simple meaning so much as opening up new questions, exploring new space, and interacting with an audience,” notes WITS/Menil writer Ryler Dustin. “The students write poems that aren’t afraid to create more questions than answers for the reader. They realize the questions can be the



A student with WITS Houston observes a painting at the Menil Collection. Photograph by Yvonne Feece.



A writing class at the Menil Collection. Photograph by Yvonne Feece.

point.”

Menil/writs writer Gremillion said the students are not so much describing art as “letting the art speak to them.”

The student visits to the Cy Twombly Gallery, housed in a separate building on the Menil campus, are a perfect example of how the Menil affects student writers. “Children gasp when they enter this gallery,” says Gremillion. writs writer Rebecca Wadlinger notes that when she takes students to the Twombly gallery, “our conversations usually start out with ‘It’s all squiggles!’ and ‘Look at that scribble scrabble!’ and the students claiming, ‘I could do that!’ But when we take some time to talk about what we see in the art, and how it makes us feel, the conversation changes. Students become excited and invent grand narratives of loss, departure, and celebration.” One of her students, she adds, wrote that Twombly “told a life story with splashes of paint.”

In addition to the Cy Twombly Gallery, the campus of the Menil also includes the Rothko Chapel, outdoor sculptures and parks, and the Dan Flavin light installation at Richmond Hall. On each visit to

the Menil, program writers divide the students into small groups of no more than eight and each group visits at least three galleries during their time at the museum.

“A lot of these kids have never been to a museum,” says writs writer Dilbert. “The visit to this eclectic environment really opens them up. They learn to create their own meaning from the art and it, perhaps, changes their feeling about art forever.”

Leaving the Menil

Reagler says writs writers often close their time at the Menil by asking students to imagine if they

lived there, where they would sleep, play, eat meals. The children always respond enthusiastically because the building feels like their own space. “They write about the art as if they own it,” says Reagler, fulfilling de Menil’s dream of a collection where visitors would develop their own relationship with and interpretation of art.

The students are clearly touched by the art they’ve seen at the Menil, and they, in turn, leave their own mark through their inspired responses to it. In fact, as a way of emphasizing that visitors to the Menil bring something of themselves to the art they view, Mrs. de Menil requested that the floors of the museum be made of pine, so that the mark of each and every visitor would be recorded in the soft wood.

“Perhaps only silence and love do justice to a great work of art,” Mrs. de Menil once wrote. The awe and love shown by the thousands of schoolchildren who have visited the museum through the years is a testament to her vision. 🍷

Writing In the Museum

HARRIET RILEY

One of WITS writer Maryann Gremillion's most effective writing exercises is designed for the largest piece of art in the Menil Collection—Cy Twombly's *Untitled (Say Goodbye Catullus to the Shores of Asia Minor)*. An entire room in the Twombly Building is filled by this monumental canvas, which measures more than thirteen feet high and fifty-three feet long.

First, Gremillion walks with her students through the other six rooms in the Twombly gallery and asks students to respond to the lines and colors—what they notice and how they feel. They also talk about Twombly and how he worked. Once they are seated on the floor in the large room with the Catullus painting, Gremillion explains that Catullus was a Roman poet who wrote about love and loss.

She asks the students to sit quietly in front of the painting, paying attention to the splashes of color on the right and the absence of color on the left, the words that are written on the piece, and the various marks on the canvas. They talk as a group about their responses to the work. Then Gremillion tells the students that for her, the painting is a visual poem of strong passion, and speaks of the love and loss in Catullus' poetry.

She then asks the students to choose from one of the following prompts:

- *Shining white air trembling* — The students are asked to write these words from the painting at the top of their page and continue to write freely. They are asked, "What does the phrase lead you toward? Respond with a story, an image, a memory, or a line."
- *Away* — Students are asked to use this word any way they want. They are asked to think about their first thought or memory when they hear the word *away* and create a poem, a story, a list, a letter, a memory, or a character.

Students write for ten minutes or so about either of the prompts and then share their work aloud, if they choose. "They connect with the colors, the whiteness, and even the scribbles on the piece," says Gremillion. "The resulting writing is always amazing."

After Cy Twombly

DIEGO A.

I see it, a white thing
and suddenly I am blind.
Next is love and an economy
drop. Then yes, she
left me. Where I came
from. Off to deeper shores
of loneliness. Silver gray
glows onto the clouds
unto the end.