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The Menil Divorces the Art Guys

by [MIMI SWARTZ \(/AUTHOR/MIMI-SWARTZ\)](#) | JAN 14 2013, 10:55 AM

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The life span of a live oak is normally about 200 years. For many in Houston's arts community, that is turning out to be way too long for a tree, specifically one very problematic young live oak that was unceremoniously evicted from its plot on the grounds of the Menil last Friday, and, not coincidentally, from the museum's collection as well. If this sounds a little peculiar, let me bring you up to date on what has been, from its beginning in 2009, a strange story that has only grown stranger over the last four years, and that now threatens to sully the reputation of one of the most unsullied museums in the world.

So: On a June day four years ago, Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing, a local duo

of Dadaistic performance artists who go by the name [The Art Guy](http://www.theartguys.com/) (<http://www.theartguys.com/>), staged a performance piece in which the two of them married a live oak sapling. “The Art Guys Marry a Plant” was, Galbreth and Massing felt, a work of art that celebrated man’s relationship to nature and, maybe, pointed out the obligation of mankind to protect that natural world. But not everyone saw it that way. To Douglas Britt, then the arts reporter for the *Houston Chronicle*, the piece looked like two guys in tuxedos [making fun of gay marriage](http://www.chron.com/entertainment/article/The-Art-Guys-big-fat-not-so-gay-wedding-1750050.php) (<http://www.chron.com/entertainment/article/The-Art-Guys-big-fat-not-so-gay-wedding-1750050.php>). Controversy ensued, in which Britt, who now goes by the name of Devon Britt-Darby, subsequently staged his own work of art, a 2011 wedding at which he was joined in matrimony to... [a woman!](http://houston.culturemap.com/newsdetail/11-18-11-art-guys-marry-a-tree-controversy/) (<http://houston.culturemap.com/newsdetail/11-18-11-art-guys-marry-a-tree-controversy/>) (Britt-Darby is gay.)

Around the same time, the Art Guys decided to find a permanent home for their tree/spouse. Through a set of circumstances that cheered some and infuriated others, the Menil took the tree into its permanent collection in the fall of 2011. A formal tree planting ceremony—another piece of art—was held the day after Britt’s “wedding,” with sculptor James Surls and cultural critic Lawrence Weschler talking about the importance of the work. A nice plaque was installed, commemorating the event.

By then many in Houston’s LGBT community were beside themselves, most notably the powerful art dealer Hiram Butler, who had even more powerful friends on the Menil board. Infuriating the Art Guys—with whom he had been friends—he began lobbying to get the tree expelled from the collection. Civil war looked to be a likely prospect for Houston’s arts community. Finally, on December 3, 2011, someone or more than one person attacked the tree under cover of night, vandalizing the sapling so that it more closely resembled a sad little shrub.

Following that, the story, which I wrote about [last March](http://www.texasmonthly.com/2012-03-01/feature4.php) (<http://www.texasmonthly.com/2012-03-01/feature4.php>), seemed to die down. After confessing to a dark and sordid past as a meth addict and male prostitute, Britt-Darby abruptly left his job at the *Chronicle* and announced that he would be returning to his old job as a sex worker. (He talked about all this in a series of very strange YouTube [videos](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqEzb6Z5EUg) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqEzb6Z5EUg>) in which he was usually topless and very buff.) Meanwhile, the tree remained under the care of the Menil’s illustrious gardening staff. Things seemed to have returned to normal. Or at least they seemed to. In fact, the tree had been vandalized at least two more times in 2012, which made things very uncomfortable for the museum, which after all could not provide 24/7 protection in the open air. Some time last week, the Menil told the Art Guys they were giving them their piece back. Almost immediately the arts website *Glasstire*, which is owned and operated by Michael Galbreth’s wife, Rainey Knudsen, [broke the news](http://glasstire.com/2013/01/11/breaking-news-art-guys-say-menil-is-removing-the-art-guys-marry-a-plant-from-their-collection/) (<http://glasstire.com/2013/01/11/breaking-news-art-guys-say-menil-is-removing-the-art-guys-marry-a-plant-from-their-collection/>) in the form of an uncharacteristically muted letter from the Art Guys:

The Menil Collection has decided to remove “The Art Guys Marry A Plant” from their collection. Tentative plans are to remove the tree and plaque and return them to us soon, perhaps sometime next week, although the specifics have not yet been determined. We offer this news to you without further comment. We have nothing further to say right now.

Now the next battle in this war threatens to break out. On Friday evening, an

email popped into my inbox from Surls. I'd been CC-ed on a scathing letter from him to Menil board member Marilyn Oshman, blaming Butler for the de-accession. (Surls later confirmed that the letter was meant for public consumption.)

Marilyn,

I write this to you because you are only board member of the Menil I know personally. I have to say I am amazed at the sheer "Gutlessness" of the Museum World, the only way I can look at this is as follows: Hiram Butler has won, he has simply beat the Menil to a whimpering pulp. Hiram Butler - 1, the Menil and all artists - 0. This is sad on so many levels that I can not even begin to state them all, but even if the piece of art was really bad, who the shit is Hiram Butler to say what will or will not be in the collection of any given museum.

I am truly ashamed of the Menil for letting a small-minded unintellectual, and yes even evil, art dealer "Lord over" one of what was one of the great museums. Ms. Menil would just die all over again if she knew of this Gutless Act by her beloved museum. History will not be kind to this moment of coward-ness on the part of your director. Even if the board said yes to this, he should resign before letting an art dealer rule a museums actions. I am truly ashamed for a place that I always had the greatest respect for.

James

When I asked him about it later, Surls wrote back that, "This ain't Ms. DeMenil's museum, it now belongs to the weak." In *Glasstire*, Knudsen (who, of course, is married to one of the artists) was equally harsh, claiming in a post entitled "[On Institutional Cowardice](http://glasstire.com/2013/01/12/on-institutional-cowardice-the-menil-collection/)" that the museum was using the vandalism as an excuse to dispose of the tree, which had already caused plenty of trouble and was bound to cause more as a fundraising campaign for a new drawing center was gearing up.

Comment from the museum is expected today. Regardless of what director Josef Helfenstein says, there really is no good answer at this point. A controversy that has been framed as one of free expression vs. gay rights, or homophobia vs. political correctness, or some other nutty, hurtful thing vs. another nutty, hurtful thing has been reignited, and the biggest loser is bound to be Jean and Dominique DeMenil's once untarnished institution.

UPDATE (2:30 pm): The Menil Collection has sent *Texas Monthly* a statement from Director Josef Helfenstein clarifying its decision to have the tree removed. According to Helfenstein, the art work was not de-accessioned, and it remains a part of the museum's collection. However, the tree has been removed and is no longer on the premises at the museum. Here's Helfenstein's statement in full:

The Menil Collection and the Art Guys removed the work *The Art Guys Marry a Plant* from the grounds where it has been on view since 2011.

The Menil Collection wishes to make clear that it has not de-accessioned the work, nor has it taken any steps toward de-accessioning the work, which continues to be a part of the institution's collection.

Like any art museum, the Menil Collection reserves the right to relocate works on display or to remove works from display. After damage occurred

to the part of the work that is a living tree, the Menil felt it necessary to move The Art Guys Marry a Plant and discussed this proposal with the artists, who stated that they would instead prefer for the work to be put into their possession. The Menil has honored this request.

The Menil is fully aware of the intense responses that have arisen regarding this work. The Menil has engaged in numerous discussions with parties who have felt injured or offended because the work was being displayed, and parties who have felt injured or offended because the work has been vandalized and might not be displayed. The Menil has preferred to conduct these conversations in private.

The Menil seeks to engage in a vigorous conversation about contemporary works of art and their subjects. We exhibit sometimes controversial works and organize public discussions of the issues they raise, including same-sex love and gender identity. In this regard, we are proud to be presenting the current exhibition The Progress of Love and the forthcoming exhibition Forrest Bess.

TAGS: [Art \(/Keyword/Art-0\)](#), [Gay Marriage \(/Keyword/Gay-Marriage\)](#), [Houston \(/Taxonomy/Term/35\)](#), [Menil Collection \(/Keyword/Menil-Collection\)](#), [The Art Guys \(/Keyword/Art-Guys\)](#)

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