

Practice the art of relaxation

written by **SANDRA COOK**

In these tech-crazy, traffic-troubled times, Houstonians have a right to feel frenzied, but more importantly, a right to relax. Refresh and recharge at one of the city's serene, and surprisingly unpretentious, visual art venues. Taking a few steps off your beaten path can lead to therapeutic mental breathing room, with the added bonus of cultural enrichment.

The Menil Collection in the Museum District makes a rewarding detour. At 1515 Sul Ross between Richmond and West Alabama, this urban oasis induces calm the moment its park-like setting comes

into view. The expansive and uncluttered green space soothes the senses, while the residential neighborhood's ample oaks keep out the cacophony of city traffic. Park in one of the free lots and walk right in – there's no admission charge. Once inside, you realize it's not a stuffy museum, but rather an enormous art gallery.

"The Menil Collection is designed for a very personal experience with the art," says Vance Muse, communications director for The Menil. "Whatever the object, The Menil encourages you to look at it in a very contemplative way, in an unmediated way."

Muse points out that The Menil refrains from using wall text to dictate the art's significance to you and emphasizes that the galleries are lit almost completely by natural light, so you experience the art for what it is and come away with your own impression.

"We want you to move at your own pace," Muse adds. "We encourage people to stay all day or even come by to unwind after work."

The Menil Collection is open Wednesday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., (713) 525-9000, www.menil.org.

You also can find mental breathing room at one of these free venues throughout the city.

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Merely taking in the unusual dimensions of the CAM's shiny, geometric structure can instantly open your mind to new

possibilities. At the very least it reminds us that things don't always have to be the same. The art displayed at the CAM drives this point further, often challenging the notions of what art is. 5216 Montrose Blvd., closed Mondays, (713) 284-8250, www.camh.org.

Cullen Sculpture Garden. On a pleasant day or evening, just stepping outdoors can be exhilarating. Take advantage of this spiritual momentum by heading to the Cullen Sculpture Garden in front of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, for some visual inspiration. Here, you are free to wander among the diverse sculptures, playful walls of varying heights, grassy slopes and graceful plantings. And unlike in a museum setting, you can get as close to the art as you like, even touch the captivating forms without consequence. It's a great place to liberate your mind. Northeast corner of Montrose and Bissonnet, www.mfah.org.

Japanese Garden in Hermann Park. Awaken your senses with a stroll through this living art. Winding paths lead you on a gentle journey of changing views of the traditional Japanese garden elements: stone, water and plants. Each crook of the path and curve of the landscape eases you from one point to the next, naturally slowing a stressed-out mind to a more tranquil pace. Open daily, the garden is next to the Jones Reflecting Pool in Hermann Park, (713) 284-1914, www.hermannpark.org. ■



The Menil's atmosphere encourages contemplation.