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SUPPLEMENT!
BY ABBY KOENIG

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An illustration in a flat, painterly style. A man with short brown hair, wearing a black t-shirt and a black watch, is shown in profile, kissing a small white panda mask. A woman with short red hair, wearing a red t-shirt, is leaning in from the right, also kissing the mask. The background is a soft, abstract wash of colors including red, orange, yellow, and green. The overall mood is intimate and tender.

PARENTS SAY THEIR
CHILDREN HAVE SOME-
THING CALLED PANDAS
— BUT IT'S NOT CUTE
OR CUDDLY AND
NEITHER ARE THEIR
SUDDEN, DRAMATIC
AND FRIGHTENING
BEHAVIOR CHANGES

BY
CRAIG MALISOW

TREATING A MYSTERY

Penetrating Houston

Come ready to take a selfie at the Soto exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.



Check out the plastic spaghetti.

BY JIM J. TOMMANEY

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston has a hit on its hands, and a cultural accomplishment as well, in its installation “Soto: The Houston Penetrable,” by Venezuelan artist Jesús Rafael Soto. It is so successful that I envision it in headlines, much like film noir movie posters in the 1930s: “24,000 Individual Tubes!” “16,000 Hand-Painted Objects!” “Ten Years in the Making!” “See It Now!”

The humor is appropriate because the exhibition is so much fun, and so lighthearted, even joyous, that it can handle almost anything, and also because Soto began his distinguished art career by painting movie posters as a boy in Ciudad Bolívar, Venezuela, where he was born in 1923.

“The Houston Penetrable” is described by the museum as “a vast, floating sea of plastic strands suspended from the ceiling.” Twenty-four thousand PVC (polyvinyl chloride) tubes, individually hand-painted and tied (Four Months in Tying the Knots!) hang 28 feet from the ceiling to the floor and encompass 2,600 square feet, a work of kinetic art completed only when the viewer walks through it.

The experience of participating is amusing and also entrancing. As you enter “The Houston Penetrable,” it’s like going into a doorway hung with a beaded curtain. The mind has been trained to expect that it will find an open room beyond the curtain, but that’s not the case here — just more beaded curtains, and then still more. You’ve entered an environ-

ment that is original and unique to your experience. As you exit, there’s the illusion that you’re leaving the art installation much before you really do, so that the expectation of being about to exit is thwarted, and then thwarted again.

Standing outside “The Houston Penetrable” to observe participants is part of the fun. As they enter, they gradually disappear from view, with those wearing light-colored garments seeming to be swallowed up more quickly, as though entering a mist, while the sight of darker-garbed visitors lingers longer before they, too, pass from view.

Children — who must be accompanied by an adult — love it. The strands stop short about a foot above the floor, and a group of four children, apparently together, were having the time of their lives as they waded through the strands, arms in front to part them, and at one point, all four of them even crawled on the floor on their stomachs under the strands, as though engaged in synchronized swimming.

Some of the strands had become tangled together, and I separated a few, but most of these were tangled at a much higher level, above my reach. An attendant confirmed that in the evenings, a tall ladder and a comb-like tool are used to restore the free-flowing liquidity. The faces of the staff tend to be wreathed in smiles, as they enjoy the children cavorting.



Photos © The Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Thomas R. DuBrock

Seen from a distance, “The Houston Penetrable” has a huge yellow dirigible-like cloud within it. The coloring stops about a foot above an average adult’s head, so once you’re inside, the coloring has less of an impact on the experience, though it enriches the image enormously from the exterior view. In order to achieve the cloud, most of the 24,000 strands had to be given their own individual color codes and were individually spray-painted up to just a pre-designated point on each — by a human technician, not a machine.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston is to be commended for its wisdom in commissioning the work in 2004. The very great majority of Soto’s 30 or so “Penetrable” art works were installed outdoors and meant to be ephemeral. This is the first permanent or semi-permanent “Penetrable”; a few prior ones were indoors but not intended to be permanent.

“The Houston Penetrable” is the most ambitious achievement in Soto’s talented and ac-

claimed artistic life. He died on January 5, 2005, so the museum’s foresight was especially fortuitous. The Soto-designed work was fabricated by a team of artisans and ironworkers at the Atelier Soto in Paris and at Villedu-Tursan (also in France) under the direction of the architect Paolo Carrozzino and the producer Walter Pellevoisin. MFAH staff worked for more than five years with Atelier Soto in planning the installation.

“We are pleased to bring this unparalleled ‘Penetrable’ to a Houston audience,” said museum Director Gary Tinterow. “Equal parts geometric abstraction, architecture, sculpture, environment and playscape, this monumental indoor piece exemplifies the museum’s commitment to Latin American art.”

“The Houston Penetrable” was designed specifically to be installed in the museum’s Cullinan Hall, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1958; the choice of venue could not have been better. The exhibit is centrally located, just past the lobby entrance to the museum’s Law building, so it can be seen in the distance as one enters. The view on entering

most museums is static, but here it becomes active and moves as visitors can see across the broad lobby other visitors moving through the work of art. This is especially appropriate, since Soto was a leading pioneer in kinetic art and one of its foremost practitioners. “The Houston Penetrable” thus brings art, and the museum itself, to vibrant life.

The museum encourages visitors to bring cameras and take photos of themselves in “The Houston Penetrable,” and to post these selfies on social media. Photos can be loaded onsite at the museum, and some of these find their way onto the museum’s website.

Accompanying the installation is an exhibition nearby of eight interesting pieces from various phases of Soto’s career — including his Plexiglas boxes, and selections from his *Agujas (Needles)*, *Ambivalencias (Ambivalences)* and *Vibraciones (Vibrations)* series. These works illustrate Soto’s contributions to kinetic art, giving museum visitors an understanding of the ideas expressed by “The Houston Penetrable” — and they are also exciting and fascinating, though less playful.

After September 1, the majestic work will be taken down to be dismantled, cleaned and stored in a warehouse to be available for future exhibitions. The purchase was funded by the Caroline Wiess Law Accessions Endowment Fund, and the current exhibition is sponsored by Mercantil Commercebank.

Soto: The Houston Penetrable
Through September 1. Museum of Fine Arts,
Houston, Caroline Wiess Law Building,
1001 Bissonnet, 713-639-7300, mfa.h.org.