

ANNIVERSARY

A pillar in the landscape of Houston art

Meredith Long & Co. gallery marks 50 years of influence and leadership in community

By **PATRICIA C. JOHNSON**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Meredith Long walks into his eponymous gallery with Andy, a Cavalier King Charles spaniel, padding softly beside him.

"He's my security system," Long grins as the 8-month-old puppy nuzzles a visitor's hand.

In fact, Andy is one of a "fleet" of dogs, as Long describes it, that includes 28 canines including Labs, spaniels and retrievers. All but three live on his 3,000-acre Star Ranch outside Austin, alongside some 300 head of cattle.

"When Cornelia (Cullen) and I married 40 years ago, I told her I wasn't into thoroughbreds. I like dogs."

The gallery, the oldest in Houston, was relatively calm in advance of a cel-

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ON EXHIBIT

The Romantic Landscapes of Frederic Edwin Church

■ **Where:** Meredith Long & Co., 2323 San Felipe; 713-523-6671

■ **When:** 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, through Dec. 7.

■ **The Romantic Landscapes of Frederic Edwin Church:** travels to Adelson Gallery in New York, which specializes in 19th-century American art, and then to Olana, Church's historical home in the Catskills, after it closes here Dec. 7.



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SPORTSMAN: Long is an avid outdoorsman who made "sporting art" a staple at his gallery.

READER: Long's library is stocked from floor to ceiling with beautifully bound art books.

CHRONICLE FILE PHOTOS

PATRON: Gallery owner Meredith Long is escorted through his gallery by Andy, his 8-month-old Cavalier King Charles spaniel. Long celebrates his gallery's 50th anniversary this year.

LONG: Founder of the oldest art gallery in Houston

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bration to mark its 50 years serving the art community. The anniversary exhibition spotlights a rare gathering of 30 paintings by Frederic Edwin Church, master 19th-century landscape artist, that reflects Long's first and consuming passion: American art of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The paintings are on loan from private and museum collections and premiered last week at a gala benefiting the American art department at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

"Meredith's had a huge impact on the city," says Betty Moody, another longtime Houston gallery owner. "His passion and the quality of his shows and his generosity to the museum have made a deep imprint."

And, she adds, "I admire him for his endurance. I would love to be in the business for 50 years!" Moody Gallery just celebrated its 32nd anniversary.

Long says with precision that he first fell in love with art in 1951. But he encountered detours on his way to this week's milestone event.

He was born in Joplin, Mo., in 1928. His father worked for Curtis Mathes Manufacturing, like his father before him. When World War II broke out, Long's father moved the family to Texas.

"I had plans to finish undergraduate work at the University of Texas, then enter law school. I had visions of being a trial lawyer," Long laughs. He was too young for the draft, but "decided I didn't want to be a private, so I joined ROTC."

The Korean War changed his plans for grad school. He was on active duty in the Air Force for two years, based in Texas and Colorado. When he was assigned to French Morocco in 1951, his first wife, Jeannie Murchison Clout, was able to accompany him. When on leave, he would travel to Europe and visit museums.

His father-in-law collected American paintings, Long says, and knew LeRoy Ireland. The American art historian was writing the first *catalogue raisonne* on the luminist painter George Innes.

"I corresponded with Ireland, and I decided I was going to open a gallery," Long recalls. When he returned to the United States in 1953, he enrolled in law school on the GI Bill but also established a gallery on Austin's Rio Grande Street.

Ireland provided "some marvelous paintings" on consignment from dealers on the East Coast who were going out of business, Long says.

Sales were slow and, he says, his mother was "very disappointed she wasn't going to have a lawyer son." His father told him he needed to get a job. Long went to work selling fans and air conditioners and eventually joined Curtis Mathes in 1954. Three years later, he refused a salary increase as inducement to stay with the company, moved to Houston and looked for space for his gallery.

"From the experience in Austin and looking around, I knew I didn't want to be in an old house. I wanted a business-like atmosphere," Long says. He looked at the River Oaks Shopping Center, but James Bute, a paint company that showed local artists on the side, was there, and center managers told him one gallery was enough. He found a space in Highland Village that had been a massage parlor and a lawn-mower repair shop before that. It was next to some railroad tracks, but he took it anyway.

When he opened Meredith Long & Co. in 1957, Houston had a population of 872,000,

two museums — the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Contemporary Arts Association (later the Contemporary Arts Museum) — and three galleries.

Long's first exhibit was paintings by renowned portraitist Wayman Adams and a group of School of Paris works that Ireland found for him on consignment.

"American art of the 19th and early 20th centuries was simply dismissed," Long says. "Everyone just wanted paintings of the New York School."

Long was also traveling back and forth to New York and became friends with E.J. Rousuck at the powerful (and later legally embattled) Wildenstein Gallery.

"He was a consummate dealer," Long recalls. "He gave me the initial pattern that bridged gallery with the business world. He said that no matter who had the money, if the 'men are not interested, forget it.' He advised me to show sporting art and to have a place where men could come in for a cocktail and a cigar on the way to and from work."

He took Rousuck's advice to heart. The place turned out to be on San Felipe Road, an artery connecting downtown with ritzy River Oaks. The property consisted of two apartment buildings, one of which became Meredith Long & Co. The adjacent building remained as apartments whose tenants essentially paid the mortgage, Long says. The apartments were flattened only recently to create much-needed gallery parking.

And Long, a sportsman himself, made "sporting art" a staple of the gallery's offerings. The phrase is used, often derogatorily, to describe artwork about fishing and hunting and the prey. For Long, choosing to support the genre is also about preserving a record of the land as it is.

"What Jack Cowan and Al Barnes and all these others are doing is also about preserving something of an environment that's disappearing," Long says.

Long's respect for the genre extends to other commitments. He has been a trustee of Ducks Unlimited, a nonprofit organization that raises funds for waterfowl conservation in Canada and the United States. In 2005 he was chairman for the annual Purdey Awards from Britain, which are given to "estates that do the most to propagate wildlife."

"I want to give one in Texas for the propagation of bobwhite quail," Long says. "It's a subject dear to my heart. Texas is the bobwhite's last stronghold in the U.S."

Eye for art, head for business

Balancing the gallery's roster of interests, Long also represented Houston contemporaries such as Dorothy Hood and Charles Schorre, as well as national artists — recently, new work by Donald Sultan.

The connection with New

York increased when Long forged affiliations with Manhattan galleries, among them Tibor de Nagy. The one that has lasted, however, is with Adelson Gallery, with whom Long has organized several exhibitions, including the current showing of Church's paintings.

The savvy mix of art and business that made the gallery a success extends to Long's involvement on many boards of directors. He's worked for both nonprofit organizations — the

Alley Theatre and Texas Heart Institute are two current posts — and financial institutions, among them Quintana Petroleum Corp., which was founded in 1932 by Hugh Roy Cullen, known as "king of the wildcat-ers," and Cornelia Long's grandfather. (Cornelia Long currently is chairman of the MFAH board.)

When Meredith Long and Cornelia Cullen married in 1967, they merged his and her children — three each from pre-

vious marriages — and a year later added their daughter Martha.

The gallery "is a family business," says Martha Long Lipsitz, who works there full time.

"I love art, I love working here and working with my dad. And when I'm not here, my sisters Jenny and Gretchen fill in."

Says their father: "I have a wonderful organization, and I have no plans to retire."

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