

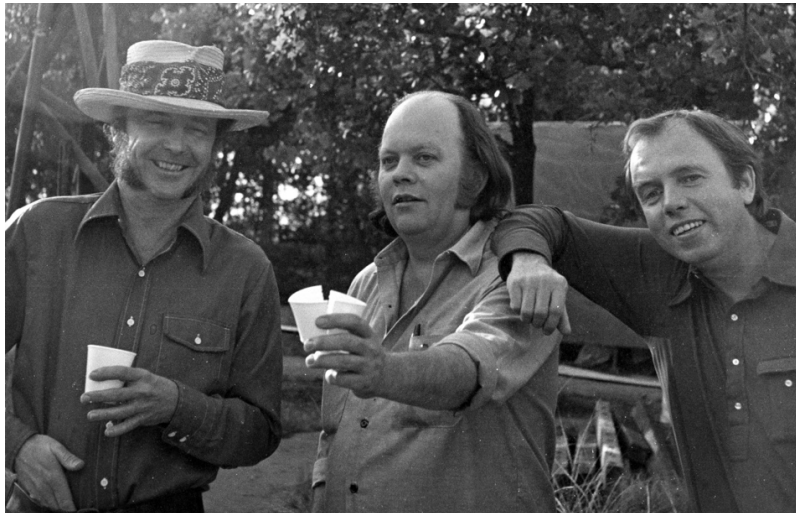
Roy Fridge, c. Early 1960s
Courtesy of the Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas

Artist, filmmaker, educator, and “amateur hermit” Roy Fridge was born in the south-Texas town of Beeville in 1927. Fridge spent a lot of time alone in his childhood. To entertain himself, the young Fridge, an only child, crafted toys and puppets, which functioned as homemade friends. Reflecting later in life about his artmaking and career, Fridge stated, “Most everything I’ve done are things I wanted to do when I was nine years old as a kid, but couldn’t do because I didn’t know how to do the carpentry, and I didn’t have the money or the materials.” Armed with a vital, youthful imagination and burgeoning craftsmanship, Fridge, upon graduating from A.C. Jones high school, left Beeville for Austin to attend the University of Texas in 1944.

According to Fridge, at the University of Texas, “I said I was an aero-engineer major... but sneaked around and took art classes. I had to sneak around because manly young men in the mid-forties did not take art classes.” Fridge’s academic studies were interrupted for a short time by his service in the U.S. Navy. Beginning in 1946, he served for two years during peacetime in Seattle working on a Navy/Civil Service newspaper. When Fridge left the Navy and returned to school, he settled on studying journalism at Baylor University in Waco. Still profoundly curious about the arts, especially interested in the films of Luis Buñuel, Man Ray, and Hans Richter, he began sneaking around again, this time enrolling in drama courses in the theater department under the direction of Paul Baker. Fridge recollected, “...thanks to the theater, I learned to use a motion picture camera and combined my art interest... I began doing animation.” Fridge, after college, spent more than ten years in Dallas as a commercial filmmaker, making commercials for clients like Melba Cigars and Southwestern Bell. Additionally, in the late 1950s, Fridge

designed theatrical set constructions for the Dallas Little Theater and was involved with the Dallas Theater Center. He also started making sculptures regularly in 1957.

Fridge began his “Hero” series around 1959. He scavenged discarded objects and collected driftwood for his sculptures on trips to the beach of Port Aransas. Back in Dallas, Fridge carved, modified, and assembled these found parts into works that embodied his satirical view of the military and national heroes of the era. In his own words, “...I made totemic and column pieces. Then got more figurative. And the figures began to be icons I called heroes or anti-heroes.” With these heroes and antiheroes, which ranged in appearance from box-like to toy-like, Fridge wed the influences of primitivism, Surrealist assemblage, kinetic sculpture, and folk-art. According to curator Susan Freudenheim, “Created just after the distorted social climate of the post-McCarthy era, the mockery of the ‘heroes’ also responds to the conservative atmosphere of Dallas during the early 1960s from which Fridge and his avant-garde friends maintained a satirical distance. Fridge has always been decidedly apolitical, but his ‘heroes’ contain Fridge’s own style of non-specific political commentary.” Among the avant-garde of Texas at this time, Fridge counted artists Jim Love and David McManaway as close friends. During the 1960s, Fridge, Love, and McManaway, dubbed the “unholy trio” of contemporary art in Texas, exhibited together and garnered attention for their engagement with assemblage. Fridge and Love lived and worked together in Houston from February of 1966 until August of 1968, sharing a building on Truxillo Street, which was a hub for artists including McManaway, James “Jack” Boynton, and others.



From left to right: Roy Fridge, Jim Love, and David McManaway
Courtesy of the Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston

In the summer of 1961, Fridge made his first “escape from and break with civilization.” Disillusioned with urban society, he spent the summer alone on the beach in Port Aransas, whittling, making sculptures, and flirting with life as a hermit. According to Fridge, “I ran away to the beach, as I like to phrase it, not so much to make art as to contemplate... I felt like whatever I made during those years was a rejection of the life I was living. It was not like I was doing this as a career or a vocation or occupation, just as a description and reflection of the life I was living.” In 1962, Fridge was invited to film a “Happening” orchestrated by Claes Oldenburg at the Dallas Museum for Contemporary Arts, which was later absorbed by the Dallas Museum of Art. In 1963, Fridge returned to living on the beach of Port Aransas. During this time, in a manner akin to Henry David Thoreau, he forced himself to live a simple existence, largely unencumbered by financial or social constraints and modern cultural norms. In Fridge’s own words, “(I was) determined to escape the world and live in semi-seclusion, part time ascetic... amateur hermit.” He continued crafting sculptures out of driftwood and found objects. He also built boats of varying sizes and levels of functionality, as well as kept journals. Fridge wrote in one journal from the period, “the only difficulty I’ve found in being a hermit is being all alone.” He referred to himself as a “whittler,” not as a sculptor.



Roy Fridge aboard *The Coleta Creek Sampan and Sailing Scow*
Courtesy of the Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston

Until 1973, Fridge split his time between Houston, his home in Port Aransas, and Norman, Oklahoma. In 1968, he spent two semesters as a visiting artist in film and animation at Rice University. From 1969 to 1973, he helped establish a film program at the University of Oklahoma. Beginning in 1973, Fridge stayed

more permanently in Port Aransas. In 1978, the Art Museum of South Texas in Corpus Christi organized a solo exhibition of Fridge's work entitled "Reflections of an Amateur Hermit." From 1980 to 1984, Moody Gallery orchestrated three solo exhibitions for Fridge. At this time, according to Freudenheim, "his work increasingly took on a mythic character as he began to express his interests in alchemy, developed via his eccentric artist friend Forrest Bess..." Fridge ceased "whittling" entirely in the mid-1980s, but continued living as an "amateur hermit" until his passing in 2007. He spent his later years writing and reading voraciously. Today, Fridge's works are in the permanent collections of the Menil Collection, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the San Antonio Museum of Art, the Art Museum of South Texas, and the Amon Carter Museum of American Art. In 2005, his art was featured in the Menil Collection's "David McManaway and Friends: Jim Love and Roy Fridge." More recently, Fridge's art was included in "Sixties Surreal," a survey exhibition organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art, which opened in September of 2025.