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The Historical Box, Curated by Mara McCarthy

William Kherbek reviews *The Historical Box*, showcasing a collection of underappreciated American artists at Hauser & Wirth London



Harpy by Robert Mallery, 1962 on display from 23 May – 28 July 2012 at Hauser & Wirth London, Piccadilly © Alex Delfanne

The Historical Box, an exhibition curated by Mara McCarthy (the director of the Los Angeles gallery The Box), was first shown at Hauser and Wirth's gallery in Zurich. The show, featuring a collection of relatively under appreciated American artists was justly acclaimed for keeping a number of important pieces and artists from the memory hole. The show has now migrated to Hauser and Wirth's Piccadilly space.

It is a diverse and powerful show; among the works that demand the most attention are assemblages by the artist Robert Mallery. *Jouster*, a fragile-seeming deconstruction of paint and sculpture hangs in the main gallery and sucks much of the oxygen from the room. Its damaged, violated-looking presence works beautifully with Wally Hendrick's sculpture, *The War Room*, which sits in the centre of Hauser and Wirth's massive repurposed bank building. Hendrick appears to have taken the Stones' advice literally when creating his bleak canvas structure. Eight large canvases are joined to form a "room", the inside of which Hendrick painted a darker shade of black in 1967 in response to the Vietnam War. It's a work Hendrick has revisited since, repainting the walls of his war room blacker than black to acknowledge the 1991 Gulf War and the present always-but-never-ending war in Iraq. The warpings in the canvas really come to life in *The War Room*, but somehow the lack of a roof on the structure seems vaguely exculpatory, a kind of deceptive light at the end of the tunnel that American Generals from Westmoreland to Tommy Franks have always insisted on seeing.

The author

William Kherbek

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Hangers by Simone Forti 1961, *The War Room* by Wally Hedrick 1967–2002 and *Horizontal* by Judith Bernstein 1973, at Hauser & Wirth London © Alex Delfanne

It's not all heaviness though, even when weight itself is the subject matter of works on show. Simone Forti's *Hangers* consists of a series of thick ropes dangling from the ceiling. At the opening, performers sat in the catenary the ropes created and – as the title suggests – hung. Walking between the danglers puts one in mind of later, more intense variations on this idea by Marina Abramović and Trisha Brown. John Altoon's deft and amusing ink and watercolour illustrations nicely converse with another fearsome Mallary in the upstairs of the gallery. When one writes "there's something for everyone in an exhibition", rarely does that formulation include dick jokes, but *The Historical Box* offers a variety of double (and single) entendres on the phallus by both Altoon and Judith Bernstein for tastes both refined and puerile.

The Vault Galleries in the basement are dedicated to a number of collages and films by Stan VanDerBeek. The films revisit some of the territory of the surrealist extravaganza *Dreams That Money Can Buy* and the low-fi inventiveness of Harry Smith and Jan Svankmajer. VanDerBeek's collages certainly would seem to have played a role in the creative gestation of collagist extraordinaire John Stezaker, but they have a rawness that Stezaker's icy, Freudian juxtapositions sometimes lack. Surrounded by such invention and artistic commitment, you wonder how thinking inside the box got such a bad name.

The Historical Box Curated by Mara McCarthy is at the [Hauser & Wirth](http://www.hauserwirth.com/exhibitions/1361/the-historical-box-curated-by-mara-mccarthy/view/) (<http://www.hauserwirth.com/exhibitions/1361/the-historical-box-curated-by-mara-mccarthy/view/>) London, from 23rd May – 28th July

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