

The Historical Box

Hauser & Wirth

There was a strange disconnect apparent upon walking into Hauser & Wirth's Zurich gallery, where 'The Historical Box', a group show curated by Mara McCarthy (of the Los Angeles gallery The Box, naturally), filled the space with 1960s and '70s-era works by a range of influential if somewhat underappreciated American artists. The show's disparate works were united by the still palpable *frisson* of sexual and wartime politics of late-mid-century America, while dapper, moneyed, impartial, 21st-century Switzerland was just outside the door. But this national and temporal dissonance was not where the disconnect lay. Instead, it arose from the fact that the assembled works felt so timely in their political engagement; more timely and engaged, by far, than the dark pastures of the kind of contemporary group shows where the political and economic realities of the present (war, stark economic disparity, sexual and racial discrimination) are often pointedly ignored.

But out of the pulpit, because the artists represented here mostly stayed out of theirs when making their work. Two large pieces by Judith Bernstein opened the show, setting an enviably smart and smarting tone. *Supercrack* (1966) featured graffiti-like scrawls (it was inspired by the bathroom at Yale University, where the artist was one of the only female graduate art students in the '60s), but I was more taken with *Horizontal* (1973), a gigantic cock-like screw rendered in charcoal on paper, the artist's signature waving jauntily along its lower shaft (she wanted spectators to *know* it was made by a woman).

Like an opaquely Freudian retort to Bernstein's work, Robert Mallary's T-shaped *Harpy* (1962) hung on an opposite wall. His dark, powerful wall works were constructed from tattered tuxedos and dirty cardboard draped and layered across metal and wood armatures, then flooded and firmed with resin. The classical forms of *Harpy* and the gorgeous *Jouster* (1960) conjured the Crucifixion, among other referents, and the darkened, abject materials were perfectly aligned; they had a touch of Lee Bontecou's violence, while also evoking Robert

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Barbara T. Smith *Black Glass*
Painting Photograph, 1965, C-type print

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Rauschenberg's elegant 'Combines'. This intimated violence was made explicit in Wally Hedrick's magisterial *The War Room* (1967–2002), with its eight enormous black-painted canvases bolted together to form a room. Made of monochromes, the space felt like a compressed, rough-hewn version of the Rothko Chapel, though Hedrick labelled his canvases 'wounded soldiers' and would go on to repaint them twice more: at the start of the Gulf War and during the war in Iraq.

Nearby, the influential artist and dancer Simone Forti contributed a kind of spectral room that shadowed Hedrick's (*Hangers*, 1961). Forti's architecture, however, only consisted of looped ropes hung from the ceiling, which were activated by dancers the day I saw the exhibition. Some dancers stood in the cups of the ropes like a swing, while others walked around them, moving them with the subtle brush of their bodies as they passed by. *Hangers's* formal and conceptual minimalism situated it firmly in the performative 1960s from whence it came. The theme of framing and performance was also taken up by Barbara T. Smith's photographs, painting and documentation of wonderfully weird and astute feminist performances in the Bay Area in the early '70s, from *Feed Me* (1973) to the speculatively technological *Scan I* (1974). Standing a bit outside of this was a series of recently discovered erotic illustrations by John Altoon, in which free-floating genitalia are served up by kitchen utensils or straddled by floppy, ardent women rendered in manic lines of ink and tarted up with colour pastel and airbrush – a kind of sunny, slacker Egon Schiele sans pathos about the sexual hang-ups.

If such works taken together did not always mesh (Forti to Altoon felt a stretch), they offered what their collective title promised: a box of histories of artistic practices that should be more established, but for sadly familiar reasons (sexism, personal problems, etc.) have not been. Also sadly familiar is the political climate in which (and against which) these artists worked: while much has changed in the past half century, much has not. Retrospective shows like 'The Historical Box' need not function merely as correctives in terms of enlarging the canon: they can also be instructive as to how today's artists might engage the political world now.

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