

## “The Historical Box”

HAUSER & WIRTH LONDON | PICCADILLY

196a Piccadilly

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One unifying characteristic of “The Historical Box” is its predominantly subdued and dark palette. From the documentation of Barbara T. Smith’s feminist body art, and the large phallus drawn by Judith Bernstein (*Horizontal*, 1973), to Wally Hedrick’s black walk-in painting *The War Room*, 1967–2002, there is a caged intensity to the show that matches its somber appearance. Curated by Los Angeles’s Mara McCarthy, director of The Box, this museum-quality exhibition acts both as a group show of the gallery’s artists and, more important, as a snapshot of the 1960s and ’70s on the West Coast. McCarthy presents a nuanced, politically charged view of an otherwise chilled-out California—a slant that is closer in spirit to Bruce Conner, Allan Kaprow, and Ed Keinholz than to the intellectual cool of Ed Ruscha and John Baldassari or the phenomenal sheen of Robert Irwin and James Turrell. In the work here, we see that political and social statements need not be separate from formal innovation.



View of “The Historical Box,” 2012

This exhibition is a more agitated and socially engaged depiction of that art scene than the usual version familiar from so many “Pacific Standard Time” shows; “The Historical Box” takes up the canonical experimentations rooted in modernism ranging from painterly abstraction (John Altoon) to collage (Stan VanDerBeek) to assemblage (Robert Mallary). Lyrical gesture is turned into jagged surreal eroticism in John Altoon’s untitled drawings from 1967–68. The heavy paint of Hedrick’s *The War Room*, which forms a dramatic centerpiece to the show, is an allusion to the Vietnam War and latterly the ones in the Persian Gulf and Iraq. Covered by thick repetitive gestures of black pigment, which symbolize death, it creates a claustrophobic and mausoleum-like atmosphere. He added more black paint to mark those later conflicts, as if each additional gesture tallied a new death. The ropes dangling from the ceiling are the minimal relics from a reperformance of Simone Forti’s dance work *Hangers*, originally performed in 1961. During the opening of this exhibition, performers activated Forti’s rope loops allowing gravity and other participants to aid their movement. Though compact, “The Historical Box” offers a complex and multilayered picture that reminds one that history often edits itself to create a smooth narrative until it is again revised.

— Sherman Sam