

Art Around Town

At the galleries

BY CHRISTOPHER MILES

Wally Hedrick: War Room

Thank heaven for old dead hippies. As we whisper past five years and 4,000 American soldiers lost in Iraq, at least Wally Hedrick shouts from the grave. Korean War draftee and decorated veteran, onetime husband of the better-known Beat painter Jay DeFeo, art teacher to the Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia, co-founder of San Francisco's The 6 Gallery, where Allen Ginsberg first read "Howl," and a trail-blazer whose broad-ranging activity prefigured practices and movements from Pop to Funk Art to happenings, Conceptual Art and Neo-Expressionism, the Pasadena-born Hedrick was also a serious protest artist.

In 1953, a year before Jasper Johns turned the American flag into a Pop Art icon, Hedrick, home from Korea, painted a similar composition, but overlaid his with the word *Peace*, and around the same time created another vision of the flag with stars morphing into daisies. Those paintings are quiet predecessors to the later and angrier painting of *Old Glory* overlaid with the phrase *Burn Me!* that is among Hedrick's works on view at the Box.

Though a few paintings here deal in clear imagery, from cartoonish political satire to mandala-like abstraction, much is obscured by multiple coats of paint. Between 1957 and 1973, Hedrick produced the Vietnam Series, a collection of black monochromes he created by slathering previously painted canvases with a layer of thick, tarlike black paint. The central work of the series, and the centerpiece of this exhibition, is *The War Room*, a structure comprising bolted-together canvases, occupying a footprint of roughly 5-and-a-half square feet and standing 11 feet tall. On the outside, you see the backs of the stretched canvases; entering through a small door, you're surrounded by mucky black surface.

Hedrick first painted over these canvases in 1967 and '68. He repainted them in 1992 in response to the Gulf War and, shortly before his death in 2003, gave them another coat for the war in Iraq. All that back story loads the work with a more specific charge than you might get by simply stepping inside, but there's no mistaking the general gravity of this work, which surrounds you with surfaces through which you still make out the underlying marks. There is vitality, even exuberance, in these canvases, but it is smothered. An immersive experience oddly akin to the Rothko Chapel in Houston and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., Hedrick's space shares the solemnity of those others but not their cleanliness or openness. It is claustrophobic, and it is messy; it is not a place in which to heal or transcend. Rather, it is a place in which to feel dirty, and to know that what is lost is just beneath the surface, and seemingly palpable, but irrevocably gone. *The Box*, 977 Chung King Road, L.A.; Wed.-Sat., noon-6 p.m.; thru April 26. (213) 625-1747 or www.theboxla.com.