

ARTslant

Print

A Misinterpreted Past Resonates in the Present by Andrew Berardini

ROBERT MALLARY

The Box

977 Chung King Rd., Los Angeles, CA 90012

February 6, 2010 - April 3, 2010



One wonders how an artist can so firmly seem to enter history and yet so quietly seem to leave it.

The late Robert Mallery, the current subject of an exhibition at The Box, seems to be just such an artist. Some of his contemporaries were more lucky in their late recoveries, like Lee Bontecou, who lived to see her own reconsideration. Unfortunately Mallery, who died in 1997, did not survive to see this moment's attempt at revival.

The artist's obituary, penned by New York Times art critic, Roberta Smith, calls Mallery a "Junk Artist Behind the Growth of Sculpture." And this was the epithet that seemed to follow Mallery, that and *Neo-Dada*. Although to look at Mallery's work, both titles, junk artist and Neo-Dada, seem quaintly old-fashioned while Mallery's work does not.

The work's intentions and its effects are two different things. Many of the monumental pieces are found in the ground floor gallery: resin cast sculptures constructed out of despoiled tuxedos, ripped, tattered, and torn, the suits have been stretched over steel frames. The iconic work in the show (which graces the postcard and the headline to this piece), *Harpy*, 1962, draws its title from classical mythology in the same way that much of the early abstract expressionist works did (I'm thinking here of Pollock's 1943 painting *The She Wolf*, though it was trope used thoroughly later on by Twombly). Such an action, referring back to ancient Greek or Roman mythology, persisted as a common titular device well into the '60s, even though its handling by then was more gestural than illustrative.

What makes Mallery's work so interesting for me isn't necessarily its place in a historical canon (though its inclusion in important surveys of the '50s and '60s insures just that), but its powerful contemporaneity in our moment. Mallery's work was first recovered by Paul McCarthy to be included in his grand biographical exhibition at the CCA Wattis, "Low Life, Slow Life." Mara McCarthy, daughter of Paul and proprietor of the Box, assisted in the recovery and restoration of the work and felt its necessity to be shown, evidenced by this exhibition, his first of any kind in LA, the press release claims, since 1954.

What makes the work so strange is its tattered darkness, its apocalyptic strangeness, its broken down seemingly S&M, post-punk assembly. Assemblage, on the East Coast with Rauschenberg and on the West Coast a little bit later and a little bit differently with Bruce Conner and Ed Kienholz, has a certain resonance still in Los Angeles, it's legacy is different than hagiography of other LA artists, particularly West Coast conceptualism, whose games and tactics are more easily digestible and shippable than heavy objects without their makers' egos to promote and defend them. But this resonance is perhaps more due to the space and materials that sculptors have in LA, than to a Kienholzian carryover.

But Mallery's version of assemblage is a more suitable shade for a different time than the sunshine swinging LA of the '60s. Brian Kennon famously refigured Richard Hawkins' pictures of decapitated male models' heads away from Hawkins intentions and towards the misinterpretation as if it were a zombie-heavy metal record cover. Mallery's assemblage oddly fits in the contemporary moment with all the gothy monstrosities of New Yorkers like Banks Violette and Angelenos like Sterling Ruby, or even further afield Germans like Thomas Helbig. The importance of Mallery, and he does seem important, is not necessarily in the impact he had on his time, though it was great enough to carry the myth into the present, but in its prescience, however misinterpreted, in the ominous art of our own moment.

- Andrew Berardini, Senior Editor, West Coast and Worldwide

Posted by [Andrew Berardini](#) on 3/02

> **COMMENTS (0)** [\[add a new comment\]](#)

Copyright © 2006-2007 by ArtSlant, Inc. All images and content remain the © of their rightful owners.