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## Robert Mallery at the Box

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ROBERT MALLARY,  
CORNER PIECE (1962-63)

**You don't have to look far to come** across curious descriptions of the materials and media that go into works of contemporary art. Various combinations of cast petroleum jelly, cast polycaprolactone

thermoplastic, self-lubricating plastic and other exotics make the list of stuff that routinely goes into the work of Matthew Barney. A drawing by Aurel Schmidt, presently included in the Whitney Biennial, is composed of "graphite, colored pencil, acrylic, beer, dirt and blood on paper." And works by the Viennese actionist Otto Muehl routinely boast ingredients that leave you feeling like you might catch something communicable if you spend too long reading the wall label. But I don't think I've ever found a materials list as simultaneously surprising, compelling and pleasing as a phrase that describes what went in a few of the works by Robert Mallery presently on view at the Box: "polyester resin impregnated tuxedos and steel."

If only the syllables lined up a little better, the phrase could be the perfect haiku, describing not only materials, but the lovely and stirring combination of scrappiness, elegance and experimentality that comes up again and again in this terrific show. Born in Toledo, Ohio, in 1917, Mallery fell in love with the work of the Mexican muralists while he was a kid growing up in Berkeley, and later spent more time studying art in Mexico — part of it working with Jose Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros — than he did in the U.S. His career is marked with hopscotches around the country, and teaching stints in the Southwest, the Midwest, and on both coasts.

Early on, Mallery was prominent enough among the assorted "neodadaists," proto-pop artists, nouveau realistes, "funk," "junk," Dau al Set and arte povera artists the world over, who were looking to bring the common and the raw into art-making, to warrant his inclusion in the 1959 *Sixteen Americans* exhibition and the 1961 zeitgeist-defining *Art of Assemblage* exhibition, both at New York's Museum of Modern Art, and the 1960, '62 and '66 sculpture biennials at the Whitney. He also caught the attention of both *Time* and *Life* magazines. But, not unlike his contemporary Lee Bontecou, Mallery dropped out for an extended period, ceasing to exhibit between the mid-'60s and the early '90s, and, unlike Bontecou, did not make a major return to exhibiting before his death in 1997, which left him in obscurity.

This exhibition, organized by Box director Mara McCarthy, follows up on the inclusion of Mallery in the 2008 *Low Life, Slow Life* exhibition curated by artist Paul McCarthy (Mara's dad) at the CCA Wattis Institute in San Francisco, in reintroducing Mallery's oeuvre. And the reintroduction is almost



painfully overdue. On view here are works in materials ranging from those resin-impregnated tuxedos — torn apart and then reconfigured into structures that have both an angelic weightlessness and an intense bodily gravity and gravitas — to simply torn newspapers and envelopes. Regardless of media, Mallery has a way of addressing his found fodder that simultaneously embraces its raw, literal materiality, exploits its semiotic load, converts it into dynamic, abstract form and embeds it with a pathos that ranges from the sweet to the wrenching. His works will hit you in your gut and make you scratch your head, and if you let them, they'll even make your heart ache.

**The Box:** 977 Chung King Rd., L.A.; Wed.-Sat., 10-6, through April 3. (213) 625-1747, [theboxla.com](http://theboxla.com).