The Historical Box – review

Hauser & Wirth, London

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'A danger to women and children' ... detail from Judith Bernstein's Horizontal, in The Historical Box show. Click on image. Photograph: Fredrik Nilsen

In 1974, a large drawing by New York artist Judith Bernstein was banned from an exhibition in Philadelphia. The drawing depicted a screw. A screw? Phew. That's a wood screw to you. Maybe metal. Whatever it was, it bored its way across the paper in a flurry of charcoal, and into the minds of the gallery's director and curator, ever alert to phallic symbols.

The Historical Box
Hauser & Wirth,
London
W1

Until 28 July
Hauser & Wirth

Bernstein's drawing was seen as a danger to women and children, and Philadelphia's mayor, Frank Rizzo, was alarmed by it. It is difficult now to see what the fuss was about, but at the time there were protests, a petition, and for a short while Bernstein became a cause célèbre.

Her drawing, called Horizontal, is now in The Historical Box at Hauser & Wirth's Piccadilly gallery. Curated by Mara McCarthy (daughter of artist Paul McCarthy), who runs a gallery called The Box in LA, the exhibition focuses on dissident political and feminist US artists of the 1960s and 70s. These are artists who have slipped between the cracks, and whose true worth has yet to be gauged.

This is less revisionism than a way of saying that art history is not just about success stories and big names. It is also about the people and ideas that make up a culture, a milieu, a time. In the middle of the gallery stands a cube made of bolted-together paintings, all facing inwards. Scuffed canvas and stretcher-struts face the audience. But there's a door. Inside, you get to see the paintings. Or rather, not see them. They were images once, now all painted over in layers of tarry black.


Wally Hedrick, The War Room

This is a miserable rather than spiritual retreat, the work of Wally Hedrick, infantry veteran of the Korean war and an artist who obliterated his paintings in protest at America's political meddling and later the Vietnam war. Hedrick began his War Room in 1967, and added further layers of black to the canvases to commemorate the Gulf war, then the first war in Iraq. He died in 2003, aged 75.

A rising star in American art during the late 1960s, Hedrick showed alongside Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg at MoMA in New York, but was never much of an art-world player – the west coast artist said he hated New York. Closer to the Beats and hippies of San Francisco, Hedrick had aspirations to make a kind of visual poetry. He saw the act of redacting his work with black as a withdrawal of services to mankind – not that mankind took much notice. This may not have made for a great career at the time (though with the right spin it could have), but it kept Hedrick's morals and dignity intact.

Barbara T Smith's performances had fewer qualms about dignity. She would duct tape naked performers to the wall, conduct religious rites about a sacred pumpkin, and in the performance Feed Me, invite individual audience members to "interact" with her in a private room where she would wait, naked. How they fed her was up to them. All this is tantalising, but the only thing to interact with here are a few photographs, notes and piles of books. Often a parody of the vanities of Californian self-improvement and new age nonsense, Smith's art was provocative and confrontational in a way that art rarely is now.


Robert Mallary, Harpy, 1962

Assemblage artist Robert Mallary withdrew from the art world not for political reasons, but because his health was suffering from the use of polyester resin in his deliciously cruddy assemblages – made from old cardboard, roofing felt and all kinds of downtown

New York dreck. Mallary's art had real power and a genuine nastiness; one work, Harpy, is a winged monster made from ripped-up tuxedoes stretched over a metal frame. It is exhilaratingly horrible.

Such rediscoveries are at the heart of The Historical Box. This is a cabinet of curiosities, rather than the fully-fledged museum show it deserves to be. The three dangling ropes that hang in the gallery, props from a dance performance by Simone Forti, really need the dance itself to come alive. Here, context is everything – and the show needs more of it. The story of west coast performance art in the 70s, and the relationships between art and dance in American art over the past five decades, really need retelling. It is also worth remembering that many of the artists here were wary of the market, and had real political ideals. They believed that art could have social purpose and moral clout. It may not have all been great, but that's not the point. I want more.

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