



# ROBERT MALLARY

THE NEW MEXICO RELIEFS 1957 - 1958

ROBERT MALLARY

THE NEW MEXICO RELIEFS 1957 - 1958

THE MAYOR GALLERY

**THE  
MAYOR  
GALLERY**





# ROBERT MALLARY

THE NEW MEXICO RELIEFS 1957 - 1958

**THE MAYOR GALLERY**

**Contents**

7	Foreword by Wayne Thiebaud
8	Introduction by Dr Catherine Spencer
16	Robert Mallery: A Self-Interview
29	Plates
62	List of Works
64	Biography & Selected Solo Exhibitions
65	Group Exhibitions & Selected Collections



Robert Mallery in his studio, 1964

## Foreword

Robert Mallery introduced me to the community of excellence and its rich traditions. His extraordinary capacity for interrogation of visual works allows formalism its regal position as one of a painters most useful tools for evaluation and self criticism. His beautiful and expressive works continue to inspire.

With respect and love, Wayne Thiebaud

April 2017

## An Introduction by Dr Catherine Spencer

The work of Robert Mallery (1917-1997) falls into two distinct phases. After he became Professor of Fine Art at the University of Massachusetts in 1967, Mallery pioneered the use of computers to design sculptures, and championed the systems thinking expounded by the critic Jack Burnham during the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Mallery's enthusiasm for the streamlined, utopian interconnectivity of cybernetics contrasts markedly with the grungy assemblage sculptures and expressionist paintings that he produced throughout the 1950s and 1960s in the first part of his career, which merged the nihilism of existentialism with the irreverence of Neo-Dada. The dissonance between these areas of experimentation perhaps partly explains Mallery's current place on the margins of post-war art histories.<sup>2</sup> His early practice, however, intersects with a number of significant processes and issues explored by painters and sculptors in the decades after World War II, across America and Europe. Equally, what might initially appear as a variegated oeuvre reveals itself on closer inspection to be held together by a consistent commitment to technological innovation, and to the exploration of materiality.

Mallery spent his childhood in California, before studying in Mexico City during the late 1930s and early 1940s with David Alfaro Siqueiros. He subsequently linked his passion for unorthodox materials to his catalytic encounter with the muralist:

About twenty-five years ago I fell under the spell of Siqueiros. He was advocating a technological revolution in painting and was himself working with an airbrush and synthetic lacquers. Soon I was doing likewise, and in the 1940s was spending much time investigating various areas of technology from the point of view of uncovering some new materials which might be adapted to the special needs of painting and sculpture.<sup>3</sup>

After his return from Mexico, Mallery continued the experimental research into both the physical effects and signifying potentialities of materials that he had begun under Siqueiros. In the early 1950s, while teaching art in Los Angeles, he fashioned installations of hanging sculptures moulded from transparent acetate, which he daubed with luminous pigment before exposing to ultraviolet light in darkened rooms, resulting in eerily glowing environments.<sup>4</sup> This innovation anticipates the sculptures made by Lynda Benglis two decades later in New York, but rather than the 'frozen gesture' effect sought by Benglis, Mallery's main concern seems to have been with movement and dynamism.<sup>5</sup>

During the mid-late 1950s, Mallery held a teaching post at the University of New Mexico, and, while he was there, embarked on a series of relief works. Their thick, viscous swathes of oil paint mixed with sand, grit, plaster, sacking, straw and polyester resins attest to the influence of Siqueiros and other Mexican muralists such as José Clemente Orozco, and to the impact of the New Mexico environment. Mallery 'reacted strongly' to the surrounding landscape, describing how 'the sandy and stone-like surfaces of my paintings and relief panels were influenced by the topography of the area.'<sup>6</sup> Their mode of production also aligns Mallery with other European and American artists such as Alberto Burri, Jean Dubuffet, Jean Fautrier, Cy Twombly, Jay DeFeo and Hassel Smith, all of whom attempted to address the psychological and physical legacies of World War II, and the atomic threat posed by Cold War, by wielding their materials with brute facticity in the creation of often highly abstracted canvases. Mallery's *Abstract Relief* of 1957-8 is composed of densely encrusted black paint layered over a ground of brown sacking, small glimpses of which remain visible in places. Together with the traces of white towards the upper left-hand corner of the canvas, these layers create an effect like glimmers of light breaking feebly through a bank of dark cloud. The pigment, which Mallery mixed with resin, set on the surface and then cracked as it dried and contracted, resulting in a network of fissures that is equally evocative of volcanic terrain. This refusal of identifiable subject matter, and the vertiginous shifts between interpretative possibilities that ensue, generates a disorientating and dislocating viewing experience.

The unstable, bewildering impression created by the reliefs testifies to Mallery's interest in existentialism, which he underlined in a 1963 self-interview for *Location* magazine (reprinted in this catalogue). This piece of writing provides valuable context for reading Mallery's abstract reliefs, as well as the assemblages he made after moving to New York in 1959, when he began teaching at the Pratt Institute. In it, Mallery intriguingly aligns his outlook with that of the 1959 *New Images of Man* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. The curator Peter Selz explicitly connected the battered, distorted and abstracted forms of the figurative paintings and sculptures featured in his show with 'the mechanized barbarism of a time which, notwithstanding Buchenwald and Hiroshima, is engaged in the preparation of even greater violence in which the globe is to be the target.'<sup>7</sup> Although, as Jo Applin notes, *New Images of Man* 'received terrible reviews from critics who claimed that its post-war existentialist humanism was out of step with the current artistic and political climate,' Mallery evidently identified closely with the intellectual and artistic context that Selz outlined.<sup>8</sup>

For Mallery, however, the challenge was to convey the experience of ‘contemporary man as assailed, harassed, confused, frustrated, befuddled, desperate and hysterical ... lonely, isolated, afraid and alienated’ through abstraction, form and materiality, rather than figuration.<sup>9</sup> During the same year as *New Images of Man*, six of Mallery’s works featured in another show at the Museum of Modern Art, entitled *Sixteen Americans*, alongside artists including DeFeo, Robert Rauschenberg, and Richard Stankiewicz. In a statement penned for the accompanying catalogue, Mallery asserted:

I conceive of an image as a monolith, an actual object in an actual place, aggressive in the factuality of its physical and sculptural attributes of surface, shape and substance. But it is an object which is magically dissolving and forming and in a state of tension with its pictorial attributes of seeming, intimating and conjuring.<sup>10</sup>

Here, Mallery stresses the ‘aggressive’ facticity of his works, which he also identifies as occupying an ambiguous state between painting and sculpture, demonstrating how he understood their material properties to be closely interlinked with their psychological and phenomenological effects. Moreover, Mallery emphasises process rather than end point, presenting his works as indeterminate ‘objects’ in flux, evidently intended to trouble and provoke their audience.

The use of sacking in *Abstract Relief* and other works like *Untitled Abstract* (1957-8), in which sections of flesh-coloured fibres emerge from a rupture between the creamy sections of white plaster that fill the wooden frame, has both formal and conceptual correlations with the *Sacchi* developed during this decade by the Italian artist Alberto Burri. There are also affinities with DeFeo’s heavily built-up paintings, notably *The Jewel* (1959) in which cracks in the impasto assume bodily connotations of wounds and rents, and with the French artist Jean Fautrier’s *Hostage* series (1943-1945). These images, which Fautrier constructed from a combination of paint, cloth, plaster and paper, contain the traces of allusions to heads and orifices, the amorphous forms of which register the violent erasures of embodied subjects during the war.<sup>11</sup> Mallery’s comparable exploitation of ‘aggressive’ facticity, and his own vivid allusion to the ‘pictorial “skin”’ of his works, entails that his reliefs would not have seemed out of place in the constellation of artists that the French critic Michel Tapié attempted to bring together in his 1952 book *Art autre*, in connection with the notion of *art informel*.<sup>12</sup> This term has been variously translated into English as both ‘informal’ and ‘formless’, and it loosely encompasses many artists

who rejected the idealism of the inter-war avant-garde, notably the positivism of constructivism, and instead created abstract works that were intensely visceral and anxious.<sup>13</sup>

There are strong connections between Mallery’s reliefs and Dubuffet’s practice, particularly several wooden panels covered in a patina suggestive of marks etched onto a surface, such as *Bacchannale* and *Amerigo* (both 1958). The formal correlation between these scarred cross-hatchings, and the design that Mallery physically inscribed into the stone façade of his *Abstract Sculpture* (1957-8), indicates that they can be read as carvings or graffiti. Graffiti was one of the forms of expression that Dubuffet prized as an example of *Art brut*, which he identified as work by people who had escaped the ‘conditioning impulse’ of established culture, and which ensued from ‘truly original states of mind.’<sup>14</sup> The lines in *Bacchannale* and *Amerigo* are abstract, and refuse to signify coherently, but they nonetheless register an attempt to communicate, although it remains ambiguous as to whether the intended message – the cut, score or scratch – is constructive or destructive.

For Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, the graffiti trace relates to the concept of the ‘formless’ that they track through the writings of the dissident Surrealist Georges Bataille. Bois and Krauss observe that, according to Bataille, graffiti ‘ties together the first marks squiggled on the cave walls from twenty-five thousand years ago and the random traces made by contemporary children as they drag their dirty fingers along walls or doors for the destructive pleasure of leaving a mark.’<sup>15</sup> As well as registering a Surrealist interest in the unconscious drives and destructive impulses of the psyche, this perceived connection between graffiti and pre-historic civilization meant that it became a particularly charged signifier for artists working under the shadow of the atomic bomb, in that was understood to express the atavistic, primitivist fear that modern life would be reduced to rubble, while also – more positively – offering evidence of enduring creativity that could support a beleaguered post-war humanism.<sup>16</sup> The duality of the marks that appear in Mallery’s reliefs from the late 1950s exemplify the oscillation between visions of destruction and the initiation of recuperation that characterizes his work, together with that of artists such as Dubuffet, Burri, and Fautrier. As Paul Schimmel writes, ‘for these artists, destruction was not just a nihilistic act, and the void was not just a black hole of despair and anxiety: destruction was in a dialectical relationship with creation, and the void was a space of potentiality. From the embers of the destruction of the picture plane emerged a medium reborn that powerfully registered the complex experience of living in a world perched on the brink of self-annihilation.’<sup>17</sup>

The tensions that energise Mallery’s reliefs would go on to inflect the assemblage sculptures that he made after 1959, which led to his characterisation as an ‘Abstract-Realist’ by the critic Thomas B. Hess.<sup>18</sup> In 1961, Mallery’s assemblages were included in *The Art of Assemblage* at MoMA, which contextualised the Neo-Dada phenomenon in relation to Cubism, Dada and Surrealism.<sup>19</sup> Mallery later reflected that his assemblages emerged as a response to New York. He felt on arrival in the city that he needed to work out ‘a strategy of accommodation’ with the urban environment, which ‘involved assimilating as much of the city directly into my work as I could. What I assimilated were images suggested by old walls, encrusted and peeling paint, and the erosion and fractured configurations of sidewalks and streets. I began to collect and take back to the studio bits and pieces taken from the City itself.’<sup>20</sup> While there are links with what Lawrence Alloway referred to as the ‘comedy of waste’ that permeated ‘Junk Culture,’ Mallery’s assemblages are arguably more violent and discomforting than such a characterisation implies.<sup>21</sup> Although for one reviewer, Mallery’s recycling of waste materials in his increasingly large-scale wall assemblages evoked ‘a new life is growing out of decay,’ this was not the only response they attracted.<sup>22</sup> For Harris Rosenstein, the materials that formed the basis of Mallery’s assemblages, and for a series of bronze castings he later made from these works – ‘the trampled corrugated board box, the twisted, cast-off tuxedos, the crumpled paper towels that carry the imprint of clenched fists’ – were all ‘part of a detritus of violence.’<sup>23</sup>

Although Mallery moved away from the abstract reliefs that he produced in New Mexico relatively quickly, the concerns they exhibit with the physical and psychological experience of violence in relation to the aftermath of world war, and the spectre of destruction raised by the Cold War, are constant aspects of the paintings, reliefs and sculptures he produced in the 1950s and 1960s. The facility with which Mallery addressed these issues through his use of materials forms a compelling instance of wider compulsions surging through post-war artistic production in America and Europe.

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See the essays collected in Jack Burnham, *Dissolve into Comprehension: Writings and Interviews, 1964-2004*, ed. Melissa Ragain (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2015). See also Robert Mallery, ‘Notes on Jack Burnham’s Concepts of a Software Exhibition,’ *Leonardo* 3, no. 2 (April 1970): 189-190.

<sup>2</sup> In recent years, Mallery’s work has however been included in a number of important exhibitions, including *Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949-1962* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2012) and *The Historical Box* at Hauser and Wirth (2011-12).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Mallery, ‘The Air of Art Is Poisoned,’ *ARTNews* 62, no. 3 (October 1963): 34-37; 60-61, 34.

<sup>4</sup> ‘TV Sculpture Shown Here for First Time,’ *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 1952, G3; and ‘Color in the Dark,’ *Time* 59, no. 10 (March 1952): 84.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Pincus-Witten, ‘Lynda Benglis: The Frozen Gesture,’ *Artforum* XIII, no. 3 (1974): 54-59.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Mallery, in ‘An Interview with Robert Mallery,’ *Artforum* II, no. 7 (1964): 37-38, 37.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Selz, *New Images of Man*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Jo Applin, *Eccentric Objects: Rethinking Sculpture in 1960s America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 106.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Mallery, ‘Robert Mallery: A Self Interview,’ *Location* 1, no. 1 (1963): 58-66, 61.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Mallery in Dorothy C. Miller ed., *Sixteen Americans*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 47-49, 47.

<sup>11</sup> During the war, Fautrier took refuge in an asylum in the French countryside, from which he claimed to hear the screams of victims being tortured and killed by the Gestapo.

<sup>12</sup> Mallery in Miller ed., *Sixteen Americans*, 47.

<sup>13</sup> For an account of both *art informel* and Fautrier’s reception in America, see Curtis L. Carter, ‘Fautrier’s Fortunes: A Paradox of Success and Failure,’ in Curtis L. Carter and Karen K. Butler eds., *Jean Fautrier 1898-1964*, exh. cat. (Cambridge, MA: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, 2002), 17-33.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Dubuffet, ‘Let’s Make Room for Some Uncivic Behaviour’ (1967), reprinted in Valérie da Costa and Fabrice Hergott eds., *Jean Dubuffet: Works, Writings and Interviews* (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2006), 103-108, 103.

<sup>15</sup> Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (Cambridge, MA and London The MIT Press, 1997), 150.



<sup>16</sup> Mallery notes his humanist leanings in the *Location* interview; the critic Harris Rosenstein also observed Mallery's interest in humanism. Harris Rosenstein, 'Ideologue in Lotosland,' *ARTNews* 65, no. 6 (October 1966): 36-38; 72, 38.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Schimmel, 'Painting the Void,' in Paul Schimmel ed., *Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949-1962*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012), 188-203, 188.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas B. Hess, 'U. S. Sculpture: Some Recent Directions,' *Portfolio* (including *ARTNews Annual*), no. 1 (1959): 112-127; 146-152, 151. This article was written in connection with the exhibition *Recent Sculpture U. S. A.* at MoMA in 1959, in which Mallery's 1957 work *In Flight* was included.

<sup>19</sup> See William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1961).

<sup>20</sup> Robert Mallery, in Paul Mocsanyi, *Contemporary Urban Visions*, exh. cat. (New York: New School Art Center, 1966), 11.

<sup>21</sup> Lawrence Alloway, 'Junk Culture' (1961), reprinted in Richard Kalina ed., *Imagining the Present: Context, Content, and the Role of the Critic* (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2006), 77-80, 80.

<sup>22</sup> 'Art Crashes through the Junk Pile,' *Life International* 31, no. 12 (December 4, 1961): 55-66, 61.

<sup>23</sup> Rosenstein, 'Ideologue in Lotosland,' 38.

Dr Catherine Spencer is a Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Art at the University of St Andrews. Her research and teaching focuses on performance art after 1960 and abstract painting during the post-1945 period. She has published essays on artists including Allan Kaprow, Jay DeFeo, Prunella Clough and Lea Lublin in publications such as *Art History*, *British Art Studies*, *Tate Papers* and the *Oxford Art Journal*. Together with Jo Applin and Amy Tobin she is the editor of the book *London Art Worlds: Mobile, Contingent and Ephemeral Environments, 1960-1980*, which will be published by Penn State University Press in 2018. She also regularly writes exhibition reviews for publications including *Art Monthly*.

## Robert Mallary: A Self-Interview

Q: *Why do you use the method of the self-interview?*

A: Because I can ask myself the questions I want to be asked.

Q: *You are continuing to work on a series of figures using old tuxedoes, tailcoats and the like?*

A: Yes, I buy these tuxedoes thirty and forty at a time in lower Manhattan, impregnate them with plastic, shape them, and they become hard and permanent. Five or six tuxedoes may be used in a single work. Some I use pretty much as is; others I rip apart and shred so that they become almost unrecognisable and only a button or lapel identifies the material as a piece of clothing. Frequently the pants and the jacket are scrambled: the pants leg becomes an arm or vice-versa. This tuxedo series evolved out of my previous work with rags, burlap and cardboard which I also impregnated, shaped and hardened.

Q: *You are doing a whole group of them?*

A: I have in mind a group of related works, something on the order of an 'environment'. But this word is not really adequate because what I have seen of these Neo-Nada displays has been too improvised and unprofessional for my taste. I am thinking of twenty, thirty or forty figures, each complete in itself but all working together in theme. Their cohesion would

be tightened further by designing walls, partitions, platforms, stands etc. I visualise an antiseptic precision and coldness playing against the humanly frantic and dilapidated tuxedo figures. This binding and integrating environment would suggest the out-scale, impersonal organisation of contemporary machine civilisation. Each tuxedo figure would be an entity, a complete and autonomous work, but would also be a part of - in effect, 'enslaved by'- the larger ensemble.

Q: *Have you made any of the figures yet?*

A: A few, including Fat Man, Suicide, Wastrel and Blue Angel. These were the first works I made using plastic impregnated tailcoats and tuxedoes; they were exhibited in 1961. Since then I have made others, including Crucifix, The Juggler and Cliff Hanger. I have also been making drawings and miniature jottings in a small black notebook.

Q: *Didn't you make some lithographs recently?*

A: Yes. Last summer I made some prints at the Tamarind Workshop in Los Angeles. Three or four of these might be considered studies for this project. One is a suspended, or hanging, figure; another, a sprawled figure; another, a blasted figure. Just before leaving for Los Angeles I made a series of drawings in which I found myself scrawling notations – for instance, 'he took a nose dive', 'caught in a trap', his back against

the wall', and 'he painted himself into a corner.' It is amazing how pungent and graphic these phrases are and how many of them there are. I may eventually adapt some of these as titles, but so far they only identify themes. In the black notebook I have also listed about a hundred words which are graphic and also provide me with ideas. Generally, I do not like an overly explicit title, but the blatancy, banality and vulgarity of many of these phrases have a lot to do with the series I have in mind. An unlikely combination of bombast and subtlety is something I especially relish.

Q: *Do these titles summarise the theme of the group of figures? Can you summarise the theme?*

A: Broadly speaking it has to do with the 'human condition', the 'image of man'- those themes treated in the so-called 'theatre of the absurd'. It has to do with contemporary man as assailed, harassed, confused, frustrated, befuddled, desperate and hysterical. As lonely, isolated, afraid and alienated. As tragic, comic and tragi-comic. The attitude is ironic, sardonic, sarcastic and just plain hateful. The figures are smashed, torn, shredded, twisted, lacerated, maimed and broken. They are being clouted, clobbered, jabbed, manacled, tripped, crushed, run over, caught in traps, in doorways, in machinery and are taking prat-falls. They are involved in vague happenings, mysterious projects and rush about madly in pursuit of uncertain goals. The images are those of shock, crisis, peril, the 'extreme

situation' and the absurd.

Q: *Are these figures realistic, partly realistic? Are there any abstract works?*

A: Some of the figures will be quite 'realistic', while others will be mangled to an almost complete 'abstraction'. Some will have 'heads' and others only the vaguest metaphorical suggestion of a head, or none at all. Each piece will have its own level of abstraction or even combine different levels. These multiple levels will have to be disentangled and interpreted, taking each work individually. The spectator will not be encouraged to make prior assumptions as he moves from piece to piece.

Q: *Won't the tuxedoes add a flavour of realism to every piece...?*

A: This seems likely. But they will also play a multiple and complex role which should result in a prevailing atmosphere of ambiguity. In the first place, the tuxedoes and tailcoats are seen as fabric and clothing with their customary associations; this provides the flavour and realism you mention. In the second place, they suggest the human body itself, even if there is no human body, or even any solid substance, within them. The human presence is evoked through stance, posture, gesture and movement. Especially important here are the long-established and conventionalised idioms of movement



Untitled, 1965, Cast bronze, 16 x 16 x 5 in, 40.7 x 40.7 x 12.7 cm

as they derive from painting, sculpture, slapstick comedy, vaudeville, the dance, the animated cartoon, the theatre, puppetry and pantomime. The tailcoats and tuxedos are the vehicles of gesture; they become metaphorical substitutes for a body which seems to have been strangely sucked out of its own skin and immaterialised. In the third place, the tuxedos, when they are ripped open, when their inner structure is laid bare, offer also metaphorical references to human anatomy, suggesting skin, tendons, nerves, bones, organs – even fluids. A fourth possibility is that the tuxedo is seen as ‘pure’ energy or; life force unrelated to any specific gesture or body, in the more abstract pieces. A fifth possibility is that the tuxedo material is seen as ‘passive’ and dead substance, that it seems to have little or no energy of its own but rather has been shaped by forces acting on it during its manufacture, in the present, or both. Invisible pressures bloat it from within or buffet it from without. And finally the tuxedos, combined with the impregnating plastic material, are the sculptural medium itself which I use as others use clay, plaster, bronze or what have you. By the time all of these functions and roles are combined in a single work you have the multiple metaphors, the ‘prevailing ambiguity’.

Q: *Aren't you trying to get a lot of mileage out of tuxedos?*

A: I grant you your scepticism; there are hazards and pitfalls. Not every combination of these multiple functions is workable. The structure of metaphor can sag and even collapse altogether.

Q: *In this group of figures you seem to be presenting a 'world view'. Is this personal, or rooted in the objective situation, or both?*

A: Possibly I am, among other things, working out personal aggressions, sadomasochistic impulses and the like. Certainly as an artist I am always ‘expressing myself’, and I do take a dim view of humanity: my attitude is more than slightly misanthropic. But despite all this I still believe that the objective situation, the world, gives one amply cause of anxiety, and that my anxiety is more nearly normal than neurotic. First there is the threat of thermonuclear war, although this is only the most pressing of a group of inter-related threats. The question is: will we destroy ourselves? Is human intelligence inevitably self-destructive? Will the species prove to be an evolutionary dead-end? In making this series of figures I am not pretending to discuss or answer questions of this sort; as an artist working within the limitations of the plastic arts I can only register my anxiety and join others in sounding an alarm.

Q: *You sincerely believe the obliteration of mankind is a real possibility?*

A: Yes.

Q: *Further comment?*

A: Jaspers writes that what is called for is nothing less than deep and profound changes within man himself, beginning first of all within each of us as individuals. I confess I do not find his prescription very reassuring. If the prospects for peace are contingent upon sudden and profound changes within man, the prognosis is pretty grim. We have to work with what we've got – man as he is now with his glaring defects and limitations. Also, any exacerbation of the crises is as apt to bring out what is worst in man as what is best.

Q: *Do you think you have any answers?*

A: I have many opinions, but practically nothing in the way of answers. What I do have are questions.

Q: *For instance...?*

A: Why don't the United States and the Soviet Union join forces to prevent other countries from entering the ‘nuclear club’? China for instance has loudly advertised its belligerence and recklessness. Why permit China to develop nuclear bombs? Why wait until the process of ‘decontaminating’ China and other emerging nuclear powers would itself lead to war? Aren't the issues which now divide Russia and the U.S. of very slight



importance measured against the developing threat of both countries?

Q: *What do you think keeps the two countries apart?*

A: Raw power- the U.S. and Russia are the two great centres of power-fanatics on both sides (left sectarianists, neo-Stalinists as opposed to our own Birchites), and inability to identify common dangers.

Q: *Would you rather be red than dead?*

A: The kind of rapprochement I speak of would not require that we 'go Communist' though it might require that we modify our anti-Communism or express it in regulated ways. Personally I would very probably rather be dead than red; the prospect of trying to create authentic art under a totalitarian regime is repugnant to me. But I do not have the right to make this decision even for my own children, let alone someone else's. Nor do the U.S. and the Soviet Union have the right to decide whether neutral peoples are going to be red or dead, or whether all living things are going to be red or dead. To wipe out all life on earth because of this issue, or any other strictly contemporary concern, would be the most abominable immorality ever conceivable. This is one point on which I am myself fanatical.

Q: *Do these ideas in some sense represent the 'content' of your present work?*

A: But for these preoccupations, I doubt that my current work would have its specific 'look'; in this sense, yes. The fact remains that the plastic arts are a poor vehicle for arguing abstract ideas. What painting and sculpture can do is help generate a ferment out of which ideas, and eventually action, can arise.

Q: *Are you in any sense an artist with a message, perhaps a mutant Social Realist?*

A: If 'in some sense' .... But there is in this work no specific ideological position. There is, rather, an attitude, a broad viewpoint, perhaps ultimately a conception of the nature of man. The focus is on evil, the evil side of man, because there is the root of our difficulties. The same concern can be traced back in Western art through generations of artists: Bosch, Grünewald, Goya, Daumier, Lautrec, Rouault, Grosz, Picasso, Orozco and many others.

Q: *Are you a 'humanist'?*

A: What do you mean by 'humanist'?

Q: *Do your preoccupations affiliate you with any school or tendency within contemporary art?*

A: Several years ago there was an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art called 'The New Image of Man'. Artists of diverse persuasions were represented

including Willem de Kooning, who is commonly thought of as an Abstract Expressionist, and Dubuffet, who is commonly thought of in connection with art brut. All of these artists had the human image in common and all of them made this image monstrous- in varying degrees and in a great variety of ways. It was as if none of them could think of contemporary man as heroic, beautiful, noble or good- as human subjects were depicted in Greek sculpture or Renaissance painting. I would say I fall within this very broad 'image of man' category, but that I am trying both to expand and intensify the image.

Q: *Might it not be better if you laid more emphasis on the positive side of human nature, on man's capacity for good, rational and purposive action?*

A: You have a point. But insufficient attention has been given to the buried beauty within ugliness. The focus has been largely on the obvious ugliness. I have already suggested that there is an implied optimism when an artist can continue to work at all in the shadow of the mushroom cloud. Beyond this, when a contemporary artist or sculptor recasts the human image he generally tries to give the new contours and proportions a beauty of their own- a new and unique beauty. He restructures, re-measures and re-proportions the lines, planes, masses and intervals. The new structure can be beautiful in a new way.

My Sycorax, may serve as an example. The lengths of the legs, their mass, their degree of separation, the slight angle at which they converge as they move up, the slightly varying angle of each leg, the point at which the body starts, where it ends at the top, the divisions formed by these- all this and more involves ratio-ing and re-proportioning in a manner which I hope is right. The really 'ugly' aspect of Sycorax has to do with the bulbous black forms erupting out of the central mass like proliferating tumours. But even these are ratio-ed as regards their sizes and intervals and 'calculated' as regards their wholeness or brokenness and their varying degrees of emergence from the central mass.

Q: *It would appear then that you place great emphasis on formal values?*

A: Finally they are almost everything.

Q: *What is gained by presenting the same kind of image again and again?*

A: Nowadays we artists are apt to be criticised if we stick with an image or a problem, three or four years. It becomes 'old hat'. But art requires time and constant recapitulation to build up any given style to the point of its most perfect statement.

Q: *Don't you ever get a bit tired yourself...?*

A: I have to live with these figures more than anyone else. The prevailing mood can depress me; occasionally I am tempted by other projects. But the tuxedos and tailcoats are I believe a highly effective vehicle for projecting an existentialist vision of the utmost violence and intensity. I would like to see to what heights or depths I can carry it. I would like to develop an iconography of absurdity anxiety just as, in earlier times, there was an iconography of Christian belief.

Q: *Are you an existentialist?*

A: Existentialism in the arts is more a prevailing mood or attitude than a philosophy, like romanticism a hundred years ago. Let us just say that I am influenced by existentialist ideas, particularly its emphasis on the exercise of free will in human affairs.

Q: *Your theme would almost seem to be 'man as victim'. How do you reconcile this with the existential idea of man as self-determining and free?*

A: There is the well-known existential image of man as 'thrown' into a bleak and indifferent universe- his primary victimhood, as it were. But within limiting conditions there are possibilities for freedom. As for my tuxedo figures, I would say most of them are resisting the posture into which they have been thrown. They are 'fighting back'.

Q: *Have you thought that perhaps you should give up art and do something more effective about the bomb?*

A: If this were my only goal, I'm not sure I would be making sculpture. Perhaps I would not be working within the visual arts at all. Perhaps I would become an organiser, a terrorist, a passive resister. But primarily I am an artist pursuing the goals of an artist and seeking the spectator who can 'read' or is 'tuned to' my work. I am more interested in the quality than the quantity of my audience. If the present series should also have an effective propaganda impact, I certainly would not object. But this would be a by-product, a bonus. The primary intention is to make art.

Q: *Do you believe that all art is equal, but that some is more equal?*

A: Yes, I believe that there is a hierarchy in the arts, and in 'serious' and 'authentic' art. But the absurd and the comic are not necessarily trivial. In any case, sculpture can use a bit of triviality; it has become stuffy, pretentious and remote. I plan to do some pieces which are little more than 'gags', works which are whimsical, trivial, light-weight in every way. They might be called 'occasional' or 'casual' sculpture. More or less like party decorations. They are expendable. At the other pole are uncompromisingly 'serious' works. In between is the much larger and more important area in which I pursue ambiguity. Here are located all kinds of combinations of the ridiculous and the serious, of the funny and not so

funny. Here I intend that the spectator be confused as to what I am about, whether I mean or not, whether I am facetious or not, whether I am involved with parody or not. Here again I would like to keep the viewer off balance, force him to confront each work afresh, on its own terms. Once again this has to do with the existentialist idea of focusing on the immediate and concrete rather than the generic and the abstract.

Q: *Is expendability a sufficient description of your idea of 'occasional' sculpture?*

A: No, but it is an important aspect of it. In the ratio of scale to weight conventional sculpture is likely to be extremely heavy- I mean physically- if only because it has been made in a traditional material such as marble or bronze. There is also apt to be a substantial investment of time, money and material in the making of the work. It is unlikely that a sculptor will spend months or years elaborating a trivial or humorous subject, this would in fact be highly inappropriate- a kind of economics is involved. But an occasional sculpture can be light-weight in every sense of the word without our feeling that something is amiss, this informality and casualness relates it to folk sculpture – to the dummy, the effigy, the scarecrow, to dolls, manikins and costumery. One thinks of the Chinese paper dragons or the larger-than-life-size paper and frame figures in Mexican fiestas which are finally blown to bits with firecrackers. I can work extremely rapidly if I resolve



Untitled (Standing figure), 1965, Cast bronze, 26 ½ x 9 x 4 in, 67 x 23 x 10.2 cm

beforehand that I am not going to let myself be bogged down with the complications of formal elaboration and if I plan the work with this in mind.

Q: *What would be an example of a ‘serious’ piece?*

A: The Crucifix I would say. It grew out of a previous work, The Juggler, which also has outstretched arms. I realised that the theme was very natural for my medium; I stretch and nail these tuxedos to the wall and the analogy to what happened on the cross is obvious. At first I postponed doing the piece because I thought of it as a sort of culminating work to end the series. This would have put it about two years hence. Then Franz Kline died. I attended his funeral that Wednesday morning and returned to the studio, moved and upset. Many of Kline’s friends, I realise, did not approve of the High Episcopal funeral- it seemed out of keeping with his character. But I was affected by the ceremony. For one thing, I was impressed by the impersonality of it; Kline’s name, as I recall, was not mentioned. Anyway, I returned to the studio and had to be active. I had to do something. I decided to make the crucifix then and there, much as Klein might have made one of his black-and-white action paintings – all at once. I tore up and pinned together five or six tailcoats, doused the whole bundle in plastic and proceeded to separate and stretch out the pieces and nail them to the wall. The image was basically ‘set’ in four hours. But I am still tinkering with details, technical and otherwise.

Q: *Is it a kind of ‘in memoriam’?*

A: That was not the original intent, but I think of it now somewhat in that way. I’m glad I responded to the impulse to make it at that moment; I believe it is better than it would otherwise have been. Kline is an influence in my current work: I would like to match the sweep and power of his giant black strokes in my taut fabrics.

Q: *Would you like to see the Crucifix installed in a church?*

A: The prospect is unlikely. It would seem to be fashioned for some churlish, coarse-grained, hair-shirted, neo-primitive Christian sect which of course doesn’t exist. This is a ‘hard’ image.

Q: *What do you mean ‘hard image’?*

A: I would like to believe it is a powerful and poignant comment on death and the resurrection. The tattered and shredded fabrics certainly suggest decay and disintegration. The folds hang in the quiet suspension of death. But working against these are the energetic diagonals, the taut contours and fast-moving surfaces. For me at least these suggest a quickening of new life- the resurrection.

Q: *A critic has made references to the unorthodox ways in which you install your work. Are they unorthodox?*

A: Perhaps. But after Calder and his mobiles why should it be strange to suspend a piece such as Fat Man or The Parachutist? For the last two years I have also been making works which lean against the wall instead of hanging on it or standing free of it. I have been making others which touch the wall and the floor, and yet others which touch two walls and a floor (or the ceiling). These I call ‘corner sculpture’. Viewed historically sculpture has always related to the architectonic scheme; today we are simply trying to renew this relationship in fresh, contemporary ways. I am also very interested in the idea and function of the pedestal, or stand, and how this relates to the sculpture itself, both as it can be assimilated more tightly into the total image and as it be made to disassociate itself from the total image. If a tuxedo figure is climbing over a partition, the partition is also a kind of pedestal. Or if a figure is suspended from a rope...

Q: *You have been criticised, too, for your use of junk and unorthodox techniques...?*

A: I think many of the new materials and mediums have proved and are proving their worth. Welding, for instance, is now quite respectable. I have been using polyester resin since 1947, and it is still my mainstay technically. I use it for practically everything: as a glue, as the binding vehicle in my cement-like and clay-like mixtures, as a painting medium and as a varnish. I am also using a variety of other plastics and accessory

materials. These materials and techniques will eventually seem quite orthodox.

Q: *You have been grouped with the Neo-Dadaists, with the ‘Assemblagists’, with the junk sculptors, etc. Do you agree with any of these designations?*

A: I relate to all of them, but do not think I fall entirely into any one category. Like most artists I resent being pushed into any niche or category. I would like to remain mobile, to change direction many more times, if I feel there is reason to do so, before my career is finished. The contemporary artist can have multiple careers if he chooses, either concurrently or successively; it is part of the climate of freedom. My interest in found-objects, junk and the like, might seem to indicate that I have no potential in bronze-casting. And yet for me bronze-casting could be just another degree of the hardening of these more ephemeral materials, another transmutation. I would be very interested in seeing some of the tuxedo figures in bronze. In fact, I plan to try it.

Q: *Would you do this casting yourself?*

A: I would hope to. I don’t like to depend on craftsmen or technicians; I want to hold all the reins myself. During this trip I looked in on a group of Bay Area sculptors who have set up their own foundry facilities. Their ‘do-it-yourself’ approach appeals to me very much.



Q: *What do you think is happening in sculpture? Can you see an over-all direction?*

A: I think the 'breakthrough' area is now in sculpture rather than painting. If such is actually the case, it's amazing because painting has been dominant for at least four hundred years. In contrast sculpture has been a minor art form. It is interesting to note how many painters have moved over into sculpture recently and how many young artists are choosing this field over painting. The explanation is not money, because sculpture is just as difficult to sell as it always has been. Pieces of sculpture are still cussedly inconvenient and awkward as objects, particularly if the scale is large.

Q: *What do you take to be the explanation?*

A: Partly the crisis in painting. Painting has been in a state of high ferment for many years; perhaps it is now enervated, spent. There is still much noisy commotion in painting, but much of it is hot air and pretence. 'Hard Edge', the 'New Figure', the 'New Realism', - for the most part these are repeat performances, recombinations and small variances of venerable themes. Sculpture has been undergoing a drastic technological revolution while painting has not; this in itself has opened up many new possibilities.

Q: *For instance?*

A: The subject is a large one. Briefly, I feel there is a need for what might be called an 'omnibus technique' in sculpture. Too many sculptors are exploiting a single technical device and their style derives from these devices. A larger, rounded arsenal of technical methods combining, for example, found-objects, conventional materials, plastics, welding, casting, forging, compression, sand blasting, etc. is needed. But there is a big difficulty -cost. Most sculptors can afford to 'tool up' only for a limited technical operation and this restricts them.

Q: *What do you think distinguishes you from some of the younger artists- for instance, the 'Pop' artists?*

A: Their coolness and my anxiety.



Robert Rauschenberg at the New York World's Fair installing *Cliffhangers*, 1964

PLATES

Untitled (Abstract sculpture)  
1957-1958  
Mixed media: Found materials bound with plaster with a wooden frame  
29 ½ x 26 x 3 ½ in  
75 x 66 x 9 cm





Suspended forms  
1957  
Mixed media: Found materials and resin with an artist made wooden frame  
18 x 19 ½ x 2 ½ in  
45.8 x 49.5 x 6.4 cm





Seascape  
1957-1958  
Mixed media: Resin and sand mix on wooden panel with an artist made wooden frame  
25 ½ x 18 ½ x 2 ¼ in  
64.5 x 47 x 5.5 cm





Untitled (Abstract relief)  
1957-1958  
Mixed media: Resin mix and pigment with an artist made wooden frame  
43  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 31  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 2  $\frac{3}{4}$  in  
111 x 78.8 x 7 cm





Untitled (Abstract relief)  
1957-1958  
Mixed media: Resin mix and pigment with an artist made wooden frame  
46 x 31 ½ x 2 ¼ in  
117 x 80 x 5.7 cm





Untitled (Abstract relief)  
1958  
Mixed media: Resin mix and pigment with an artist made wooden frame  
61 x 46 ¼ x 2 in  
155 x 117.5 x 5 cm  
Inscribed on reverse: R. Mallery, Alburquerque NM, June 1958





Bacchannale  
1958  
Mixed media: Resin mix and pigment with an artist made wooden frame  
39 ½ x 74 x 2 ½ in  
100.4 x 188 x 6.4 cm







Amerigo  
1958  
Mixed media: Resin mix and pigment on wooden board  
69 ¾ x 47 x 4 in  
177 x 119 x 10 cm  
Inscribed on reverse: Robert Mallery, New Mexico 1958





Untitled (Abstract relief)  
1957-1958  
Mixed media: Found materials, resin mix and pigment on wooden board  
36 ½ x 70 ¾ x 1 ¼ in  
92.8 x 179.7 x 3.2 cm







Untitled (Abstract relief)  
 1957-1958  
 Mixed media: Found materials, resin and pigment mixture on board  
 44 ½ x 23 ½ x 2 in  
 113 x 59.7 x 5 cm





The White Whale  
1958  
Mixed media: Resin mix and sand on fibrous board  
44 x 80 x 1 in  
111.8 x 203.2 x 2.5 cm  
Inscribed on reverse: Mallary NM 1958







Untitled (Abstract Relief)  
 1957-1958  
 Mixed media: Resin mix on fibrous board  
 43 ½ x 56 ½ x 2 ½ in  
 110.5 x 143.5 x 6.4 cm





The Warrior  
1957-1958  
Mixed media: Resin and sand mix on particulate board with artist made wooden frame  
48 ¾ x 41 ¾ x 2 ¼ in  
123.8 x 106 x 5.7 cm



List of works

Pg 31	Untitled (Abstract sculpture) 1957-1958 Mixed media: Found materials bound with plaster with a wooden frame 29 ½ x 26 x 3 ½ in 75 x 66 x 9 cm	Pg 39	Untitled (Abstract relief) 1957-1958 Mixed media: Resin mix and pigment with an artist made wooden frame 46 x 31 ½ x 2 ¼ in 117 x 80 x 5.7 cm	Pg 49	Untitled (Abstract relief) 1957-1958 Mixed media: Found materials, resin mix and pigment on wooden board 36 ½ x 70 ¾ x 1 ¼ in 92.8 x 179.7 x 3.2 cm	Pg 61	The Warrior 1957-1958 Mixed media: Resin and sand mix on particulate board with artist made wooden frame 48 ¾ x 41 ¾ x 2 ¼ in 123.8 x 106 x 5.7 cm
Pg 33	Suspended forms 1957 Mixed media: Found materials and resin with an artist made wooden frame 18 x 19 ½ x 2 ½ in 45.8 x 49.5 x 6.4 cm	Pg 41	Untitled (Abstract relief) 1958 Mixed media: Resin mix and pigment with an artist made wooden frame 61 x 46 ¼ x 2 in 155 x 117.5 x 5 cm Inscribed on reverse: R. Mallery, Alburquerque NM, June 1958	Pg 53	Untitled (Abstract relief) 1957-1958 Mixed media: Found materials, resin and pigment mixture on board 44 ½ x 23 ½ x 2 in 113 x 59.7 x 5 cm		
Pg 35	Seascape 1957-1958 Mixed media: Resin and sand mix on wooden panel with an artist made wooden frame 25 ½ x 18 ½ x 2 ¼ in 64.5 x 47 x 5.5 cm	Pg 43	Bacchannale 1958 Mixed media: Resin mix and pigment with an artist made wooden frame 39 ½ x 74 x 2 ½ in 100.4 x 188 x 6.4 cm	Pg 55	The White Whale 1958 Mixed media: Resin mix and sand on fibrous board 44 x 80 x 1 in 111.8 x 203.2 x 2.5 cm Inscribed on reverse: Mallery NM1958		
Pg 37	Untitled (Abstract relief) 1957-1958 Mixed media: Resin mix and pigment with an artist made wooden frame 43 ¾ x 31 ¾ x 2 ¾ in 111 x 78.8 x 7 cm	Pg 47	Amerigo 1958 Mixed media: Resin mix and pigment on wooden board 69 ¾ x 47 x 4 in 177 x 119 x 10 cm Inscribed on reverse: Robert Mallery, New Mexico 1958	Pg 59	Untitled (Abstract Relief) 1957-8 Mixed media: Resin mix on fibrous board 43 ½ x 56 ½ x 2 ½ in 110.5 x 143.5 x 6.4 cm		

Biography

1917	Born in Toledo, Ohio
1938 - 1939	Studied at the Escuela de Artes del Libro
1941	Attended the Painter's Workshop School, Boston
1942 - 1943	Academia San Carlos, Mexico City
1942 - 1943	Collaborated on a research project on Experimental Media with José Clemente Orozco
1945 - 1954	Worked at the advertising graphics company Cole of California
1949 - 1950	Taught at the California School of Art, Los Angeles
1950 - 1954	Taught at the Hollywood Art Center School, Los Angeles
1959 - 1967	Taught at the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY
1997	Robert Mallary dies at 79

Selected Solo Exhibitions

1953	Gump's Gallery, San Francisco
1956	Urban Gallery, New York
1958	Urban Gallery, New York
1958	Santa Fe Museum, Santa Fe, AZ
1959	Urban Gallery, New York
1961	Allan Stone Gallery New York
1962	Allan Stone Gallery, New York
1964	Allan Stone Gallery, New York
1966	Allan Stone Gallery, New York
1968	State University of New York at Potsdam, Potsdam, NY
1993	Mitchell Albus Gallery, New York
1995	Springfield Museum of Fine Art, Springfield, MA
2010	The Box Gallery, Los Angeles
2014	Allan Stone Projects, New York

Selected Group Exhibitions

1951	Los Angeles County Museum of Art Annual
1953	Los Angeles County Museum of Art Annual
1954	Los Angeles County Museum of Art Annual
1959	Sixteen Americans, Museum of Modern Art, New York
	Sculpture USA, Museum of Modern Art, New York
1960	Whitney Annual Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
1961	New Forms – New Media, Stable Gallery, New York
	Art of Assemblage, Museum of Modern Art, New York
1962	Whitney Annual Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
	Pittsburgh International Exhibition (now Carnegie International) Carnegie Museum,Pittsburgh
1964	Ten Americans, Museum of Modern Art, Sao Paulo, Brazil
	Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
1966	Governor Rockefeller's Collection from Albany Mansion, Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, NY
	Whitney Annual Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
1968	Cybernetic Serendipity, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK
	Whitney Annual Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
	Guggenheim International Awards Exhibition, Guggenheim Museum, New York

Selected Collections

Museum of Modern Art, New York
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, NY
University of California, Berkeley
Houston Museum of Art, Houston, TX
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
University of New Mexico, Albuquerque
SUNY Potsdam, Potsdam, NY

THE MAYOR GALLERY since 1925

21 CORK STREET  
FIRST FLOOR  
LONDON W1S 3LZ  
T: +44 (0)20 7734 3558  
F: +44 (0)20 7494 1377  
info@mayorgallery.com  
www.mayorgallery.com

Printed on the occasion of Frieze New York 2017:

ROBERT MALLARY: THE NEW MEXICO RELIEFS 1957 - 1958  
5 - 7 MAY 2017

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publishers or copyright holders.

Edition of 400

Foreword © Wayne Thiebaud  
Introduction © Dr Catherine Spencer  
Self-interview © Robert Mallery  
Works © Robert Mallery

Special thanks to:

Mitchell Albus, Dr Catherine Spencer, Wayne Thiebaud, Alex Bult & Christine Hourdé

Cover image: Untitled, Abstract Relief (detail), 1957-8, 43 ¾ x 31 x 2¾ in, 111 x 78.8 x 7 cm (pg 37)

All dimensions of works are given height before width before depth

The colour reproduction in this catalogue is representative only

Design by Stephen Draycott

Printed by Birch Print, Heritage House, DE7 5UD

ISBN: 978-0-9957416-1-4



