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H. C. Westermann

A Human Condition

November 3—January 14, 2012

Gallery hours: Tuesday-Saturday 10am—6pm

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The exhibition opens on the thirtieth anniversary of Westermann's death on November 3, 1981. It also marks twenty-three years since our gallery's inaugural show, a retrospective survey of the artist's work. This exhibition revolves around two significant groups of drawings and a selection of particularly potent objects.

At the beginning of the 1960s, Westermann created a unique series of experimental drawings in crayon that relate to the evolution of his sculptural syntax. Some refer to a medical issue, others his relocation from Chicago – where his independent stance vis-à-vis the mainstream was established – to Connecticut and its proximity to the New York art world. These drawings have never been exhibited or published until now.

The delicately polychromed sculpture *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1962) has a set of bodily and architectural references similar to those explored in these drawings. The title has multiple associations – Shakespeare, Alexander Pope, Abraham Lincoln and E. M. Forster among them – but Westermann might just as well have had in mind a love song popular during the early years of his marriage to Joanna Beall, *Fools Rush In (Where Angels Fear to Tread)*. The title opens the work to a range of philosophical, political and personal meaning.

The same can be said of *A Human Condition* (1964), a cross-shaped pine box that cannot be opened. Aside from the general connotations of the phrase “human condition,” Westermann may have intended a reference to *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt’s treatise on existentialism and political freedom published by the University of Chicago in 1958. Or he might have seen Masaki Kobayashi’s epic antiwar film trilogy of the same title released between 1959 and 1961, an indictment of Japanese militarism. Westermann’s substitution of “A” for “The” shifts the emphasis from the universal to the individual. The dedication to a Marine killed in action in Korea defines the sculpture as both coffin and grave marker, for Cpl. Paul Flower and for the rest of us also.

The first of his classic “death ships” was made in 1965 after events such as the Cuban missile crisis, Kennedy’s assassination and the naval incident in the Gulf of Tonkin that triggered the rapid escalation of the Vietnam War. Westermann served on an aircraft carrier in the Pacific during WWII and on the ground in Korea, but later said that he had been “a dumb right winger – I thought we were correct to fight. But I think differently now – I don’t believe in this primitive bloodletting.” The later death ship sculptures are metaphorical meditations on our ultimate fate, but this visceral object expresses the waterline torpedo strike as mortal wound.

Westermann’s personal thoughts, political views and indecorous humor found regular expression in the many illustrated letters he sent to friends and family during the 1960s, and the letters gave rise to larger ink and watercolor drawings in the 1970s. This exhibition includes a cycle of narrative works from 1972 that he selected as the basis of a suite of lithographs. This group of drawings is a travelogue of the key places and players in his archetypal, movie-inflected scenarios – tuxedoed dandy and naked native girl on a tropical island, a jungle growing through the ruins of a Holiday Inn and a pelt-clad primitive surveying an arid desert. The *Deathship in a Port* drawing distilled an image that Westermann drew repeatedly down to its essentials – wharf, dock, ship, sea, sky and moon. And rats.

In another drawing made that year, Westermann depicted himself as a blind man tapping his cane along a path in a futuristic city. He made no claim to wisdom and balked at explaining his work. Not seer but seeker, Horace Clifford Westermann was an artist of uncommon insight.

In 2001, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago presented a retrospective exhibition of Westermann sculptures. The exhibition traveled to the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, MOCA in Los Angeles and the Menil Collection in Houston. A catalogue raisonne by Lynne Warren and Michael Rooks was published by Abrams and a second traveling show documented Westermann’s prints was organized by the Smart Museum at the University of Chicago. More recently, Rooks organized *Dreaming of a Speech Without Words: The Paintings and Early Objects of H. C. Westermann* for The Contemporary Museum in Honolulu which traveled to Montclair, Philadelphia and Stanford. David McCarthy’s *Westermann at War: Art and Manhood in Cold War America* is a definitive study of the relationships among Westermann’s experiences in WWII and Korea, the cultural and political environment in place during his formative years as an artist, and the enigmatic content of the artworks themselves.