

LENNON, WEINBERG, INC.

514 West 25th Street, New York, NY 10001 Tel. 212 941 0012 Fax. 212 929 3265
info@lennonweinberg.com www.lennonweinberg.com

H. C. Westermann

Death Ship: Important Sculptures, Drawings & Prints

January 26 – March 4, 2000

Tuesday-Saturday 10-6

One of the most enduring themes in H. C. Westermann's work reflects the impact of his experiences at sea during World War II. He created an image which gave voice to his memories of horror and honor, to his feelings of anxiety and awe. Westermann called it a Death Ship, and he drew them, wrote about them, and fashioned extraordinary sculptures of them. He made them vessels for expression of his deepest feelings about life and death.

H. C. Westermann enlisted in the Marines in 1942, and before long was serving as a gunner on the aircraft carrier USS Enterprise. After a long stretch at sea and with the climax of the Pacific war drawing near, Westermann witnessed a fiery and explosive kamikaze attack on the USS Franklin which caused the death of nine hundred men. His own ship was repeatedly attacked, before and during the invasion of Okinawa, after which hundreds of dead sailors were stacked on deck. When the USS Enterprise returned to Pearl Harbor, Westermann noted the smell of death emanating from the USS Franklin, still so hot that no one could board her.

In letters and drawings sent to family and friends, Westermann recalled these experiences, and made his first ship sculptures in the late 50's. Over the next twenty years he returned again and again to the subject, revising, refining and restating the theme of the Death Ship in many forms. He said that these drawings and sculptures "satisfy some kind of need" and that he'd drawn "hundreds by now over the years." All the while, he was developing a body of work involving other subjects and forms - personages, houses, narrative tableaux, eccentric abstractions and paradoxical machines. Together, Westermann's work elaborates a complex, deeply inquisitive perspective on human nature and the nature of experience.

This exhibition will include rarely-seen works: a 1946 drawing of the USS Enterprise under attack drawn just after the war, and later letters which add words to his pictures. We have brought together a closely worked series of drawings from 1971 to 1974 which depict variations of a scenario involving a ship looming in the San Pedro harbor, with rats, murders, forlorn figures and the occasional naked lady, all bathed in the light of the moon. The development of the death ship theme in drawings and prints will be seen together with eight important sculptures. One early sculpture, newly rediscovered after having been lost for many years, is not of a battleship but a broken-masted sailing vessel with a single bronze sailor lying dead on the deck. Later ship sculptures are streamlined, pared down, slightly listing as if dead in the water. Often they are housed in wood boxes, a bit like coffins. The exhibition will also include the last death ship sculpture Westermann made before his death in 1981, *Death Ship out of San Pedro, Adrift*, a spare ebony shape penetrated midships by a brass plane. Westermann inscribed on the bottom of the sculpture "This piece is dedicated to all the dead Kamikaze pilots + to the sailors + Marines that were killed by them."

The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago will open a major retrospective exhibition of H. C. Westermann's work in June 2001, and will publish at that time the catalogue raisonne of his sculptures in addition to a substantial exhibition catalogue. The exhibition will travel to the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and The Menil Collection in Houston. The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago will exhibit and publish Westermann's entire printed work. Both the exhibitions and publications will offer considerable new information about this enigmatic and important artist's achievement, and new insight into his considerable influence on his contemporaries and later generations.

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The following text was reproduced in the exhibition brochure:

The theme of the Death Ship occupied H.C. Westermann throughout his entire life as an artist. It first surfaced in his drawings and models before World War II, and remained firmly anchored in his consciousness until his death in 1981. He once explained to a fellow artist that it was a motif he never tired of exploring. Indeed, by his own estimate there must be hundreds of drawings of the subject. Deriving as much from his experiences aboard the *USS West Virginia* and the *USS Enterprise* during World War II, as from a deep-seated literary tradition extending to Homer's *Odyssey*, Westermann crafted his ships as allegorical symbols to explain the journey of humanity through a perilous world. Typically we encounter his Death Ships at the end of their voyage. Battered and listing in a desolate port, ravaged by the devastating power of modern armaments, or less frequently tossed about in a raging sea, they testify to the sublime forces – whether of nature or war – over which individuals have no control. The coffins that often accompany the sculpted ships emphasize the funereal function of the theme, transforming these vessels into sarcophagi of the sea. The vision is as bleak as it is morbid, and for precisely this reason it ties Westermann's point of view to a moralizing strain in Western art that addresses human frailty and transience. Never quite reaching the haven of a safe port, Westermann's Death Ships disturbingly suggest that the journey of life is a tragedy.

David McCarthy

David McCarthy is an Associate Professor of Art History at Rhodes College, Memphis. He is the author of *H.C. Westermann at War: Art and Manhood in Cold War America*.