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H. C. Westermann

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THE AESTHETE AS POPEYE

It's time to give the raucous, war-haunted H.C. Westermann his due as a major sculptor

By **ROBERT HUGHES**

WORLD WAR II GAVE SOME AMERICAN writers images that burned deep to the core of their work and became, sometimes, its chief theme: the bombing of Dresden for Kurt Vonnegut (*Slaughterhouse-Five*), the contradictory lunacies of command for Joseph Heller (*Catch-22*). This scarcely ever happened to American painters or sculptors. But to one in particular it did. It was war, as much as anything else, that made an artist out of H.C. (Horace Clifford) Westermann Jr., that imbued him with raucous suspicion of the "normal" life he was supposed to be defending and filled him with horrible sights, now bleak and now baroque, whose exorcism would become a life-time task.

The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago is holding a marvelous retrospective of Westermann's work, the first in a generation (the last one was in 1978, at New York City's Whitney Museum of American Art; he died only three years after). It comes with excellent catalog essays by Robert Storr, Dennis Adrian, Lynne Warren and Michael Rooks. It

SENSE OF THE SINISTER
Mad House, 1958, is a subtle parody of the *House of Horrors*, evoking mere hauntings, not traces of death

is a revelation, for it sets before us an artist who deserves to be rated as one of the great American talents, and should have been long ago; an aesthete of unshakable integrity who looked and talked like Popeye the Sailor Man, a cigar-chomping wisecracker of diabolic humor whose curriculum vitae (timber worker, carpenter, sailor, U.S. Marine Corps marksman, acrobat, gandy dancer and voluble loner) was not, to put it mildly, of a kind normal in the art world.

Yet there was nothing affected about him; he was not playing a role. He was laconically and sometimes pugnaciously American. And he believed in the redeeming powers of craft: how making things well—no concessions, no shortcuts, with complete faith in the beauty and integrity of material (in his case, mostly wood)—gave a certain urgency and moral power to the object. He never seems to have had a slipshod moment. If you can imagine Jack Kerouac without the stupid sentimentality but with the assets of a truly fine craftsman, you might have had something like Westermann. But there was no other such person.

In 1945, having served two years as a gunner on the aircraft carrier U.S.S. *Enterprise* in the Pacific, he watched another carrier, the U.S.S. *Franklin*, turned into an oven by a Japanese bombing attack, smelling the stench of more than 700 men slow-roasted alive between its steel decks. "After that," he wrote, "I became a f___ing coward & was ready to come home immediately, to hell with the war & all that crap about what we are fighting for, etc? Well anyway the Korean War came along & I wanted to see if I was still a coward—I was!" By 1952, when he was discharged from the Marines, no one could have said Westermann had shirked his duties, despite various courts-martial for drunkenness, brawling and going AWOL.

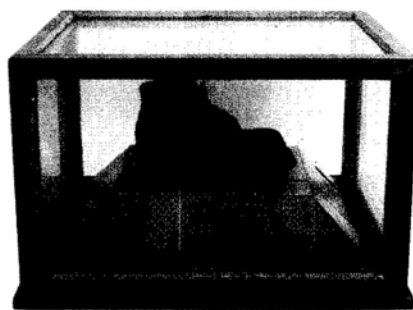
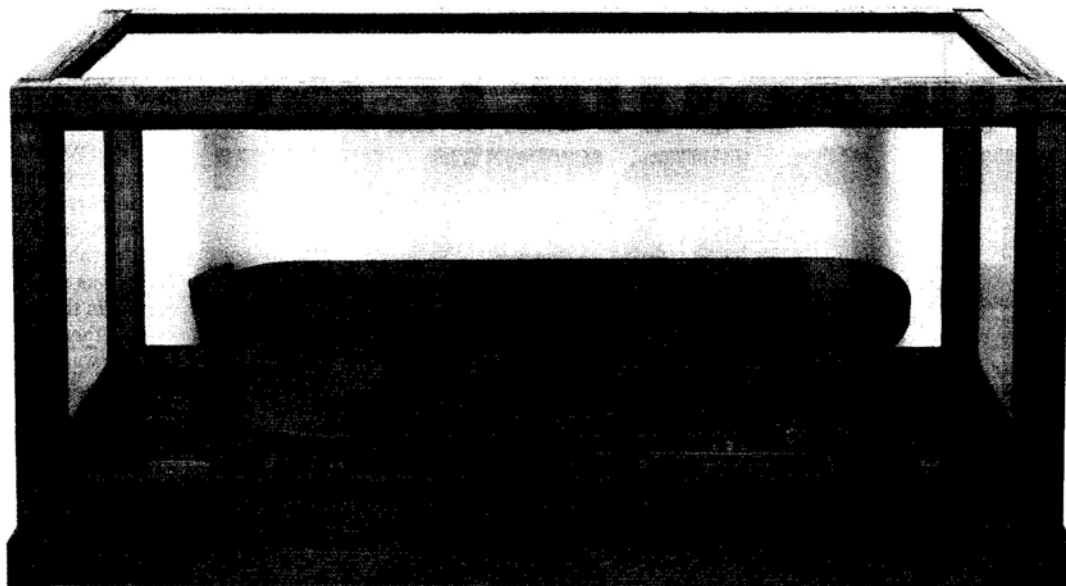
Westermann's art was shaped by the pressure of memory and the need to vent that pressure. But lots of bad art has been made about intense, violently authentic experience. What made Westermann such a good artist was the combination of discipline and intense feeling. An



image he returned to, often and each time differently, was the Death Ship, a simple block of carved wood, sometimes afloat on a green sea of dollar bills, with the tiny dorsal fins of sharks implacably circling it. *Death Ship Runover by a '66 Lincoln Continental*, 1966, refers not to World War II but to Vietnam, a war Westermann hated and opposed. The auto that has just run over the ship (and, by implication, its men) with an inked tire tread is the same model that belonged to Westermann's father-in-law; it was also a favorite limo of American politicians at the time.

But there is nothing crudely propagandistic about Westermann's war images. Like the rest of his work—except for the letters and drawings, which tend to be dirty and rawly funny—they are understated, oblique, and sneak up on you. They imply both sudden disasters and long cultural histories. Thus some of the Death Ships link back to the awful sense of abandonment envisaged by Coleridge in *The Ancient Mariner*, "idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean," or in their case a sculpted ship on a sculpted ocean. Who else would envisage, as a symbol of progress, an object like *The Last Ray of Hope*, 1968—a pair of Westermann's Marine-issue boots, polished and waxed again and again to a perfect, obsidian-like blackness, in homage to Maxim Gorky's remark that a strong pair of boots "will be of greater service for the ultimate triumph of socialism than black eyes"?

It's hard to imagine anyone's actually



PRESSURE OF MEMORY

Westermann used images from his military experiences to protest the war in Vietnam, above, in *Death Ship Runover by a '66 Lincoln Continental*, 1966, and to suggest progress, in *The Last Ray of Hope*, 1968

him out to be a wood-butcher cousin of Joseph Cornell's, except that he didn't have Cornell's haunted preciousness, his extended nostalgia for a dream Europe. While Cornell was fantasizing about long-dead French courtesans like Cléo de Mé-

ent, being based on handmaking, on high-intensity craft, rather than on semirandom assemblies of street detritus. Which is not to say that Westermann was a better or a worse artist than Rauschenberg—just wholly different, not least because of the dark side of his work.

Nobody else in American art had such a strong sense of the sinister. It breathes through such early constructions as *Mad House*, 1958—a parody of the House of Horrors that isn't quite a parody because its contents are more subtle than you would expect, mere hauntings rather than the traces of death or dismemberment—yet affecting all the same, like an *American Gothic* version of early, Surrealist Giacometti.

In some ways, as Storr points out in his richly sympathetic catalog introduction, the artist to whom Westermann was closest in spirit was that exquisitely sophisticated Polish émigré Elie Nadelman, whose delicate, elegantly refined figures inspired by American folk art seem to underwrite many of Westermann's coarser and more collo-

What a talent he had—sardonic, passionate . . . at times touched by real genius

disliking Westermann. You would need to be blind not to realize what a talent he had—sardonic, passionate, always invigorating, at times touched by real genius and always, totally, himself.

Which other artists did he resemble? Not many, it turns out. Miró, in brief flashes. You could think of Westermann's strand of buckeye Surrealism and make

rode and building mossy palaces for paper owls, Westermann was chopping dovetails, perfect ones at that, and constructing scary, haunting emblems of death, loss and love.

You could relate him to that great American junkmeister Robert Rauschenberg, his contemporary, except that the whole tenor of his imagination was differ-

quial ones in their ecstatically precise finish.

In the past, Westermann may have seemed too quirky, colloquial and weird to be, as people used to say, "major." He no longer does. But it's the dark side of Westermann that makes him live, 20 years after his death. Carpenters build houses. Westermann's small houses were habitations for the soul—and traps for it as well. ■