

# VENUS

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## ARTFORUM

### H. C. Westermann

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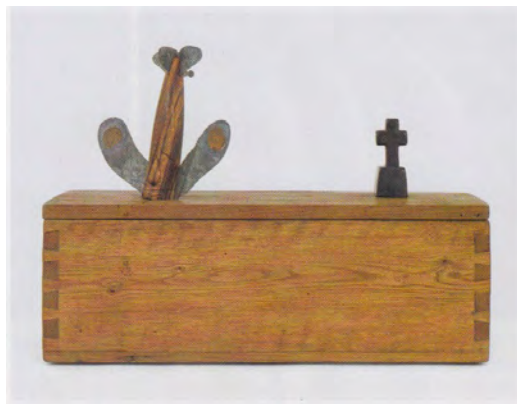
Lined three deep on a massive table, the H. C. Westermann sculptures in this exhibition were stunning in their craftsmanship, blistering in their satire, and sometimes, as in the case of *Walnut Box*, 1964—a walnut box filled with walnuts—just plain funny. These small-scale constructions, some of the best that Westermann made, were accompanied here by forty-seven prints and drawings, two paintings, and eleven life-size assemblages.

Colored by his time as a marine on the USS *Enterprise* (called the "Grey Ghost" because of Japan's multiple claims to have sunk it) in World War II, and later as an infantryman in the Korean War, Westermann's understanding of the destruction wrought by military aggression is most plainly presented through the "death ship" that

appears throughout his sculptures and drawings. In *Untitled (Walnut Death Ship in a Chestnut Box)*, 1974, an airplane has crashed into the lid of a box; a cross-shaped grave marker stands at the opposite end of the lid. Inside, a model of a ship is both protected and entombed by its case. Likewise, *Death Ship of No Port with a Shifted Cargo*, 1968, features a boat's form encased in a goatskin-lined coffin. With their exquisite craftsmanship and blunt iconography, these remain powerful works, even in a post-9/11 world in which the symbols of warfare have dematerialized dramatically. And when Westermann expands this sense of mutual destruction beyond war, the sculptures are even stronger. *Death Ship Runover by a '66 Lincoln Continental*, 1966, serves as a send-up of the actions of such artists as Robert Rauschenberg (whose

assemblages, one guesses, would have been far too sentimental for Westermann's taste). Rather than driving a vehicle over blank sheets of paper, as Rauschenberg did to make *Automobile Tire Print*, 1953, Westermann ran over his own completed sculpture. But the work also mocks the ship and the sacrifices made for it, killing it again, as it were, by mowing it down with a shiny new piece of American capitalism. Placed atop a sea of dollar bills and a shark fin, and then enclosed in a glass display case, the battered ship seems imperiled from all sides.

The material fetishism expressed in Westermann's work makes its potential destruction by car even more painful. His attention to each dovetail and dowel joint, to each inlay and brass hinge, was described by Barbara Haskell in the catalogue accompanying his 1978 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, as a attempt to stave off the unpredictabilities of his time at war, to "guard against" the impinging of the real world upon the contained world of his objects. The works also seem to reveal the artist's almost didactic pleasure in letting us know the mechanics of their slow and deliberate creation. Westermann sometimes stamped or inscribed details regarding materials in the lids of boxes (HANDLE MADE OF HICKORY—USA / BOX MADE OF PURPLEHEART), and for his larger sculptures he occasionally made exhaustive notes about construction and installation. For *Texas Cactus*, 1979–80, which stands nearly five feet tall, Westermann provided several pages itemizing the various woods used, and the reasons for their use; diagramming the locations of tenon, mortise, and bolt; and



H.C. Westermann, *Untitled (Walnut Death Ship in a Chestnut Box)*, 1974

specifying where the work should be placed (KEPT INDOORS is underlined in red). The crates and cases that often serve as plinths for the pieces are further extensions of this fastidiousness.

Westermann viewed the US from the perspective of one who left with ideals and returned with disillusion. His anger, however, was always tempered by humor and irreverence, as in his 1968 series “See America

First,” lithographs that caustically poke fun at the early-twentieth-century slogan promoting tourism throughout America’s national parks. In Westermann’s version, volcanoes erupt, ships burn, glaciers melt, and rising sea levels threaten high-rises. While the exhibition presented only two preparatory works from this series, it showed them alongside a splendid collection of illustrated letters to dealer Allan Frumkin, written during the 1964 cross-country trip that inspired it. In these works Westermann exhibits enough self-awareness to implicate both himself and, by extension, us, in the grandstanding and bombast that have shaped—and continues to shape—this nation’s landscapes and its foibles.

—*Rachel Churner*