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MYSTERY, ECCENTRICITY, AND GALLOWS HUMOR: MATTHEW WEINSTEIN ON MARK MANDERS AND H.C. WESTERMANN

Mark Manders's work makes a good argument for banishing the term "contemporary." It's a silly term. Unlike "modern," which projected futures for a range of now-failed ideologies and left its own archaeology, "contemporary" has no historic potentiality. I admire Manders's indifference to the contemporary. His work has a solemnity that stands out in an increasingly shrill art world.

In Manders's current exhibition at Tanya Bonakdar, one first comes upon a ghostly room delineated by translucent plastic sheeting. It contains two monumental versions of the artist's familiar attic-inspired figures. The armless truncated bodies resemble unfinished sarcophagi. They lean back almost parallel to the floor while the heads face forward, chins tucked down into their necks, as if navel-gazing. These sculptures seem to be made out of raw clay but that is an illusion—in fact, they are painted bronze. Each piece is bisected by a Carlo Scarpa-like plywood divider. By slightly offsetting the two halves of each figure, Manders destabilizes these images of calm introspection. The bifurcated faces are especially unsettling as they seem to move back together like images in a stereoscopic viewer. Buckets of clay and newspaper-covered folding chairs nearby suggest a studio, but one abandoned before the pieces could be finished.

In a second plastic-walled room is what looks like part of an ancient sculpture of a dog caught in mid-leap. Nose to tail, it spans the width of the room. It is reminiscent of Bruce Nauman's flayed-looking cast-polyurethane animals but, with its evocation of vanished cultures, is far more romantic.

There has to be a space in art today for the kind of dreamlike, mysterious, and humorless work that Manders makes. It's a difficult space to navigate because its biggest pitfall is

nostalgia. But I don't think that Manders's art is nostalgic; I believe in its singular and private nature, and nostalgia isn't private. Its toxicity is located in the fact that it is based on received and unexamined ideals.

Another danger of the backward--gazing private space is grandiosity. Maybe this makes me too hopelessly American, but I need to know that Manders doesn't consider himself an artistic high priest, because if these objects woke up to their own grandiosity, their strength and integrity would vanish.

One of the pleasures of living in an art-rich city is having exhibitions by two very different artists connect in one's head. On the face of it, the work of H. C. Westermann (1922–81) has little in common with that of Manders, but, like Manders, Westermann also made use of secrecy—not as a quality, but as part of his art's very subject matter.





As seen in a generous exhibition at Venus Over Manhattan, much of Westermann's memory-laden and melancholy work takes the form of hand-carved sculptures. These evoke a lost ritual of American manhood: the hobby. Many American men of yore, on their few hours a week not spent at work or fulfilling the duties of the paterfamilias, would disappear into a garage or basement and relax by

producing wooden objects for the home. Or they would grow tomatoes. I assume that this custom began to decline in the '60s, when the world invaded the home and everything traditional began to seem laughable and the enthusiasm for shopping for nifty consumer goods took the meaning out of making them for oneself. Also the private nature of the hobby had to have been worn away by the dissolution of the private self and the growing need of people to receive great amounts of public recognition for small achievements. Most of the hand-crafted wooden objects in this exhibition, which look like the products of a very esoteric hobbyist, are from the '60s and '70s, which means that Westermann was operating within a private cultural world quite cut off from the violently morphing one he was living in.

These pieces do not yearn for a past; they are *of* a past. And they are intimately connected to Westermann's own personal history. Westermann was in the Marine Corps during World War II and subsequently fought in the Korean War. The exhibition has a number of carved ships, chains, ropes, and trunks. But anybody who thinks that Westermann was merely nostalgic for his time as a sailor needs only to read his titles to realize that he had a much more complex relationship with it. *Death Ship of No Port with a Shifted Cargo* (1968) is a redwood box containing a small carved ship. The box is padded, coffin style. *Death Ship Runover by a '66 Lincoln Continental* (1966), is another carved boat, this one with tire tracks on it. It sits in a vitrine, the floor of which is papered in dollar bills. A shark's fin in the corner suggests that yet another disaster is in store for the crew.

These tabletop sculptures have a generous pour of gallows humor. *Suicide Tower* (1965), for instance, is a section of a wooden beam with a miniature staircase winding its way up it. The staircase ends in a tiny platform, presumably a place from which to end it all. The wood in all of these pieces is nicely carved, sanded, and varnished. Westermann's aesthetic has more to do with the quality of a job well done than with any allegiance to the

mechanistic, hyperrealistic, or conceptual visual strategies that were being developed at that time.

John F. Peto (1854–1907), the American practitioner of trompe l’oeil painting, could be considered one of the grandfathers of American melancholia, which manifests itself in the work of Westermann as well as artists as diverse as Edward Hopper, Ed and Nancy Kienholz, Ed Ruscha, Jasper Johns, Robert Gober, and Rona Pondick. Through the reduction of painting to a trick, tromp l’oeil functions as self-abnegation serving the amusement of the viewer. Westermann, similarly, uses homely and unpretentious materials and processes to not only evoke the paucity of memory, but the paucity of art itself.

Peto’s representations of scraps, papers, photos, and envelopes evoke the futility of memory. For Westermann, these scraps and memories take the form of cryptic carved inscriptions on his wooden sculptures. These inscriptions have the same tangential relationship to something that once occurred, as does a phrase scribbled on the bottom of an old photograph. It is of interest that this exhibition includes a selection of beautifully ornamented envelopes addressed to Westermann’s longtime dealer, Allan Frumkin. These framed souvenirs of a past relationship, and apparently a fond one, as can be seen in the whimsy and sweetness of the drawings, have Peto’s sense of the *vanitas*.

The postcard found in a junk shop is a secret, a teaser for a narrative that will be forever obscured. Likewise, even when their inscriptions are visible, Westermann’s objects guard their secrets. *Ed’s Varnish* (1976) is a pine box containing three cans of Man O’War Ultra Spar Marine Varnish (the name itself reads like a Westermann title). On the inside of the box’s lid is the inscription, “Dear Ed, not only may you borrow a can of varnish, but you can keep these for your cabin in the desert.” We know there is an Ed. We know he has a cabin in the desert. But still this piece is like a torn envelope that reveals only enough of the letter within to unsettle. Many of the objects in this exhibition similarly remind us that all we are ever given by memory are fragments, which we then polish up and present as totalities.