

VENUS MANHATTAN

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS



H.C. Westermann, *Suicide Rehearsal*, 1965, ink, watercolor, paper, newsprint, 17 x 14".

NEW YORK

H.C. WESTERMANN

VENUS OVER MANHATTAN
980 Madison Avenue 3rd Floor
February 20–April 6

H. C. Westermann is beloved for a type of sculpture that's a potent mix of Dada and old, weird Americana. But this modest yet gripping exhibition also reveals that he was a marvelous draftsman with a sharp, satirical wit. Along one wall is a group of drawings, inspired by a road trip the artist took with his wife, that skewers 1960s fantasies of the Wild West.

In *Right Straight On*, n.d., an old man seems the sole inhabitant of an overbuilt, abandoned desert city; is he a sage brimming with wisdom,

or is he just lonely and exhausted, wondering how to go on? The palm tree in *Buildings on a Red Butte*, 1968, suggests that we might be taking in a tiki-style paradise—yet the butte it sits in front of looks a lot like a nuclear reactor. These arid oases are little hells, custom-built to torturous perfection. Though Westermann's depictions feel apocalyptic, he's merely just showing us how things were and, frighteningly, still are. He allows us to laugh a little—uncomfortably.

Other works, such as *Suicide Rehearsal*, 1965, target American militarism and what we now call toxic masculinity. It depicts a man who apparently hanged himself while wearing a cocktail dress. His head is a putrefied green. A yellowed newspaper clipping attached to the corner of the work tells the story of this subject, a "41-year-old ex-seaman who meticulously planned his 'final curtain.'" It appears the former sailor left a long note clarifying that "I am not a queer" and that he just wanted to die in a frock. His journal, according to the article, describes a couple of girlfriends, "transvestites . . . who apparently had affairs with women as well as with him." The column also talks about an incredulous coroner who didn't believe the man killed himself. Westermann's artwork is a cruel illustration of an even crueler culture that produced such a fatality. One is fascinated by this salacious bit of history—and a bit scandalized by one's own titillated response.

— Nicholas Chittenden Morgan