

VENUS

MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES

"11 Things You Need to Know About the Artist Known as H.C. Westermann," *Autre*, November 9, 2015

AUTRE

11 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE ARTIST KNOWN AS H.C. WESTERMANN



"See America First," a comprehensive exhibition of sculptures and drawings by the late, great H.C. Westermann, is on view now at Venus Over Manhattan. The installation features a wide range of Westermann's work, spanning from 1953 to 1980. Here are 11 Things You Need To Know about the artist before you visit the exhibition:

1. He served in the U.S. Marine Corps

Westermann served in World War II on the aircraft carrier Enterprise, weathering kamikaze attacks by Japanese fighter planes. He also served in the Korean War. Thus, much of Westermann's work draws on the idea of a nostalgic and romantic America, one that yearns for a return to traditional values.

2. He was a carpenter

Before his service, Westermann worked in the logging industry of the Pacific Northwest, where he picked up woodworking and handyman jobs. Westermann used the skills he learned as a carpenter to create sculptures that confronted the realities of his time at war and the post-war psyche of America in the 40s and 50s. Mr. Westermann once said he wanted his constructions to look like they'd been made by a mad cabinetmaker.

3. He started out as a painter

Westermann attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago on the GI Bill, where he studied painting. His paintings combined geometric abstraction with surrealist images, inspired greatly by the work of Paul Klee. After college in the mid-1950s, he turned to sculpture.

4. A cross-country road trip inspired an entire series of creations

Mr. Westermann and his wife (painter Joanna Beall) embarked on a cross-country road trip in 1964, which inspired a series of cartoon drawings in 1968. These drawings, entitled "See America First," were the inspiration for the newest showing of his work at Venus Over Manhattan.

5. His letters to his dealer included wild drawing and fantasies

Several wild and beautifully illustrated personal letters to Westermann's long-time dealer Allan Frumkin are included in the newest exhibition.

6. He regularly made art as gifts for friends

The exhibition includes a box with sergeant stripes inlaid in its lid's underside that he gave to the Los Angeles painter Billy Al Bengston as well as a relief carving he made for the West Coast Funk artist William T. Wiley. "For Baby Ed from Cliff" is a small, rustic rocking horse that he gave to the Pop artist Ed Ruscha.

7. He inspired a generation of underground artists

Westermann's work challenged the pop art status quo of the 1960s. Movements such as the Bay Area's "Funk Art" scene and the famous Chicago Imagists Hairy Who were inspired by Westermann's art.

8. He was featured on the Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper" album.

In 1967, he was one of the celebrities featured on the cover of Sgt. Pepper's Lonely hearts Club Band. Mr. Westermann appears in the third row alongside George Bernard Shaw and Albert Stubbins.

9. He refused to comment on his work

When asked to interpret an object of his, Westermann said, "It puzzles me too... How can I explain a work like that?"

10. He was given a retrospective at the Whitney

In 1978, Westermann was given a full-fledged retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Reviewing the Whitney exhibition, John Russell wrote in The New York Times: "There is in his work a combination of fiendish invention, boisterousness, naivete and a high-souled ethical overdrive. He never evades a question, and he doesn't mind coming on like an unreconstructed preacher."

11. His Views On Art and Death Were Profound

Westermann died of a heart attack at the age of 58 in Danbury, Connecticut in 1981. Of life, he said, "I feel that life is very fragile. We're all just hanging by a thread; it's very spooky. I can best come to grips with it by doing my work. I guess that's why I'm an artist."