



A loner who functions happily outside the system, Westermann has become an underground artworld cult figure, a symbol of our reverse provincialism.

VOICE

ARTS

**Narrating Life's
Existential Fuck-up**

By April Kingsley with photographs by Fred W. McDarrah

"Who's he?" Cliff Westermann asked when I mentioned a well known art critic who'd written an article on some artists Westermann had influenced. "I don't think I've seen an art magazine in 15 years."

Lunching in the kitchen on homemade won-ton soup, Barbara Haskell, the Whitney curator, and I were telling Westermann we thought his upcoming Whitney retrospective would have a tremendous impact, and that it coincides with the current shift to idiosyncratic, mythicizing, obsessive art. He seemed surprised, and so were we, having become accustomed to a certain degree of familiarity with the current scene among artists—and a concomitant pushing for a place therein. But Westermann is a loner functioning happily outside the system, who, in fact, has become a sort of underground artworld cult figure, a symbol of New York's reverse provincialism. They adore him in Chicago, Minneapolis, San Francisco, and L.A. Every art student in Montana, Colorado, and New Mexico knows his work. But here, on the East coast, he's practically a secret, even though he's been living here for nearly 20 years.

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All that's about to change. It could even happen that his life will be seen as the proverbial "success story" of the artist who stayed home and just made art and was "discovered." But no matter how popular his meticulously crafted box constructions and assemblages become, I doubt his will ever be the swimming-pool-in-the-loft success of Lowell Nesbitt or the island-paradise success of Robert Rauschenberg.

He and his wife, the painter Joanna Beall, live in a tiny gatekeeper's cottage on the grounds of her mother's estate in Connecticut. (Their address Obruse Road off Silvermine, like Joseph Cornell's Utopia Parkway address, couldn't be more appropriate.) Each has a studio in the woods behind their house on a half mile-long road they built themselves. They seem to have a perfect "true-love-romance" life. As Cliff says, "Just workin' at our art in isolation here—ain't it quiet?—we don't know what's going on. Couldn't stay here by myself, though. Gotta talk to someone and share things." Joanna has received a measure of success with her work, which has some of the quirky flavor of her husband's, and he, in turn, seems to have been affected by her organic formal plasticity. They work for each other in a mutually inspirational sharing of concerns. On his recent return from the hospital (having recovered from a heart attack), he painted a bright red heart for her over the front door of their yellow clapboard cottage.

Riding up to the Westermann's with Haskell, I was given descriptions of the approximately 60 sculptures and 20 works on paper coming from all over the country to be in the show, and filled in on details of his life and lifestyle. Like the Marine he was, and like my father's friends down in Wheeler's shipyard, he finds "fuckin'" the qualifier of choice. He's a tense, high energy man who likes to be in charge. He smokes cigars and dresses like a carpenter. The two things that drive him up the wall are ecological destruction and poor workmanship. The central obsession of his life—and main theme of his

art—is existential fuck-up.

Born in Los Angeles in 1922, Westermann grew up near the La Brea tar pits. "It was a great place to play, before they fenced it all in, and now they went and plunked that museum down right on the best part of it. There was a creek there that went all the way to the market. I remember a guy was drowning once in the tar. It was bubbling. There was quicksand there too, and the fire trucks came and they went down too." He joined the Marines at 20 and served as a gunner on the U.S.S. Enterprise in the Pacific, where he saw some of the first kamikaze attacks. Once he managed to deflect an attacker from hitting the center of his ship—he gunned it down from the rear, where he was strapped into place, and it only hit the bow. He vividly remembers the stench of death in the air around the floating hulks of bomb-blackened ships. (This image, and images of rats deserting their sinking ships, and sharks feeding where they sense blood, recur often in his work.) The war experience of imminent annihilation and the necessity for a bravura stance have colored his vision ever since.

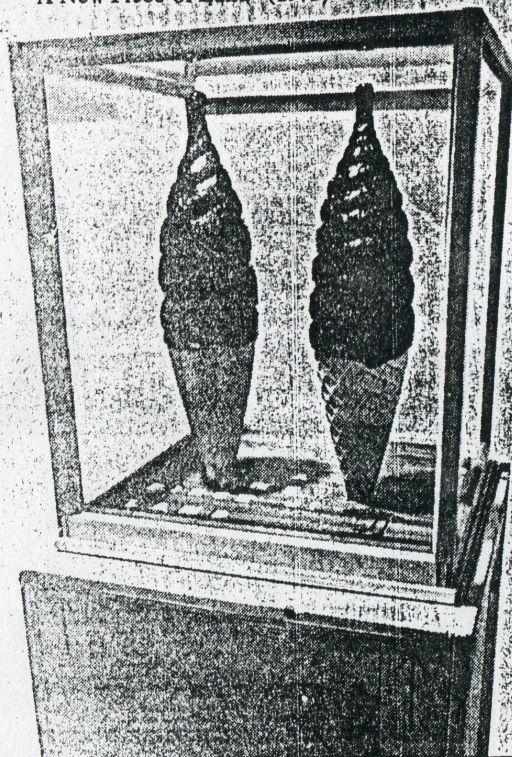
After the war, Westermann studied applied art at the Art Institute of Chicago on the G.I. Bill. When his wife left him, taking their child with her, he reenlisted for the Korean War in disillusioned desperation, bordering on the suicidal. Surviving that also, and having become unalterably opposed to the materialism he felt lay behind it, he went back to the Art Institute, this time to study fine art. The prevailing style was Expressionist-Surrealist. He says of this commitment to Chicago and then the East Coast, "The closer

I came to New York, the better it felt. Imagine me growing up out there. There wasn't any art to look at. Imagine how great it was in Chicago, the great collections, the Brancusi, the Seurat, and the Gauguins and Picassos." Working as a carpenter and handyman to augment his G.I. Bill income, he was led into woodworking and the use of cabinet-making techniques in the creation of sculpture.

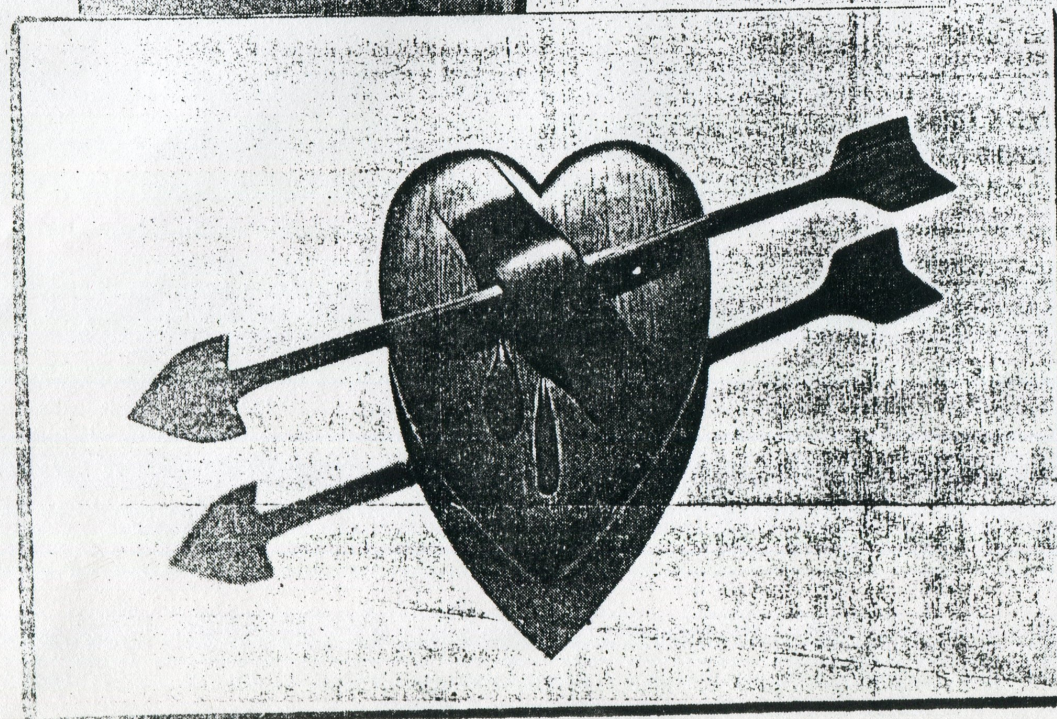
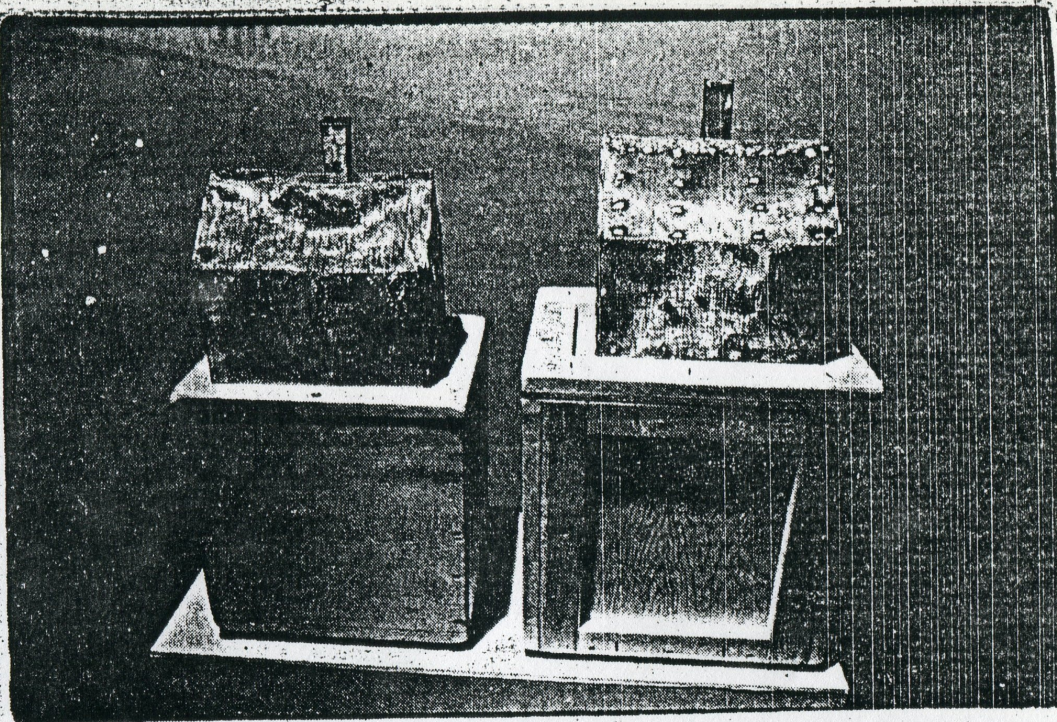
Thus his special combination evolved: a survivor's view of life as fraught with danger and humanity as helpless in the face of terror, escaping only by skill or luck; his aggressive, emotional expression of these feelings in narrative drawings and symbolizing sculptures assembled by free-association; and finally, his obsession with perfect craftsmanship as the means by which some measure of control might be gained over this imperfect environment. He proudly told me that an early piece, *The Black Magic Maker*, was "so well built that when some crazy fucker tried to hack it apart [in Chicago in 1958, when it was first shown] it was too strong for him to do much to it. Just scratched the surface. Hardly dented the thing."

Hidden beneath everything, like an underground river, is his homespun romanticism that seems based on a sailor's dream of love and a safe, happy home. It is revealed in his images of paradise islands, arrow-pierced hearts, and soaring birds, and in his incorporation of postcards from exotic lands, sailor's wedding pictures, and houses and towers. The hopelessness of this dream coming true, or lasting, is expressed in the shark fins that glide past hapless lovers, in shattered glass, burning houses, and the *Death Ships* them-

"A New Piece of Land" (1973)



"The Dancing Teacher" (1972)



selves, and, when not overt, in the titles: *The Suicide*, *The Last Ray of Hope*, *A Close Call*, *From the Museum of Shattered Dreams*, *Suicide Tower*, *Mad House*, *The Mysteriously Abandoned New House*, and so on.

More often than not, a piece is enclosed within a glass box, safely sealed off—in addition, Westermann often builds a packing crate for it, sometimes as part of the piece itself. All the objects are wood based, and his shop/studio is a wood worker's dream. A table saw stands at the ready, oiled and sawdust-free, with an attached industrial vacuum cleaner to keep it that way. A vise, an oiled whetstone, a drill press, and a fine lathe are handily located and sturdily mounted. Neatly labelled cigar boxes full of bolts, nuts, screws, and other hardwood joining devices are stacked on shelves beside a vast array of wood finishes. Pipe and C-clamps in serried ranks, dowels sorted by size, chisels, screwdrivers, rasps, planes, and specialized carving tools arranged on the work table with wormy chestnut drawers—all let you know that this man has "the right tool for the job", any job, and that it is in perfect working condition. Against the wall, behind the carefully labeled wood box, are planks of hardwood from Monteath's in New Jersey—oak, aspen, walnut, teak, rosewood, zebrawood, purple heartwood, Macassar ebony, Finnish birch, Honduran mahogany, and California redwood. He heats the studios with firewood cut from fallen trees on their land—an area is reserved for wood chopping—and a closet labelled "tree-climbing gear" holds equipment for topping trees. His wife's paintings adorn the walls, and his gymnastic equipment—rings, wrist-strengthening stone and

chain, and a climbing rope—strike the only non-woody notes. He built the studio himself, and says, as he stomps the un-shaking floorboards, "You could drive a fuckin' 10-ton truck right in here and the floor wouldn't give."

His studio is one arm of a U-shaped building planned as their dream studio-home. The other arm is unfinished—left that way since the day about 10 years ago when Cliff came into their cottage and said, "Jo-anne, I fire-d'ed 'em, couldn't take it any more," and proceeded to rip out what the hired carpenters had done in his studio part and re-do it himself. "I begged them to go slow and do it right. Hell! I was payin' 'em by the hour and I didn't care if it took 'em forever, just so as they'd do it right." The parts he's finished are as finely worked as a sculpture. Tree trunks de-barked and varnished but not delimbed, support the porch roof, the ends of all planks are smoothly rounded or carved into abstract or animal motifs, and every gleaming surface has been given coat upon coat of protective varnish. Specially carved window frames and door plaques adorn both studios, but my favorite is the elegant box enclosing the gas meter outside his wife's studio with the words "gas meter" carved in the lid. (His wife finished the inside of her own studio, and Cliff proudly points out that "she's a damn fine carpenter!")

In a sort of Japanese garden outside the studio, and dotted along the road in the woods, are natural sculptures made by setting rocks upright or atop one another, the way primitive man first made "art", and cast concrete objects—an oversize foot, a figure of a little boy, a perfectly round ball—made by

some one in town, probably for use in a cemetery. Westermann said that he "normally doesn't like cement, but those damn things are so fuckin' well made, such beautiful things, I used to go by and take them home."

He admires good craftsmanship as much as good ecology. In one piece a hammer is honored, while in another clean air is protected inside three nested glass enclosures. If this weren't Westermann, you would be tempted to call such works (as well as his *Walnut Box* containing real walnuts, and his many plays on the word *art*—in *Nouveau Rat Trap* and his frequent use of *tar*) Duchampian. But Westermann is so inner-directed, so fond of inside jokes, that he undoubtedly just enjoys doing things like making *art* out of *tar* (a primeval ooze we still use in everyday construction). His wit, and his black humor, come naturally, the way they did for Calder, who was also in that good 'ole American tinker tradition that wisely substitutes "know how" for know about. There is always room in the American heart for the do-it-yourselfer—Simon Rodia building his Watts towers, Ann Norton constructing chimney sculptures in her Florida backyard, or Harvey Fite terracing a quarry in upstate New York. Someday, Westermann's studio complex should be conserved, along with these, as monuments to the independent American spirit.

Westermann is quite sophisticated, but he's a master at hiding it. His library may include "Airplane Models," do-it-yourself home-improvement books, and "How to Get the Most out of your Lathe," but it also contains Gabriel Garcia Marquez and tomes in the series "Arts et Metiers Graphics des Par-

is." His drawings, done in teen-age cartoon narrative style, seem diaristic and exorcistic in their personal-vendetta violence, but they have the formally ambiguous space of Modernism and their imagery has been finely honed. Of *Night Bird* one of his most powerful and beautiful drawings, he says, "I worked for a week on that bird and that ship, in my sketchbook, 'til I got the shapes right. Couldn't get 'em right for the longest time. Then I did the drawing." That's his approach to the art-making endeavor—an intuitive working process whereby one "gets at something," a feeling, a look, an emotion, a philosophical notion, something that "looks right." In that sense, he's closer to Pollock than to Miro; in the up-front, disturbing emotional power of his imagery, he's closer to Marisol than to Cornell's bitter-sweet nostalgia; in the blunt directness of his form world, he's closer to folk art and Calder than to the sophisticated Cubist Surrealism of David Smith.

Westermann loves metamorphosis not because it taps into a long line of art historical precursors, but for its magic-making potential. He can please himself, and his wife and friends, for whom he creates endlessly, with his transformation of things into art, death into life. As he says, "We just feed the birds and work on our art. You gotta do that anyway. After all, when you're inside those four walls, it's just you in there. Just you and those four walls and you gotta make art outta that. Yourself."

H.C. Westerman. Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue (opens May 17, to July 16).