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H. C. Westermann

Woman, “the sweetest flower”

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Tuesday-Saturday 10-6

This exhibition surveys some of the many images of women who appear in various guises in H. C. Westermann’s sculptures, drawings and prints.

Westermann (1922-1981) introduced the woman into many of his essential environments – tropical island, city street, desert oasis and wharf. She is a leading lady in Westermann’s enigmatic narratives. She is either naked or clothed. Her hair is dark and shiny and she sometimes sports a snood-like headpiece and high-heeled shoes. She plays the ingénue as native girl uncontaminated by civilization, or sexy vamp in the quintessential scenario he called “The Dance of Death.” She may be a mad woman, a slut, or an angelic apparition. She is, as Westermann inscribed in a little drawing for his wife Joanna, “the best.” Joanna Beall Westermann (1935-1997) was his “little flower,” and he cast her in his work as the ultimate embodiment of love and security who nonetheless provides no sanctuary from life’s inescapable peril and death. The “dance of death” is life itself.

Westermann’s woman is not always alone. She appears in the company of the slick-haired tuxedo-clad handshaking man, dandified movie-star version of the artist himself. She leads, he follows, or vice versa. She says “Kiss Me Goodbye George” in a noxious black and yellow drawing from 1969. She has her ass pinched in a letter-drawing accompanied by the caption “damn the torpedoes.” She has “An Affair in the Islands,” and appears as a siren rising from the watery depths under a technicolor sunset and has sex in an upstairs window.

When she does appear by herself, as in an important ensemble of desert-environment drawings of which “Woman Descending Into Paradise” is central, she is alone yet observed. Watched by pig, crow, dog – all stand-ins for the primal male gaze. “A Lady in Paradise” from 1977 is dedicated to Georges Seurat, whose “Sunday Afternoon, Grande Jatte” in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago Westermann would have seen often while a student there in the 1950s. In the 1970s, Cliff and Joanna Westermann bought a piece of land in west Texas near Marfa, and this cycle of drawings may describe the paradise he thought they would find there.

“Female Figure,” 1977, is one of Westermann’s largest and most important figure sculptures. Her body is a glass-front box with carved saplings for head and limbs. The back of the box is covered with a watercolor of a moonlit sea. The palm tree implies a dot of land in the immensity of the ocean and a vantage point from which to observe the ship disappearing beyond the horizon. Juxtaposed with this scene is a wedding photo of a sailor and his young bride. Two carved book-shaped objects are inlaid with their author’s names: “Dick-ens” and “Faul-kner.” This combination of images suggests a meditation on art and eternity and pays homage to the unique capacities of the female species.

An earlier wood and glass box construction from 1965 presages the large “Female Figure.” It also houses a wartime wedding picture, accompanied by shark fins circling the inside of the box. The silk calla lilies are traditional symbols of both marriage and death. His bride may be the sailor’s “sweetest flower,” Romeo’s Juliet, of whom Capulet declares “Death lies upon her like an untimely frost, upon the sweetest flower of the field.” (Westermann inscribed these lines in a watercolor made shortly before his death.)

In 1964, Westermann carved a bas-relief sculpture called “The Woman from Angel Island,” whose voluptuous figure – all tits and ass – marks an early appearance of the woman who appears so often in the later prints and drawings.

The objects and images gathered for the exhibition by no means exhaust this rich and diverse theme in the work of H. C. Westermann, but this exhibition is the first organized on the subject. The Smart Museum of Art at The University of Chicago and several generous private collectors helped make it possible, and we would like to thank them as well as the family of Joanna Beall Westermann.