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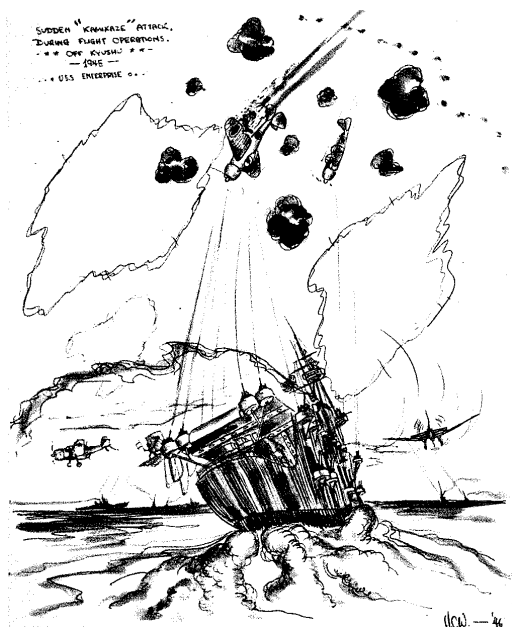
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H. C. Westermann

Rubinstein, Raphael. "Westermann's Death Ship." Art in America, May 2000.



Above, H.C. Westermann: Walnut Death Ship in a Chestnut Box, 1974, copper, galvanized steel, chestnut, ebony, walnut and zebrawood, 18 by 25 by 8 1/4 inches. Private collection. Below, Sudden "Kamikaze" Attack, 1946, ink and gouache on paper, 18 1/4 by 13 inches. Private Collection.



Westermann's Death Ships

As a recent gallery show demonstrated, throughout his life H.C. Westermann kept returning, via sculptures, drawings and letters, to his WWII combat experiences aboard a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier.

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN



USS ENTERPRISE

USS Enterprise, ca. 1958, ink on paper, 8 1/2 by 11 inches.
Private collection.

The “death ship” imagery that haunts H.C. Westermann’s work is at once allegorical and autobiographical; universal in application, specific in source. Both aspects were recently on display in a riveting exhibition of nearly 40 sculptures, drawings and prints at Lennon, Weinberg Gallery in New York. Viewers were immediately clued in to Westermann’s obsession with death at sea by the earliest work in the show, *Sudden “Kamikaze” Attack* (1946), a small ink and gouache drawing depicting the aircraft carrier USS *Enterprise* under assault by Japanese suicide planes. Westermann shows the giant vessel heeling dangerously to one side as it tries to escape the kamikazes plunging through the flak-splattered sky.

When the 24-year-old Westermann made this drawing (at his sister’s kitchen table, according to the wall label), he had just been discharged from the Marine Corps and was living in Long Beach, Calif., working for the Red Cross. Like many artists of his generation, Westermann (1922-1982) found his path to art-making delayed by WWII. But although he wouldn’t even begin his official art studies (at the Art Institute of Chicago) until several years later, in 1946 Westermann was already starting to generate art from his experience as a gunner aboard the *Enterprise*.

Late in the war, while Westermann was serving on the *Enterprise*, the ship came under repeated attack from Japanese kamikaze pilots, resulting in extensive casualties and damage. (By war’s end it became the most decorated vessel in the U.S. Navy.) In a 1978 letter to a friend, Westermann recalled, with an ex-serviceman’s appropriately profane language, that being a gunner during a kamikaze attack was tantamount to “actually seeing death coming at you right down your fucking gun barrel.”¹ In 1958, no closer to exorcizing the demons of his war experience than in 1946, Westermann again drew the *Enterprise* under furious attack. It seems likely that he was spurred on by news that the decommissioned ship had just been sold for scrap. More graphic and cartoony than the earlier work, this ink drawing features sharks devouring floating airmen and sailors and, in the distance, a second warship being torn apart by a powerful explosion. (By 1958, Westermann was showing with Allan Frumkin in

Chicago and was about to gain a much wider audience when three of his sardonic sculptures—cabinets-cum-figures which combined exquisite craftsmanship and found objects—were included in the important “New Images of Man” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.)

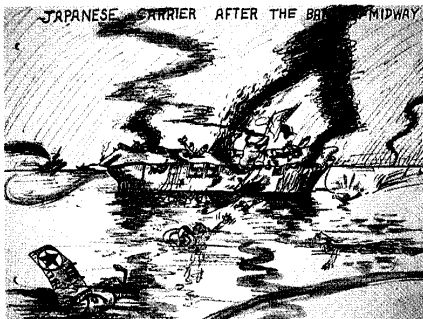
The shark fins Westermann added to the 1958 drawing of the *Enterprise*, and which he incorporated into many subsequent images of death ships, might seem at first like fanciful artistic inventions but, in fact, they refer to one of the most tragic and grisly incidents of the Pacific war: the sinking of the heavy cruiser USS *Indianapolis*. On the night of July 30, 1945, after ferrying the first atomic bomb to Guam, the *Indianapolis* was torpedoed and sunk by a Japanese submarine. The suddenness of the attack left no time to launch lifeboats, so the 900 sailors who escaped the sinking ship found themselves floating in life jackets. Because of the top-secret nature of the mission, the sinking went unreported and the sailors had to endure four days and nights in the water. In addition to suffering from thirst, hunger and exposure, the survivors found themselves terrorized by sharks. When rescuers finally arrived, only 315 men were pulled alive from the water.

Westermann was also plagued by gruesome memories of the aftermath of a kamikaze attack on the carrier USS *Franklin*. The *Enterprise* escorted the *Franklin* from the combat area, and in the corner of a drawing of the *Franklin* he sent to Chicago art critic Dennis Adrian in 1966 (many of Westermann’s best drawings occur in his correspondence) he wrote, “To this I’d like to add the horrible SMELL of DEATH but that’s impossible dammit! Of 2300 men.” More than 30 years after the end of the war, Westermann was still brooding on the scenes he’d witnessed in the Pacific. A 1978 ink-and-watercolor work shows the pale, naked body of a tattooed sailor soaring above the *Enterprise*, out of which flames and smoke are pouring. Perched above the lurid tropical sunset in the background is a horned devil, surrounded by flames, pitchfork at his side. In the accompanying letter, Westermann recalls once recognizing the corpse of a friend killed in a kamikaze attack by the “huge, beautiful” tattoo of an eagle on his chest.

Right, The Dead Young Sailor, USS Enterprise, 1978, ink and watercolor on paper, 11 1/4 by 8 1/2 inches. Private collection.



Below, Japanese Carrier After the Battle of Midway, 1973, ink and watercolor on paper, 11 1/4 by 15 inches.

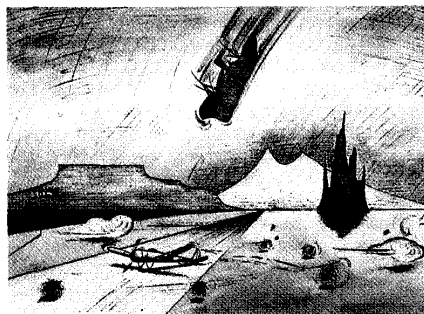


Below, Death Ship USS Franklin, 1966, ink and watercolor on paper, 13 1/4 by 9 1/4 inches. Private collection.



Left, Untitled (Sharks and Setting Sun), ca. 1977, ink and watercolor on paper, 12 by 9 inches.

Right, The Kamikaze, 1976, ink and watercolor on paper, 22 by 30 inches. Private collection.



Westermann translated his affinity for vernacular images into an intensely personal art of high-octane narrative.

Searing as his memories of lost comrades were, Westermann was also sensitive to the sufferings of his enemies. The battered and smoking vessel in the ink-and-watercolor drawing *Japanese Carrier After the Battle of Midway* (1973) seems done in a spirit of commiseration rather than exultant victory, and carved into the bottom of one ship sculpture is the phrase “dedicated to all the kamikaze pilots who died and to all the marines and sailors that were killed by them.” Most of the wood sculptures feature lovingly laminated and sanded hulls—Westermann often angled the bottoms of his ships to make them appear to be listing—which are shown alongside their accompanying equally artful wooden cases. In *Walnut Death Ship in a Chestnut Box* (1974), the artist embedded in the box’s lid an ebony cross and a crashed Japanese fighter plane fashioned from wood, steel and copper.

Westermann has his humorous revenge on the Japanese Air Force in a 1976 ink-and-watercolor drawing showing a plane taxiing on a desert runway while a ship hurtles down at it from the sky above. With its echoes of George Herriman and Saul Steinberg, this drawing can serve as a reminder of how big an influence comics and cartoons had on some of the best American art in the decades after WWII. Like Philip Guston and Peter Saul, Westermann translated his affinity for vernacular images into an intensely personal art of high-octane narrative and (especially in his “A Country Gone Nuts” drawings of the 1960s) outraged social commentary.

As the death-ship theme progresses, the WWII imagery of embattled carriers and attacking planes is supplemented and, often, completely replaced with a different set of images: listing trawlers, nearly deserted quays that feature long shadows, creeping fog, scuttling rats, mysterious figures and the occasional corpse. A major inspiration for these scenes seems to have been the classic French film *Quai des Brumes*, Marcel Carné’s atmospheric 1938 melodrama set amid the ominous backstreets of a gloomy port. The film, which was blamed during the Vichy era for helping sap the morale of the French nation, stars Jean Gabin as a doomed army deserter looking for a ship on which he can escape. Westermann spells out the cinematic connection in a 1967 lithograph by inscribing the English title of the film, *Port of Shadows*, across the top of the composition.

In these “Port of Shadows” works, Westermann piles on film-noir effects like an overenthusiastic director, evoking scenarios of betrayal and assassination in settings of exaggerated decay and dread. A pair of works titled *Progresso* (1971) features forlorn figures making their way down an impossibly long pier, at the end of which is moored a dark, smoke-belching trawler. As an allegory of human life, which it is clearly intended to be, the image is exceedingly bleak, but through the sheer excessiveness of its black humor, as well as its sure feeling for dramatic form, it communicates a kind of weird glee. Similar effects abound throughout Westermann’s death-ship works, sculptures and drawings alike.

In a 1971 letter, after recalling the fact that during the war he once went more than a year without ever stepping off the *Enterprise*, Westermann summed up his ongoing obsession with the ship as an emblem of human mortality. “I like the sea & feel at home there,” he wrote to his friend Herk van Tongeren. “But then I have seen ‘Death Ships,’ many of them & I can’t get them out of my lousy system. You know how it is! Well I still make those ships & I am a 48 year old fart & they still aren’t very good, but now I don’t give a damn & they satisfy some kind of need there—But they are all death ships now. Forgive me kid.”² □

1. *Letters from H.C. Westermann*, ed. Bill Barrette, New York, Timken Publishers, 1988, p. 161.
2. *Ibid.* p. 149.

“H.C. Westermann *Death Ship: Sculptures, Drawings, Prints*” was on view at Lennon, Weinberg Gallery, New York [Jan. 26-Mar. 4]. In June 2001, a touring Westermann retrospective will open at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art.