

Ingenious Simplicity:
The Sculpture
of **H.C. Westermann**

by Michael Klein

BRUCE C. JONES

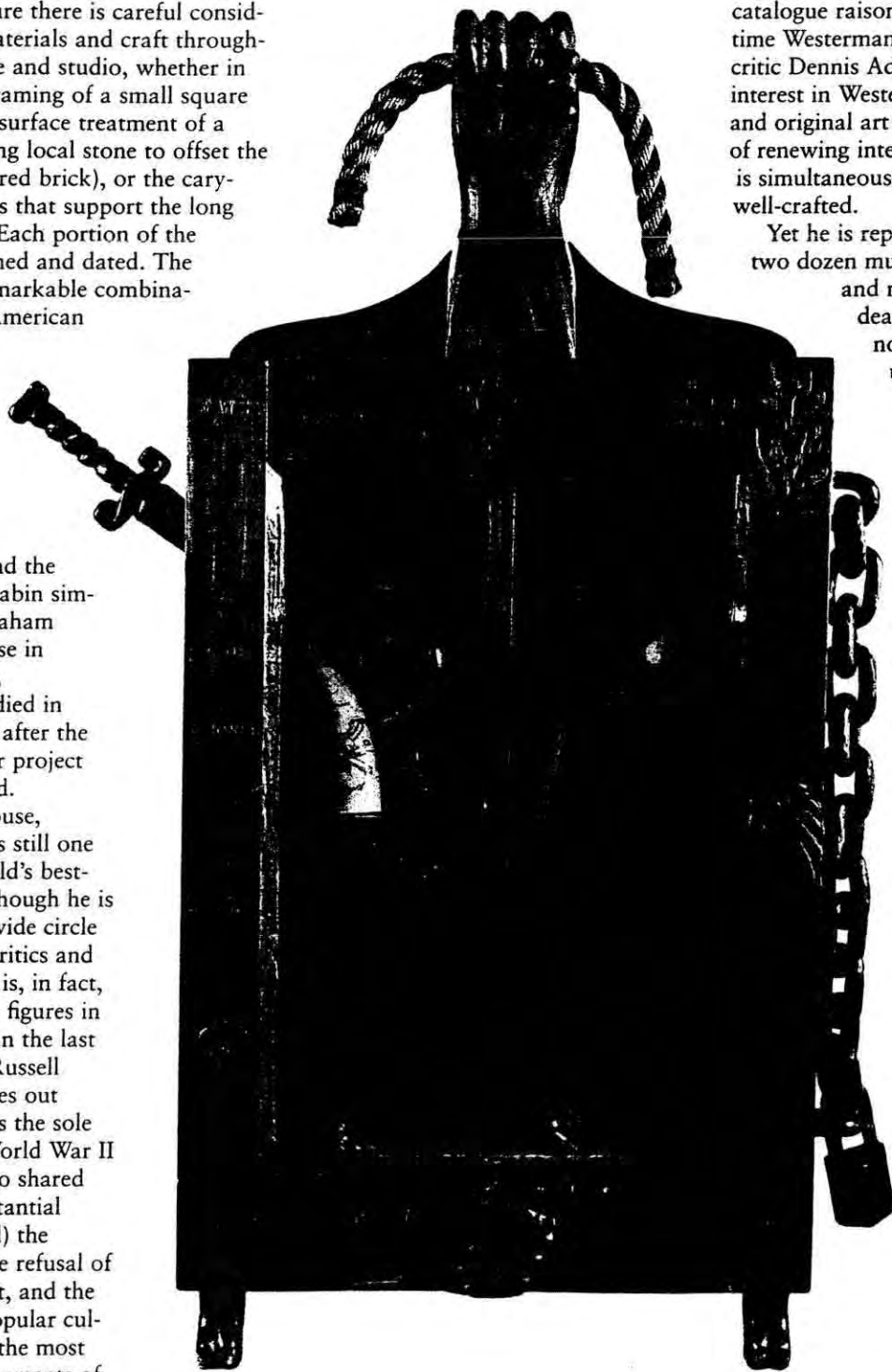
The home and studio of H.C. Westermann, in a recently gentrified region of Connecticut surrounded by tract homes and old farms, is a wonderful oasis away from a mad and imposing world—a great place to work, live, and hide out. The house itself (built by the artist, on a street aptly called Obtuse Road) is a life-size manifestation of Westermann's art; as in his sculpture there is careful consideration of materials and craft throughout the house and studio, whether in the elegant framing of a small square window, the surface treatment of a chimney (using local stone to offset the repetition of red brick), or the caryatid-like posts that support the long front porch. Each portion of the project is signed and dated. The house is a remarkable combination of two American traditions: the ingenious design of, for example, Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and the humble, log cabin simplicity of Abraham Lincoln's house in Illinois. Sadly, Westermann died in 1982, shortly after the nearly 13-year project was completed.

Like this house, Westermann is still one of the art world's best-kept secrets, though he is revered by a wide circle of American critics and collectors. He is, in fact, one of the key figures in American art in the last half-century. Russell Bowman singles out Westermann as the sole artist of the World War II generation who shared (and to a substantial extent inspired) the eccentricity, the refusal of mainstream art, and the openness to popular culture of one of the most important movements of

the 1960s: "In his vernacular leanings, his craftsmanship, and his stubborn refusal to work in any artistic system but his own, Westermann provided a model for all the Chicago Imagists." (Catalogue for "Who Chicago? An Exhibition of Contemporary Imagists," Ceolfrith Gallery, Sunderland Arts

Center, England, 1980, p. 24) He was featured in a key exhibition of that group's work, "Chicago Imagist Art," at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (MCA), in 1972, as well as in many other group and solo shows in Chicago and throughout the United States. Westermann will be the subject of a forthcoming 2000 retrospective organized by the MCA, as well as a catalogue raisonné written by longtime Westermann supporter and art critic Dennis Adrian. This renewed interest in Westermann's intriguing and original art should have the effect of renewing interest in sculpture that is simultaneously conceptual and well-crafted.

Yet he is represented in less than two dozen museum collections here, and none abroad. Since his death in 1981, there has not been a single museum tribute, and only a handful of reviews and articles (in a 1967 essay, Adrian complained of similar critical reception during Westermann's prime). Perhaps the greatest problem for the appreciation of Westermann's work is that there is no single category in which he can be placed. In spite of his association with the Imagists, he is not part of any particular style or movement. His entire oeuvre, in fact, represents a diary of social



Left: Korea Cabinet, 1965. Wood, glass, and objects, 34.5 x 24 x 7.5 in.

Opposite: Machine Dedicated to Spike Jones, 1976. Wood, leather, and brass, 38 x 29 x 28 in.

and political comments on the culture and society in which he operated.

To many people the name may ring a bell without a specific image coming immediately to mind—though the inventiveness, wit, and thoughtfulness of much of the best work of not only the 1960s but also of contemporary art is laced with the influence of Westermann's visual whimsy and literate humor. Among the artists whose own independent and visionary sculpture suggests Westermann's influence are Siah Armajani, Jackie Ferrara, Paul Thek, Charles LeDray, Donald Lipski, R.M. Fisher (especially the early light fixture assemblages), and Robin

Winters (in primitively styled glass busts and figurines). Richard Artschwager's popular black punctuation-mark multiples, which arrived on the scene in the '80s, were preceded by some 20 years by Westermann's elegantly polished 1962 wood carving of an exclamation mark, called *A Positive Thought*. Ian Hamilton Finlay, whose garden/studio in Scotland is the center of his world, shares with Westermann a taste for bitter irony, a fascination with the sea and sailing vessels, and the unabashed application of language to sculpture. Today's artists and Westermann share an emotional and

intellectual consternation in the face of modern everyday life—Westermann's work is in fact so evocative of daily life that once seen, his sculpture is difficult to shake from memory. There is something knowing and very real about Westermann's sculptures, even when they puzzle the viewer with a three-dimensional conundrum.

Born in Los Angeles in 1922, Westermann spent his formative years as an artist in Chicago. He was a wiry, athletic man, with a whimsical, impish grin, a receding hairline, and a Te Amo cigar always at hand (in his studio there is a large glass jar containing many paper rings from his cigars). He was shaped very much by his early years in the military and his experience of the horrors, futility, and devastation of war, both in the Pacific during World War II and again during the Korean conflict. His wartime experiences left him permanently scarred—like the pair of birds he had tattooed on his chest, those experiences would always be visible. At the time of the Vietnam War, Westermann joined thousands of others who opposed the latest American incursion in Asia.

After seeing a newspaper report in 1966 that described the forthcoming "live" coverage of the war for the American television audience, Westermann collaged the clipping in a letter and called it "sick," adding an epitaph for the times: "a Country Gone Nuts." Because of all he had witnessed, Westermann did not project a cheery picture of



Right: *Untitled (Box with Wood Samples)*, 1974. Vermilion, rosewood, and 17 samples of wood, 5.5 x 12 x 6 in.

His oeuvre is a diary of social and political commentary on his culture and society.



the human condition, which he knew to include frailty, stupidity, and plain meanness. Death and survival are themes that are returned to time and again in his work and in drawings and wonderfully illustrated letters to friends and colleagues. Critic Max Kozloff, writing in a catalogue essay for the 1968 retrospective at the L.A. County Museum, called Westermann's work an "iconography of despair and anguish." But hope always sneaks in, almost as a surprise. As an artist, Westermann combined the acumen of a keen observer and the charm of a hometown inventor. He created a coterie of fictional characters and scenarios that were truly his own: recurrent themes and subjects that include houses, robot-like figures, merchant ships (known as "Death Ships"), towers, and boxes.

Early houses, such as *Mad House* (1958) or *Burning House* (1958), illustrate the foremost characteristics of Westermann's methodology: highly finished work with vernacular subject matter with the atmosphere of a State Fair fun house. His objects could also be small tributes, tokens of love or companionship, as in *Untitled* (1974), a sample box which was made as a gift for his late wife Joanna Beall. The

wooden box is filled with 17 rectangular samples of woods identified by name and country of origin: "Cocobolo—Central America; Harewood—England; Cherry—U.S.A." The samples resemble a Valentine's Day box of chocolates, each a different color and texture but each very much handmade and infused with undying devotion. The lid is carved in low relief with an arrow through a heart.

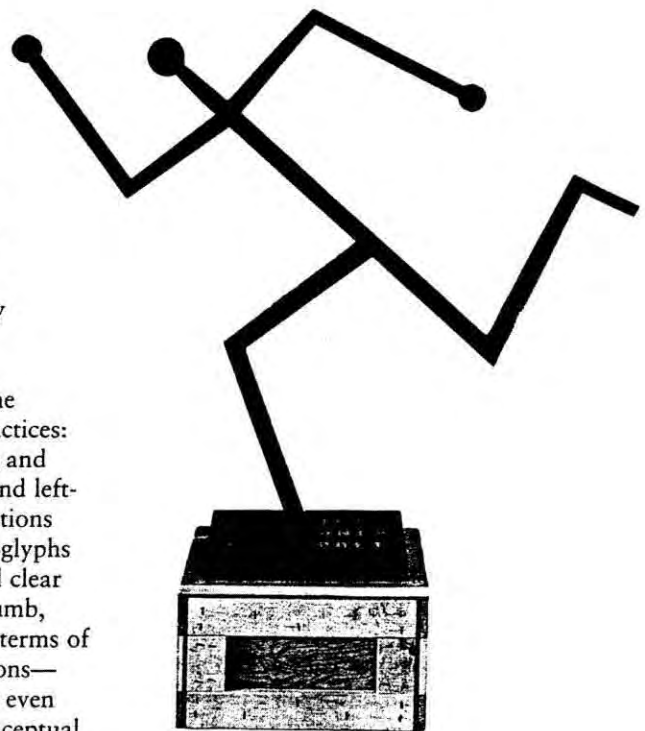
With this same passion and sentiment, Westermann fabricated or found many other objects that were put into boxes, such as *Clean Air* (1964), walnuts (1964), a pair of leather boots (1968), news of a U.F.O. landing in Africa (1974), or the corpse of a crooked man (in actuality just air, 1979). Each box was the equivalent of a declarative sentence: "I love you," "This is funny," "This is a ridiculous world." One box, called *A Little Black Cage* (1965), is a small self-portrait. It is a walnut and wire box with a small black handle. The inside of the box is fitted with a small gym including a rope to climb, a dumbbell, and a pair of rings—all reminders of Westermann's days as a professional acrobat touring for the U.S.O. At the same time it is a cell for some unseen and unspecified prisoner. Another character (and self-portrait) is *Mr. Goo*, a 1966 casting in chromium plate over bronze. A cross between the Pillsbury Dough Boy and the Michelin Tire Man, he is ready to perform but stuck to the bench by goeey, unyielding gunk.

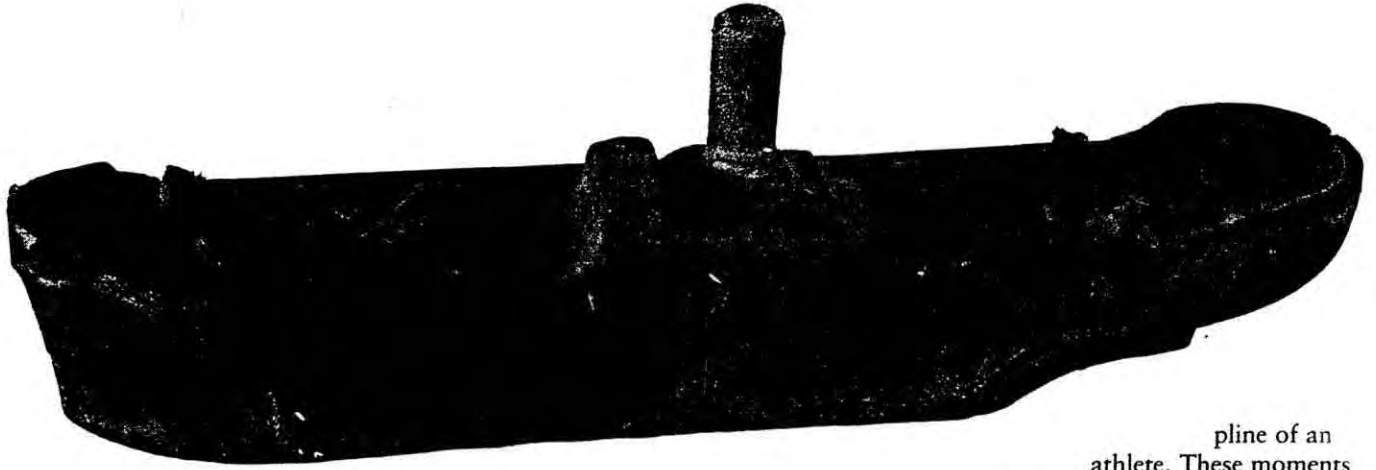
One might suggest that Westermann's sculpture is at the confluence of three distinct practices: rigorous American engineering and craftsmanship, wild sarcasm, and left-wing commentary. His observations could be as cryptic as the hieroglyphs on an Egyptian tomb or crystal clear to the point of being silly or dumb, but they were always stated in terms of the most brilliant of constructions—skilled carving and joinery that even more skillfully disguised its conceptual

motivation. The results are always subtle, wry, or caustic, and Westermann is one of a long list of artists whose strict, if not traditional, artistic practice is turned toward political action: Courbet, Mondrian, and even de Kooning were practitioners of craft and at the same time critics of their social milieu.

Westermann's *Horse* (1962) suggests a bloody prop left over from a Sam Peckinpah film: it is a hobby horse, a child's toy that is elegantly carved but does not work. Instead of rockers, the four legs rest on skis, and the layers of enamel are covered with a final wash of blood red that stains the horse's grinning teeth, mane, and flank. Westermann has turned this child's toy into a symbol of fear, anger, and rage. Taking the familiar and turning it 360 degrees forces one to reconsider what might otherwise be taken for granted, or simply overlooked. The little horse becomes an object from an Edgar

Above, left: *Jack*, 1971. Connecticut fieldstone and pine, 12.5 x 8 x 5.25 in. Below: *The One-Eyed Poet*, 1979. Ebony, mahogany, and maple, 54.75 x 60.25 x 12 in.





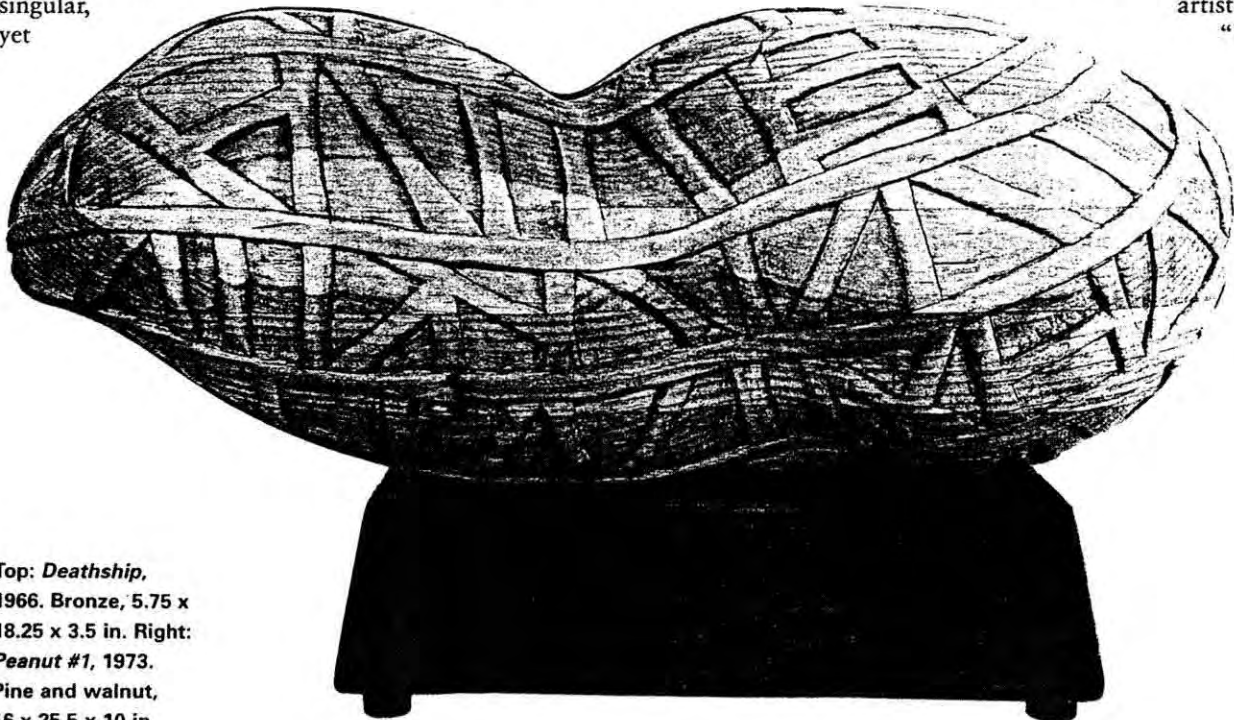
Allan Poe tale of horror rather than an innocent, decorative kid's plaything. The message is that the quiet of the playroom can easily explode into war games. Once again Westermann balances his sculpture on the edge between the work of art as a trophy and as an emblem.

Salvador Dali's *Lobster Telephone* (1936) or Man Ray's *Gift* (1921) may be historic precedents for Westermann's irony, but it is surely Alberto Giacometti's *The Palace at 4 A.M.* (1932–33) that lies behind his work, as it does behind much of 20th-century sculpture. The emotional turmoil and the anticipation of some singular, yet

undisclosed event that structures Giacometti's stage of wood, glass, wire, and string echoes in Westermann's polychromed wood tableaux. Each of Westermann's sculptures is a small-scale stage set in which a single act is played, or a single theme depicted, as in *Exotic Garden* (1962), *Nouveau Rat Trap* (1965), or *Indian Lookout* (1979). Westermann's protagonists are surely stand-ins for the artist himself, engaged in, as a 1971 title suggests, a battle to the death. This extreme engagement with the world is the residue of his war experience and of the demands and physical disci-

pline of an athlete. These moments are also symbolic representations of his life as an artist—his internal, emotional struggle to make art and his ambition to remain engaged, active, and independent. In one of the letters published in a 1988 collection edited by Bill Barrette, Westermann writes to his friend and dealer Allan Frumkin, "I am an American artist + don't give one God damn about the international scene." Westermann goes on to write "these things are very introspective + meditative." Many of the letters describe his plans and wishes, his frustrations with the machinations of a relatively small though highly competitive art world that he compares to the giant conglomerates, and the career fears and doubts that all

artists share:
"You know
the N.Y.
art



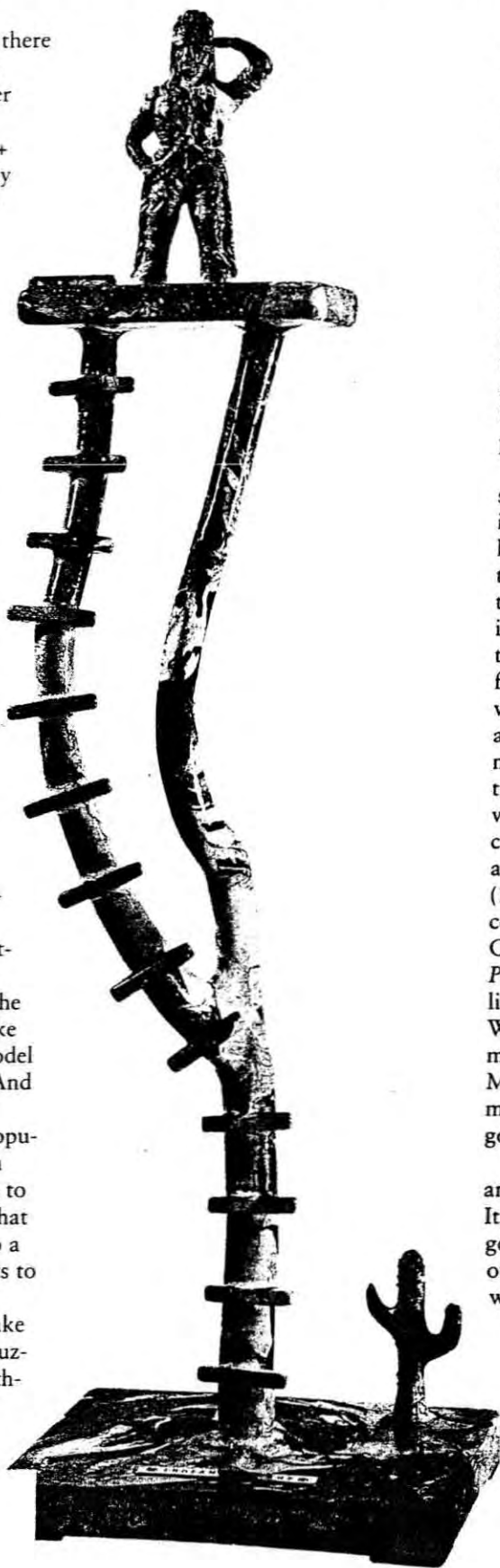
Top: *Deathship*, 1966. Bronze, 5.75 x 18.25 x 3.5 in. Right: *Peanut #1*, 1973. Pine and walnut, 16 x 25.5 x 10 in.

Today's art is strongly influenced by Westermann's whimsy and literate humor.

scene is about the phoniest thing there is. It is a joke + it's fantastic how many of them "pirate" from other artists...And then you have the cheap gossip amongst the artists + critics that is devastating—literally horrible lies...They all attend too many parties and don't work." Work was the aesthetic and ethical imperative in Westermann's studio.

Still completely intact, his studio is well-equipped for the jobs of carving, building, and assembling. There are even a pair of metal rings and a rope used for Westermann's daily physical workouts. Some sculptures seem to be manifestations of machines, like the wooden "machine dedicated to Spike Jones" or mechanized figures like the life-size figure *Jack of Diamonds* (1981) built entirely of galvanized wire mesh. Symbols of work appear in the 1973 carving called *Peanut #1*. It looks like first prize for "Best Peanut," but is also a visual explication of the feeling that we all work for "peanuts." Bigger than life, carved in pine with a walnut base, the peanut is presented as one might present a ship model or bowling trophy, very matter-of-fact and still somewhat mischievous. The commemoration is the result of a compulsive drive to make every ridge of its shell visible, a model of the best-made peanut in town. And by identifying it as *Peanut #1*, Westermann plays with the then popular Minimalist idea of working in a series, suggesting more of the same to come. For Westermann, however, that is rarely the case. He may return to a theme but it is the concept he wants to reexamine, not the formal design. Once he has figured out how to make the piece, the fun is gone and the puzzle is solved. But there may be another way to tell the story or a different way to produce a reaction.

Right: *Indian Lookout*, 1979. Wood, iron, lead, brass, and enamel, 33 x 10 x 7.5 in.



JACK (1971) shows another kind of carving, and another kind of model. Made from a Connecticut fieldstone cut to imitate the toothy smile of a jack-o'-lantern, the base is stamped with an anchor symbol and then engraved with a dedication to "little flower," as he lovingly referred to his wife. Yet, the stone head also has an uncanny resemblance to a skull and the unsettling suggestion of death in the recessed triangular eyes and the wide smile. Westermann made a second version, larger in scale but more childlike with its pseudo-pumpkin features and details.

Another repeated theme is a whimsical though somewhat haunting image of a running man, which looks like the model for a cartoon character. In *The One-Eyed Poet* (1979), this stick figure appears as a frolicking mid-'60s character. As a sculpture, the form moves again into the familiar realm of trophy, or sign; it is very two-dimensional. This figure appears several times in Westermann's work as a freestanding sculpture and in works on paper. Earlier versions include a work from 1966 called, in bad French, *Le Ronaire* and a cast bronze version, *The Jock Strap* (1966-67). In a 1970 work in the collection of the Des Moines Art Center, he appears in another role, *Phantom in a Wooden Garden*. As a lifelong witness to all that goes on in Westermann's world, he functions much like his mythological prototype, Mercury, speedily carrying important messages, even after the author is gone.

The final disposition of the house and studio has not been determined. It, like its owner, should not be forgotten. Perhaps it will remain the outpost it was designed to be, a place where sculpture can be made and a place where some of the work of Westermann and of his fellow independent artists can find a permanent home.

Michael Klein is a writer and frequent contributor to *Sculpture magazine*.