

# CULTURED

THE CRITICS' TABLE ART IN BRIEF

## Flashbacks to 1975, Glimpses of a Banned Instagram, and a Proto-Punk Penpal: 3 New York Critics Share Their Late-July Faves

Johanna Fateman admires the pre-drip geometry of the great Pat Steir at Hauser & Wirth, Will Harrison visits Khajistan's archive of ephemera and excess at SculptureCenter, and John Vincler sees H.C. Westermann with fresh eyes at Theodore.



### H.C. Westermann

Theodore Gallery | 373 Broadway, 6th floor, #F10  
Through August 1, 2025

H.C. Westermann (1922–1981) has super fans who delight in going deep into the most minor aspects of his work. But you needn't be a devoted acolyte (I'm not) to appreciate the letters, drawings, and prints gathered at Theodore. Previously, Westermann was best known to me for his sculptures that distill folk aesthetics into refined yet mysterious objects, marrying Americana with elements of Pop and Surrealism. But this show made me see the artist anew as a precursor to the punk energy of the likes of Raymond Pettibon.

The 37 objects, dating from 1967 to 1981, show—in fragments and flashes—an artist conjuring fantastical worlds or satirizing more familiar ones for the raucous entertainment of colleagues, dealers, and friends. The “Old Crow,” of the exhibition's title is an avatar for the artist himself, drawn on letters, with a top hat, bow tie, and cane, while smoking a cigar: both a performer and mischief maker. Also on view are examples of Westermann's haunting nautical works, such as the lithograph *Death Ship in Port*, 1972, a sparsely populated dock scene with an ominous ship at anchor in the distance (inspired, partly, by his childhood in Los Angeles during the very early days of Hollywood).

In his drawings, and especially in his correspondence that includes collaged cartoons, personal ads, and newspaper articles, Westermann revels in dressing up and making fun of a sometimes-ugly world. There is real community and comradery on display in such mementos recalling past meetings and shared meals, marking Valentine's Day and Christmas. These lively works on paper convey a generosity of spirit over a concern with commerce, but in a 1977 letter, he declines an offer for a swap of work. Thanking the addressee for sending “interesting material,” he concludes, “I'm not inclined to trade.” Westermann was also an artist who knew his worth. —John Vincler