

MIA WESTERLUND ROOSEN

SCULPTURE AND DRAWINGS



Cover illustration: Legion 1992

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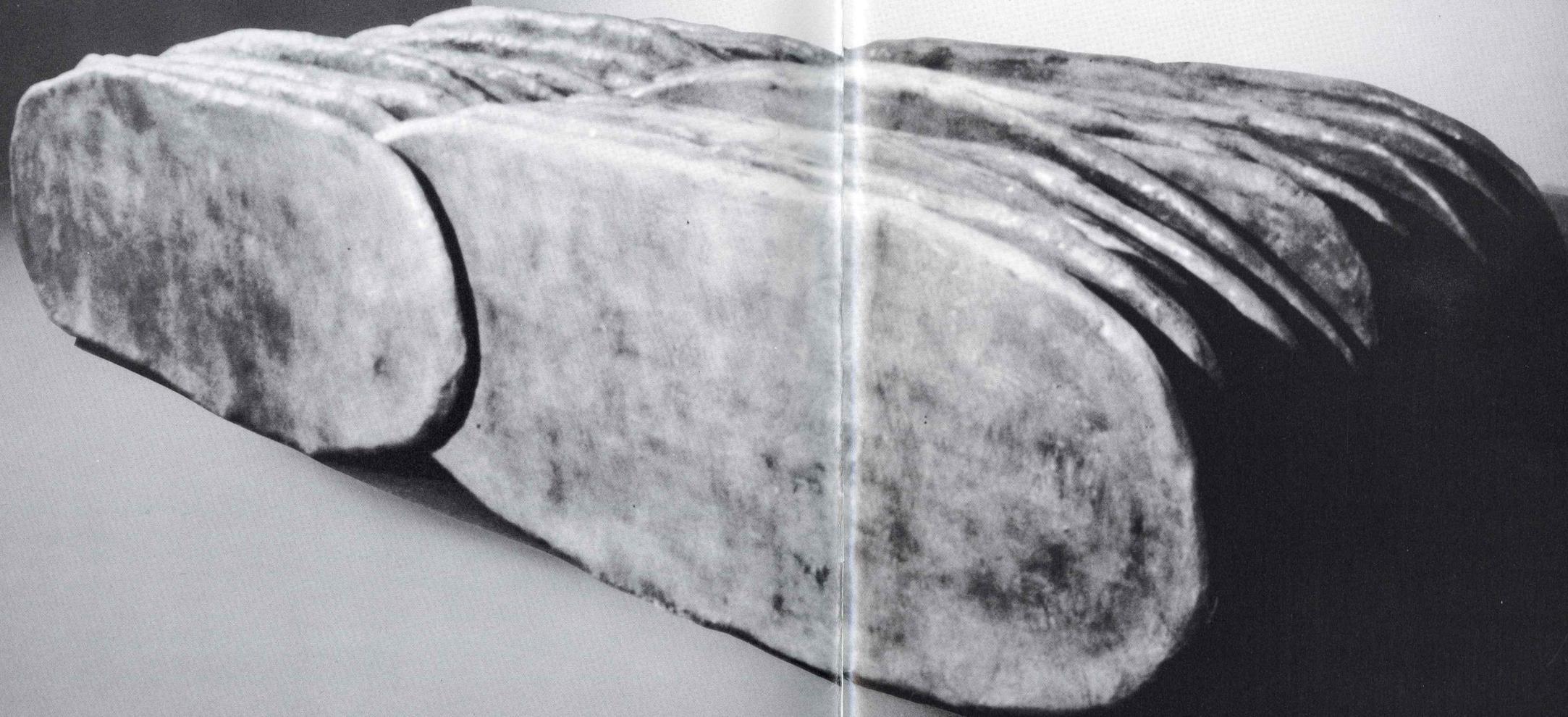
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M I A W E S T E R L U N D R O O S E N

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S C U L P T U R E A N D D R A W I N G S





Acknowledgements

It is with great pleasure that Storm King Art Center's Board of Trustees and staff present *Mia Westerlund Roosen: Sculpture and Drawings* for its 1994 season. This show surveys the artist's work from the early 1980s to the present, in which she has charted a hybrid course between abstraction and figuration, between reductive form and suggestive content. Her use of a variety of materials, including bronze, lead, concrete, and encaustic, adds to the sensuality of her pieces. Newly created drawings indicate her skill in two dimensions. A highlight of the exhibition is a group of outdoor sculptures that were conceived with the Art Center landscape in mind. These works probe the relationship between sculptural form and the earth itself.

Mia Westerlund Roosen: Sculpture and Drawings was made possible, in part, with public funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts. A major contribution was made by the Ralph E. Ogden Foundation. Education programs held in conjunction with the exhibition are supported, in part, by a generous grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

The Art Center is indebted to many individuals for their generosity and efforts in support of this exhibition. Our warm thanks go to the lenders to the exhibition: the artist and her dealer, Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., Thayer and Edwin Hochberg, and Peter Lewis. Jill Weinberg Adams of Lennon, Weinberg, Inc. provided crucial assistance, and our great appreciation is extended to her. We are especially grateful to Patricia C. Phillips, noted art critic and Chair of the Art Department at the State University of New York at New Paltz, who has written a probing essay on Roosen's work. Our warmest thanks are extended to Mia Westerlund Roosen herself. She worked closely with the curators and helped ensure the selection of pivotal works.

Special appreciation is extended to others involved with this project. David R. Collens, director, and Maureen Megerian, associate curator, conceived and installed the exhibition. Wise counsel and support came from our Trustee and Vice-Chairman, Cynthia Hazen Polsky. I recognize and thank the entire staff at Storm King Art Center for their efforts to present *Mia Westerlund Roosen: Sculpture and Drawings*.

H. Peter Stern
Chairman



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Disc (foreground)
1988

Triple Disc Horizontal
1988

(not in exhibition)

Signs of Imperfection

Patricia C. Phillips

Moreover, it is not the brain nor the heart that is the organ of recollection. It is the skin! For to gaze upon the skin is to bring to life the past . . .

It is all engraved here, that which I was, that which I did, all the old stories, but now purified somehow, the commonplace washed away, rinsed of all that is ordinary . . .!

Included in an anthology entitled *Nature Writing*, Richard Selzer's graphic yet poetic meditation on the human skin appears, at first, to be an odd companion to observations and experiences of the natural world including such reliable subjects as landscape, weather, animals, and travel. But Selzer describes, and convincingly confirms, the unmistakable connections of body and earth, surface and structure, form and meaning, nature and culture. Skin is naturally at home in this context.

As deftly as Selzer, a physician by training, negotiates the physiognomy and psychology of skin, Mia Westerlund Roosen uses pigmented and marked surfaces to propose that figuration and abstraction share a structural and visceral kinship, a lineage that the artist discovers through making forms. Roosen's generous diversity of sculptures all represent the enigmatic structures of form, of content never completely clear or accessible. As Selzer does with skin, Roosen also embraces imperfection as a subject and objective. In the same way that skin pictures and protects, Roosen's surfaces—especially those scarred and imperfect perhaps from age or accident—concern the paradoxical dynamics of clarification and concealment.

Roosen's sculptures manifest an ambiguous anatomy of organic form. Avoiding both perfectible geometric or direct figural forms, she exploits the iconographies of surface and material that can suggest a human presence—a physical and psychic engagement of space. The powerful irony of the work is that Roosen's

process of creation invokes actual objects and individual impressions that are resolutely evaded by her sculptural forms. We experience a human presence without specific visual clues; the work is always boldly abstract.

Roosen has been driven by a very personal momentum of ideas, yet she has not grown as an artist in a context-free environment. There is a traceable development and transformation of her sculpture influenced by a range of critical issues. The ambient environment of ideas in the last half of the 20th century, as well as the influence of particular individuals (Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, Alan Saret, and others) provide a cultural and historical setting to consider Roosen's independent, uncategorical work.

Much of her early work involved process—a commitment to creation that accepted the contingencies of time and the agency of the artist. Materials such as fabrics soaked with polyester resins described the time and nature of human activity. Forms that seemed quixotic and ephemeral, if not tentative, manifested the action of decisions. As they became solid they seemed more like pauses—suspended gestures—than enduring objects. Like performance, immediacy and urgency were both method and meaning. Work inscribed the intuitive character of thought.

Roosen describes her transition from process-oriented work to more lasting, predetermined forms as an acceptance of a more involved, deliberative decision-making process. Yet while there is a more conscious use of less pliant materials, she remains dedicated to the animating tension between calculated intelligence and intuitive reactions required to create these memorable forms. This adjustment to another time and space of form was a personal process of clarification that also reflected Roosen's opposition to the retentive grip—the critical standardization—that Minimalism had wrought on sculptural ideas in the 1970s.



Pursuing simple, sometimes serial and colorful forms, Roosen accepted the formal parameters of Minimalism. But her insistence on an unusual range of materials imprinted with evidence of the artist's unique production process was a quietly defiant gesture made to humanize the obsessive anonymity of the normative, fabricated form. Handmade trays for poured concrete enabled her to make multiple elements that are each variable. Minimalism normalized form; Roosen particularized abstraction.

By the mid-1970s Roosen had completely departed from the temporal process of stiffened fabric hastily draped and arranged over temporary armatures and began to work exclusively with commonplace, often inelegant, materials such as concrete and asphalt. Not only was there a shift in process, methodology, and duration, but there was an engagement of a new ideology—and instrumentality—of materials. Concrete's viscosity and slow transformation from fluid to solid raised significant questions about the relation of production, methods, creative thought, and gesture. Concrete is used to make sidewalks and building foundations. It is a predominant material of the urban environment, as banal as it is ubiquitous. It is poured into wooden forms that endow it with shape. Roosen uses it to create marvelous insinuations of organic forms evocative of landscape elements or body parts. Associations of concrete as the flesh and bones of modern cities' rationalized forms are upended by the artist's modeled, idiosyncratic management of the material. The work alters conventional expectations about how meaning is embedded in surface.

Conical [Fig. 2] and *Heat* [Fig. 4], both 1981, share a recognizable familial connection. Made of concrete and encaustic layered over armatures, their extraordinarily simple, deliberately dumb shapes are confounded by the blemishes, pox, and other irregularities of the surface. Like the coarse skin of an old man or woman, the surface discloses a time and history; skin

maps experience. The rich, paradoxical qualities of skin are also exposed in *Baritone*, 1985, [Fig. 9]. The paired, pear-shaped forms could be large pods or rocks—or a misshapen set of lungs, breasts, testicles, or other body parts. Like many of Roosen's titles that seem deceptively direct, *Baritone* confirms the vague, presumptuous, and often unreliable strategies of gender identification.

These conjoined forms are made of concrete covered with a thin skin of hammered lead. All of the imperfections of the interior form—the manipulation of wet concrete—are inscribed on the metal surface. The lead skin becomes a witness to the painstaking work of the artist who willed into shape this craggy hide. The tough veneer suggests an underlying vulnerability, an interior ironically both darkly disguised and partially disclosed. This proud flesh is at once an aberration, protection, and a probe. As the connective tissue between the form and the surrounding space, it bears the tension of internal and external forces. The skin is "at once keeper of the organs within, and sensitive probe, adventurer into the world outside."²

While the singular form describes the tension hidden beneath the thinnest of skins, seriality has enabled Roosen to explore other ideas—to enlarge the disquieting ambiguity between identifiable objects and abstract elements. *Olympia*, 1990, [Fig. 1] is a long, low construction. Two parallel processions of long, flat, petal-like shapes balanced on slender edges overlap like the teeth of a zipper. They are held in place by a bar threaded through their conjoining ends. Using plaster mixed with wood pulp and colored with encaustic, these landscape-scale plates have the color, character, and variability of skin; they look damp and dimpled, coarse and weathered. Suggesting a curious aggregation of natural forms or a methodical arrangement of mass-produced components, Roosen does not allow viewers to rest comfortably or complacently with either—or any—literal conclusion.

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Bethlehem Slouch 1993





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Bethlehem Slouch 1993



CLEMENS KALISCHER



American Beauties, 1990, [Fig. 11] uses surface and seriality in another pursuit of body politics. Pink, disc-like forms connected end-to-end stretch across the floor. Like the blades of a harrow that rotate through the landscape to deeply gouge and turn the soil for cultivation, there is a sense of potential disruption. But the sweet, flesh-like colors and conical forms also look like an incongruous procession of breasts. At once ludicrous and disturbing, the sculpture is a beauty-pageant line-up of the imperfect and aged. These are forms that register real, touching life stories, like “those whose state of grace is marginal, the ragtail and bobtag, those in whom the difference from homely to comely is but a single freckle, one wart, a crease.”³ These forms bear little correspondence to the stereotypical icon of female sexuality. The fact that the sculpture looks like a collection of female breasts or a threatening piece of farm equipment discloses the fragility of our symbols—their vulnerability to the inevitable impressions of circumstance and predisposition.

Skin and surface invoke a restless range of ideas in the natural world. The earth has its own, highly variegated skin that is constantly shifted, ruptured, and arranged by human beings as well as undividable natural forces. The Army Corps of Engineers, agribusiness, and slow erosion are just some of the systematic ways that great expanses of land are realigned. In contrast to these vast, methodical operations the earth’s own chaotic, molten core often erupts to violently cut, splay, and sear new identifications on the land. The breaking of the surface is analogous to the incision of flesh. But these marks on the land and body, inevitably violent in some capacity, often reveal a constructive, creative, curious, and curative objective.

In a quartet of sculptures at Storm King Art Center, Roosen breaks the surface of the land—digs below the skin of landscaped forms and manicured lawns—to excavate ideas that confirm a historical, unbreachable correspondence between the earth and humankind,

organic and produced forms, geological time and human temporality. Creating channels as well as underground crypts, she invokes a history of human settlement in the landscape—the common landscape of canals, cisterns, and cemeteries—with a more personal exploration of form and meaning.

Crib, 1992, [Fig. 12] is a three-foot-deep rectangle cut into the earth. Its sides are lined with steel to create a precise chamber—a clearly circumscribed vault. In this excavated hole Roosen has placed a large concrete “rock.” Its generous proportions fill the chamber and peek above the surface. Squeezed into cramped circumstances, there is a touching awkwardness and conceptual ambiguity. Is this big, ungainly form being buried, or is it slowly emerging from its subterranean prison? Has it simply outgrown this hollow in the landscape, or is this robust organic form a sign of the abundance and possibility of the land—the fierce fecundity of the natural world?

The title of *Adam’s Fault*, 1993–94, [Fig. 8] suggests an engaging perplexity and imprecision. Is Adam to blame for some act or deed, or is he simply the unfortunate steward of this deeply scored landscape? For this installation, Roosen cut a trench that stretches eighty feet. Five feet deep and four feet wide, it forms a great channel—a deep fault in Storm King’s sculpted landscape. The arduous signs of excavation remain in place. The interior walls are not supported or lined; they remain as remarkable, if brutal, evidence of an incision. The deeply hewn walls offer sectional readings of geological time—of layers of rock and soil of deepening hue and contrasting density.

Spaced irregularly on either side along the length of the canal, Roosen has installed eight potato-shaped concrete forms. It appears that half of each form is embedded in the wall. Neither obviously organic or explicitly engineered, they occupy portions of the deep cavern. Their purpose and presence are unre-



CLEMENS KALISCHER

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Domestic Disturbance II 1993



solvable. Were they discovered through excavation, or did they emerge later? Do these serial forms suggest a premeditated infrastructure, or a mysterious deposit of enormous natural forms? Does this "fault" suggest some fracture that is the consequence of nature's violent capacity, or is it a mark of human greed, weakness, desire, or need? The questions and metaphors extend beyond the conditions of the site to the volatile relation of the human community and the environment.

For the sculpture placed closest to the Art Center's central hilltop, Roosen uses excavation and seriality to make human and landscape concepts disturbingly complicit. Its title is inspired by the final line of William Butler Yeats' poem "The Second Coming." *Bethlehem Slouch*, 1993, [Figs. 5, 6, and 7] is a bleak manifestation of the inevitable, entropic passage of life. In a wedge-shaped trough the artist has layered and leaned a series of concrete plates, each with a raised edge. From certain angles, the sculpture looks like a topographical drawing. Each plate forms a line that signifies subtly changing elevations. Wedged tightly and stooped by their collective weight, the slow procession appears to sink into the ground in a quiet state of resignation. The pitted surfaces are testaments to lives of difficulty, despair—even diffidence.

*I hold no brief for rosy, turgid youth. It does but stir envy and leave compassion unaroused. My sympathies lie with the aging—those, motley with spots, gypsy with plaques and knobs, in whom each misfeatured stain announces with grim certainty the relentless slouching toward . . . the end.*⁴

The skin is a vessel—tough, flexible, and profoundly paradoxical in the ways that it distinguishes and disguises. At the same time that it maintains the margins of the body or the earth,

it also manifests the first signs of trouble or disruption. *Domestic Disturbance II*, 1993, [Fig. 10] is a boldly striped black and white carpet of concrete and pigment. Placed on the gallery floor, there is a small undulation in the center. The mound interrupts the unbroken horizontal expanse but remains an unidentifiable form. In fact, it is ambiguity which is the source of "disturbance." What is this encroachment of domestic order and tranquility? How did it get there? What are the risks involved in revealing it? Does "it" actually exist? Engaging the powerful metaphor of skin as covering, Roosen teases this regular, ordered expanse to expose the psychological dimensions of anxiety that register just below the surface.

Selzer describes skin as: ". . . the instrument by which we are thrilled, protected, and kept constant in our natural place."⁵ Roosen's sculptures also serve as instruments to consider the temporal, physical, and psychological spaces of the contemporary world. Like the porous nature of the human skin, the sculptures are membranes that allow the exterior and interior, the figurative and abstract, nature and culture to travel freely back and forth. The sure sense of balance in the work is, in fact, the consequence of constant movement between the imperfect realms of physical and psychological experience. Time and time again Mia Westerlund Roosen shows that deep meaning is surprisingly close to the surface.

1 Richard Selzer, "Skin," from *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976, reprinted in *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*, edited by Robert Finch and John Elder, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990, 715.

2 *Ibid.*, 709.

3 *Ibid.*, 714.

4 *Ibid.*, 713–714.

5 *Ibid.*, 709.

Mia Westerlund Roosen's New Outdoor Sculpture: An Interview

Maureen Megerian

Maureen Megerian: Why did you decide to make sculpture that incorporates the landscape as in these new works in the exhibition at Storm King Art Center?

Mia Westerlund Roosen: I've always worked on a large scale. I don't feel as deeply engaged in a piece otherwise. In the past the main reason for some of my work being outdoors was simply a practical one—it didn't fit inside most homes. After showing for twenty years, making discrete objects that were set down in neutral gallery spaces, I wanted to make a larger gesture, taking into consideration an entire gallery or outdoor space. I don't consider myself a site-artist. I am still an object maker. But these new pieces at Storm King actually marry object-making, a large gesture, and interactions with the earth itself.

MM: Can you describe the nature of this "marriage," as you call it?

MWR: The cuts in the land act metaphorically as drawing and literally as structure for the sculptures. The landscape also helps to soften the materials of the sculptures—concrete is so identified with architecture, industry, and the man-made. Since nature and the landscape are in constant flux, there's a dynamic relationship between the sculptures and their setting. The organic forms of the pieces and their placement in the earth reflect such a mutability, and the boundaries between object and environment tend to collapse.

MM: How do the steel boxes that hold the forms of *Crib*, *Legion*, and *Bethlehem Slouch* relate to these ideas?

MWR: Well, the boxes are somewhat practical. If you dig a hole, you usually need walls to hold back the earth. The boxes also give the

concrete forms something to react against. They separate two organic things—that is, the organic forms of the sculpture and the earth—and allow the viewer to see each more clearly. The excavations act as a type of frame or pedestal for the objects, in the same way that I have made sculptures within tables that became particularized pedestals. *Adam's Fault*, of course, is not lined with steel, because the earth held when I set it up, and I like it that way. I considered making the trench crooked, but I think its straight line acts somewhat like the steel boxes. The question is how to get the forms to interact with the boxes and with the earth. Obviously the colors have something to do with it—the fleshy pinks and bruise-like purples—because they are so unnatural, yet natural at the same time.

MM: Not only are the shapes of your sculptures organic, but your ideas for shapes seem to grow out of other shapes, and repeat themselves. Did working outdoors affect this generative method of invention?

MWR: I think the same thought processes took place. I've been working on and off with repetition since the early 1970s. Repetition reflects natural processes, so for the pieces in the landscape it feels especially logical. The forms themselves are the same ones I've been making since I was a kid—reductive, simple, irregular shapes. Because they are so elemental, they seem sympathetic to the landscape. Taking a blob of material that has no recognizable meaning and giving it life and context is an enormous challenge for me. Repetition within the forms adds to their monolithic quality because it's an organic repetition that makes each form a unified whole.

MM: Your titles are very intriguing. How do you come up with them?

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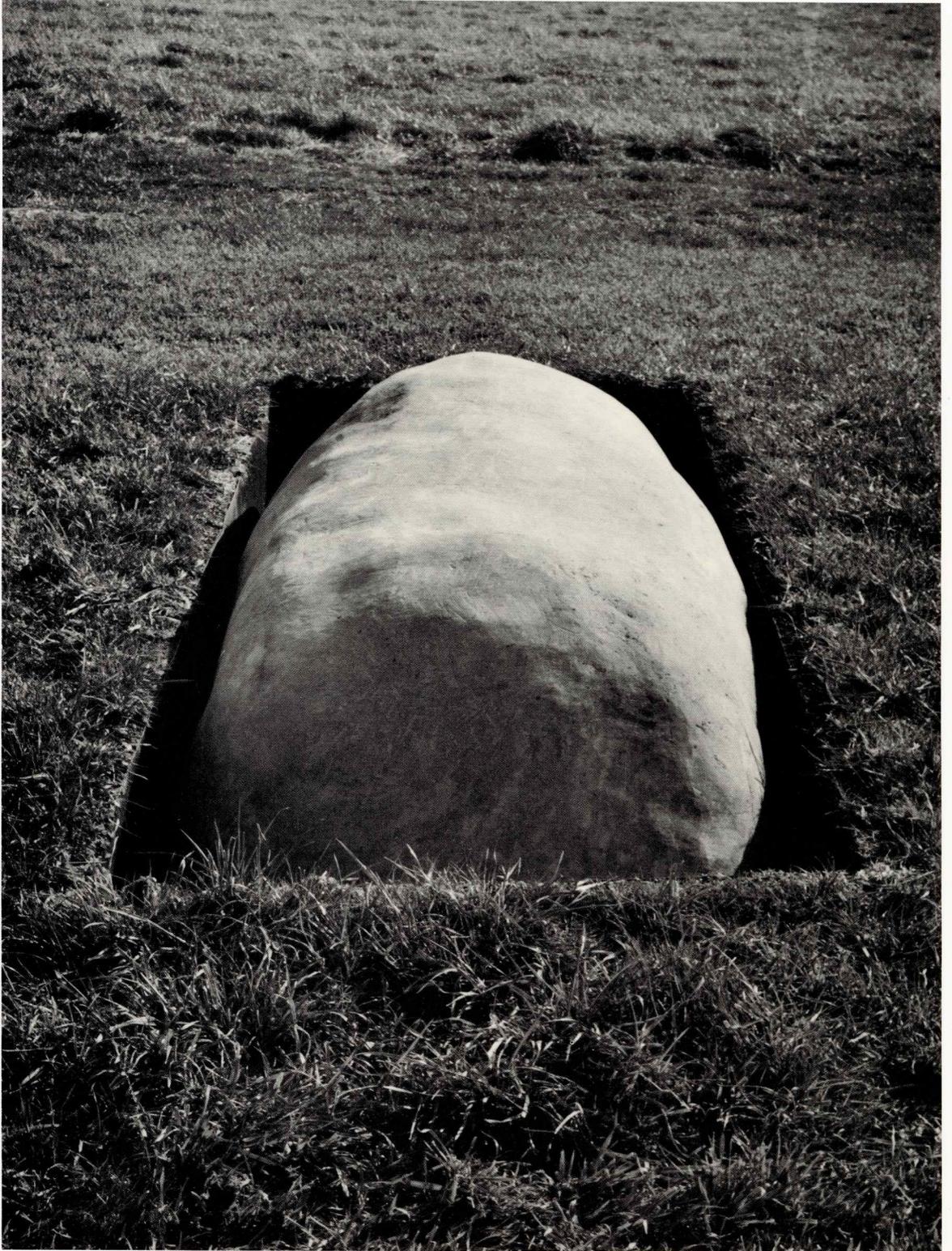
American Beauties, 1990



MWR: I used to give pieces really subdued titles that just described the shapes. Then I began to want to give viewers more information. I really search for titles. I have always thought that my work has an awkward humor. The imagery of the earth pieces, however, is so imbued with mythology that they are not exactly lighthearted. Their titles—*Bethlehem Slouch*, *Adam's Fault*, for example—make somewhat ponderous references. And there is a lot of sexuality in many pieces, so some of the titles reflect that, such as *American Beauties* and *Heat*.

MM: When you make such intriguing allusions to sexuality and other realms in your titles, does it make viewers more aware of content and less aware of the work's abstract qualities?

MWR: Probably it does make viewers more aware of content, but that is one way to engage them. Pure abstraction does not seem appropriate to our time. There are things that need to be said, or maybe not so much said as referred to. I have gingerly added more concrete allusions to my work over the years. Of course, getting beyond content is where the real joy lies in looking at art—where there is visual and sensual pleasure, where art rises above narrative. The ideal is to make art that has both qualities.



Biography

Born in New York City in 1942, Mia Westerlund Roosen studied at the Art Students League in New York. She was a 1993 recipient of a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. She lives and works in New York City and Buskirk, New York.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

1993

Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., New York

1991

Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., New York
Sculpture Center, New York

1989

Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica, California
Christine Burgin Gallery, New York
Joseloff Gallery, Harry Jack Gray Center,
University of Hartford, West Hartford, Connecticut

1987

CompassRose Gallery, Chicago, Illinois

1986

Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

1985

The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York

1982

Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

1980

Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York
Clocktower, Institute for Art and Urban Resources,
New York

1978

Vancouver Art Gallery, British Columbia, Canada

Selected Group Exhibitions

1993

Edward Albee's Other Eye: Sculptural Objects from the Edward Albee and Edward F. Albee Foundation Collections, Hillwood Art Museum, Long Island University, C.W. Post Campus, Brookville, New York

1991

The Atlanta College of Art, Georgia

1989

Figuratively Speaking: Drawings by Seven Artists, The Neuberger Museum, State University of New York at Purchase

1988–89

Figurative Impulses, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California
17 Years at the Barn: Highlights of the Edward F. Albee Foundation, Rosa Esman Gallery, New York

1987

Leo Castelli & His Artists: 30 Years of Promoting Contemporary Art, Centro Cultural Arte Contemporaneo, Mexico City, Mexico

1985

The Maximal Implication of the Minimal Line, Edith C. Blum Art Institute, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

1984

Transformation of the Minimal Style: Materials & Meaning, Sculpture Center, New York

1983

Content in Abstraction: The Uses of Nature, The High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia

1981

Hunter College Art Galleries, New York

1980

The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

1977

Musée d'Art Contemporain, Montreal, Canada

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Doll, Nancy. *Figurative Impulses: Five Contemporary Sculptors*. Santa Barbara, California: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1988–89.

Feinberg, Jean E. "Evocative Abstraction: The Sculpture of Mia Westerlund Roosen." *Arts* (October 1986): 18–20.

Miller, Nancy. *Figuratively Speaking: Drawings by Seven Artists*. Purchase, New York: The Neuberger Museum, 1989.

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Raynor, Vivien. "Large Sculptures of Pale Presence." *New York Times*, September 3, 1989: CN-26.

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Mia Westerlund Roosen. Essay by Carter Ratcliff. West Hartford, Connecticut: Joseloff Gallery, Harry Jack Gray Center, University of Hartford, 1989.

Viney, Jill. "Mia Westerlund Roosen: Sculpture with a Life Force." *International Sculpture* (September/October 1986): 7, 34–35.

Mia Westerlund: Recent Work/Sculpture and Drawing. Essay by John Chandler. Vancouver, British Columbia: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1978.

White, Peter. "Mia Westerlund's Pictorial Sculpture." *Parachute* (Winter 1978): 36–39.

Checklist

Conical, 1981

Concrete and encaustic

41 x 86 x 43 inches

Lent by the artist, courtesy Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

Heat, 1981

Concrete and encaustic

130 x 58 x 47 inches

Lent by the artist, courtesy Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

Rooting Rocket, 1982

Concrete and encaustic

37 x 108 x 34 inches

Lent by the artist, courtesy Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

Baritone, 1985

Concrete and lead

60 x 50 x 23 inches

Lent by Thayer and Edwin Hochberg

Disc, 1988

Concrete and lead

11 x 60 x 60 inches

Lent by the artist, courtesy Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

Triple Disc Bronze, 1990

Bronze

29 x 60 x 60 inches

Lent by the artist, courtesy Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

American Beauties, 1990

Concrete and encaustic

23 x 23 x 240 inches*

Lent by the artist, courtesy Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

Olympia, 1990

Plaster pulp and encaustic

48 x 96 x 180 inches

Lent by the artist, courtesy Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

Crib, 1992

Concrete, pigment, and steel

49 x 48 x 120 inches

Lent by the artist, courtesy Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

Legion, 1992

Concrete, pigment, and steel

54 x 48 x 120 inches

Lent by the artist, courtesy Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

Domestic Disturbance II, 1993

Concrete and pigment

4 1/2 x 95 1/2 x 72 inches

Lent by the artist, courtesy Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

Bethlehem Slouch, 1993

Concrete, pigment, and steel

30 x 132 x 240 inches

Lent by Peter Lewis

Adam's Fault, 1993-94

Concrete and pigment

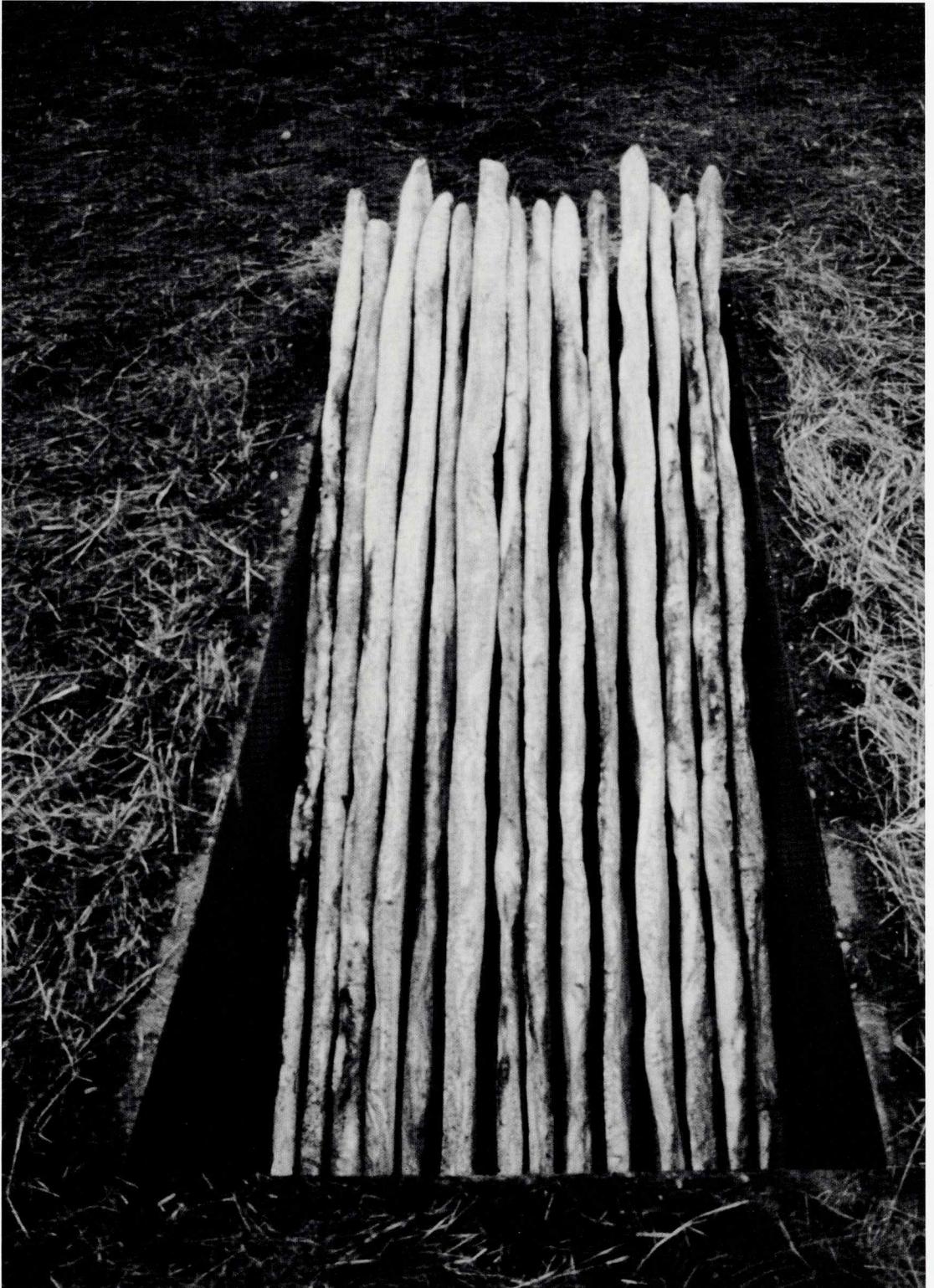
60 x 48 x 960 inches

Lent by the artist, courtesy Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

Selection of three drawings

Lent by the artist, courtesy Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

* A shortened version of *American Beauties* is on view at Storm King Art Center



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