

## **A journey through Emil Westman Hertz's Works in**

### **Horsens Kunstmuseum's Collection**

*By Claus Hagedorn-Olsen*

The focus area of Horsens Kunstmuseum is modern experimental contemporary art. As a cultural institution, the museum strives to build collections of art that seeks, at any given time, to innovatively interpret the world that produces it, either in terms of form or attitude.

My first encounter with the world of Emil Westman Hertz goes back to 2011 at the exhibition *Feber (Fever)*. A complex exhibition inviting the audience into a multifarious world of accumulations, installations, and drawings but also a few works of a more traditional character. On that occasion, the first work was acquired for the collection at Horsens Kunstmuseum: the sculpture *Sygeleje (Sickbed)* from the same year.

I did not meet Emil Westman Hertz until later and, when I did, I saw a person for whom artistic creation was driven by sheer necessity. This was an artist who had the potential to become yet another cornerstone of Horsens Kunstmuseum's collections.

My last meeting with Emil Westman Hertz took place a few months before his death. He came to Horsens to place *Prinsens Have (The Prince's Garden)* in the showcase we had developed jointly for his large installation. Later, in the spring, we had arranged to meet him on his native island of Bornholm, where he wanted to show us his exhibition *Under bjerget (Beneath the Mountain)* at Bornholms Kunstmuseum. He sadly died before our scheduled meeting, and all we could do was to see the exhibition with him in our thoughts.

In his short life, Emil Westman Hertz managed to create an oeuvre whose distinctive approach to sculpture places him at the pinnacle of Danish sculptural tradition: among visual artists like Bjørn Nørgaard, Ib Braase, and Martin Erik Andersen.

Emil Westman Hertz's approach to art is characterised by his interest in ethnography and, more particularly perhaps, an interest in nature and the place of mankind in this and in the world generally.

His artistic universe rarely contains singular figurations. Rather, it consists of juxtapositions which can be interpreted as architecture, constructed nature – either free-standing or placed in old showcases from natural history museums and school biology rooms. They are also conspicuous in large-scale drawings where he creates worlds unlike our own.

In a sense, placing them in old showcases lifts them out of the art space and into a reality closer to the world of science or small Wunderkammern. We enter a wholly unique world in which viewers' interpretative options are immense.

Emil Westman Hertz's practice was often a transformation in the sense that elements from works were used for new works in new contexts. Thus, Emil Westman Hertz's work perception departed from the traditional one. The works were, in reality, unfinished: they represented a specific point in an ongoing process, a snapshot. From a greater perspective, they remain 'frozen' – not only because the artist can no longer work on them, but chiefly because they are now part of Horsens Kunstmuseum's collection and can under no circumstances be altered. Horsens Kunstmuseum's collection comprises a broad selection of Emil Westman Hertz's oeuvre from his first graphic works created in 2008 to *Telt (Tent)*, one of his last works shown at the exhibition *Under bjerget* in 2016. The intervening period saw several sculptures and installations as well as drawings, primarily in the form of ideas on paper. In the following, a number of these works will be discussed in an effort to prise open the artist's very complex world inspired by literature, cartoons, ethnography, and local nature without necessarily wanting to get to the root of things.

Emil Westman Hertz came from a diverse background. He was born and grew up in Gudhjem on the island of Bornholm, and his family counted several artists, including his mother Inge Lise Westman. He studied Eskimology, graduated from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, and travelled extensively, not least with his father Ole Hertz, an ethnologist and bee expert.

Emil Westman Hertz contracted leukaemia shortly after having graduated from the Academy. Life with a terminal illness naturally became an inevitable factor in his artistic creative process, both as an ever-present undertone but also in several works directly referencing his life situation. The extent to which his illness is a decisive factor when experiencing his work is, of course, debatable. Nevertheless, art-historical theorising apart and thinking of artists first and foremost as people, it seems unthinkable that it should not have been a constant companion in his daily work with visual art.

*Sygeleje* was, as mentioned, shown at the exhibition *Feber* whence it was later acquired. It comprises several elements: in a large showcase, a large beeswax sheet is placed which, like a mattress, is ready to receive a sick patient, perhaps adapting its shape to the feverish body.

Outside the showcase, a tower has been built from empty medicine cartons whose content has been ingested by the artist, clay vessels filled with honey from his own beehives, one of a pair of crutches, and a few more items.

A sickbed certainly, but perhaps also a coffin. This is evident from the sculpture's other elements, inevitably recalling burials from the past, where food was provided for the journey to the hereafter. Thus, it is a work which transcends Emil Westman Hertz' own world. The work introduces some of the materials and methods we see time and again in the artist's works. The showcase, beeswax, materials from nature, not forgetting the

artist's own empty medicine cartons. The actual character of the installation – the juxtaposition of different objects – is also, as already mentioned, a general feature of his oeuvre.

The basic theme of illness and the inevitable one of death recur in the work *Alt hvad der var er nu væk* (Everything That Was Is Now Gone), now part of the museum collection. A work which is relatively isolated in its choice of materials. A text written in neon, *Alt hvad der var er nu væk*, a linen sheet and, not forgetting, a stuffed black hen hung on the wall as a tripartite installation. This installation was the key work in the exhibition of the same name.

The idea of the definitive end constitutes an undertone in this work. There is nothing left, and the white sheet can only be interpreted as a shroud. The black hen, presumably one of the artist's own hens, may point us in a different direction. Hens are, of course, capable of laying golden eggs. Could this represent a trace of hope?

*Alt hvad der var er nu væk* is essentially a *memento mori* which, in the exhibition of the same name, was accompanied by *Medicinlinjer 1-7* (Medicine Lines 1–7), of which *Medicinlinje 5* is held in Horsens Kunstmuseum's collection.

The juxtaposition of a series of elements, often in rows as in *Sygeleje*, is also evident in *Medicinlinje 5* from 2014. The arrangement is almost museum-like, certainly when we consider how culture-historical museums of the last century presented their artefacts in endless rows.

When the work was shown in 2014, it did not appear in isolation as it does now but formed part of a larger installation (see picture), which could be interpreted as a total installation, and I am convinced that it was so in Emil Westman Hertz's world. In the real world, it has been necessary to divide the work into smaller parts for commercial reasons. This means that *Medicinlinje 5* is now in our collection, whereas some elements were integrated into other works.

In terms of the materials used in *Medicinlinje 5*, we are on home ground in the artist's world: wax, cardboard, twigs, polystyrene, and a wax-filled stalk from a giant hogweed. We are still in the world of disease but this time, perhaps, inside the body. Certain elements are abstract, but there are also elements reminiscent of lungs and respiratory passages – so, perhaps it is a decaying human body lying on the floor in front of us.

The human body as an element of self-contained artistic work is evident in several works on paper in the museum collection, where Emil Westman Hertz looks beyond the skin and into the body, illustrating the bodily cycle.

During his period of illness, the artist must have met countless health workers. Perhaps the work *Natsygeplejersken* (Night Nurse) from 2016 represents a portrait of one of these.

The choice of material in this sculpture is unique, as the artist has used polyurethane foam constructed around a steel-wire frame. An advantage of this material is that it is practically weightless and is easy to work. This was one of the last sculptures created by Emil Westman Hertz. He had lost his strength. We see a shape reminiscent of a human form – a night nurse.

References to illness are not, of course, always present to the extent mentioned so far. The sources of inspiration were innumerable and many-faceted, but a couple of cases distinctly references specific literary inspiration.

An element that Emil Westman Hertz reverted to repeatedly is the face. It forms part of large works, or can be a separate work in its own right.

*Uden titel* (Untitled), created chiefly of newspaper, is one such example. A face covered by a mask of news from the real world with an accompanying construction that shields the face. The work is undated but the choice of material could mean that, like *Natsygeplejersken*, it is one of his very late works.

*Det nye ansigt* (New Face) from 2013 is related to several other works, in which the head plays a key role, for example, titled *Face of Another*. The materials used are wax, polystyrene, wood, and a pill carton placed in a row in a showcase. Not only a work but also a museum exhibition. The face was modelled by the artist and then placed in a beehive, where the bees have given it its present appearance. A meeting of art and nature.

There is little doubt that the title as well as the faces created by Emil Westman Hertz are specific literary references: *Face of Another*, for example, refers to the Japanese writer Kobo Abe's (1924–1993) book from 1964. The lead character of this book is a scientist who has lost his face due to a laboratory accident. Losing his face means that a vital identity factor has disappeared, and the love between him and his wife is compromised due to his disfigured face. So, he decides to construct a mask – so true to life that it is indistinguishable from a real face: the face he wants to present to his surroundings.

He believes that wearing the mask will change everything – not just himself but also the world.

Did Emil Westman Hertz discover a literary counterpart to the transformation of his own face?

'Our exterior form, our skin, and our body are just as degradable as our garden waste but – as Westman Hertz shows us beautifully, just as edifying. My body may exist within it, and what you don't have, I can give you, my face, and you can start afresh.'

Also, the work *De to byer* (Two Cities) from 2015 presumably contains a literary reference. The inspiration for this work may have been Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, *A Story of the French Revolution* from 1859–

60. Dickens's classic novel about the French Revolution is the story about the strength and saving grace of love in the face of evil, violence, and indifference. The novel is set in London and Paris and describes the conditions of the French people under the brutal suppression by the aristocracy during the period leading up to the revolution, and the matching cruelty exercised by the rebels against the former aristocracy in the years to come. The safety of London is contrasted to the troubles of Paris.

The sculpture comprises two parts, in which the basic material is Emil Westman Hertz's beloved stalks of giant hogweed and beeswax placed in an old showcase, probably from a natural history museum. One is placed directly at the bottom of the showcase whereas the other is placed on the remains of a piece of bamboo furniture from IKEA. The latter was used by Westman Hertz earlier, first in the installation *Sømandens grav* (The Sailor's Grave) and later as a self-contained sculpture.

However, there are decisive differences in the choice of material in the two parts. The one standing on the very bottom of the showcase is made of cardboard, wax, giant hogweed, string, and polystyrene, whereas the material of the other is more complex with its addition of twigs, a pill carton as well as disposable plastic bottles. It would seem obvious that, with this sculpture, the artist is not only looking inward in relation to love, which can push us onward no matter what, whilst at the same time pointing to today's world, which is falling apart.

In 2014, Emil Westman Hertz created one of his most complex works, *Prinsens Have*, which still exists as the entity he had originally envisaged. It can be interpreted as a self-portrait weaving his fighting an illness, his studio and garden on Bornholm, and his life into a large installation brimming with both life and death.

*Prinsens Have* is created from materials such as wax, cardboard, twigs, giant hogweed, clay, bronze, plaster, as well as the artist's own discarded medicine packaging and empty pill cartons filled with dead bees from his beehives on Bornholm.

'I've always kept bees and made wax figures. It's a durable material since wax has been discovered on Egyptian mummies. On the whole, I tend to work with materials which are to hand whilst also being symbolic, precisely because I collect them in my immediate surroundings. In this way, it becomes a kind of archaeology of an inner landscape sort of unearthed.'

*Prinsens Have* was created for an exhibition held at Horsens Kunstmuseum to mark the presentation of Horsens Kunstmuseums Venners Kunstnerpris (Friends of Horsens Kunstmuseum's Artist Award) in 2014.

When it was presented, all parts of the sculpture were placed directly on the floor.

Emil Westman Hertz created *Prinsens Have* on the island of Bornholm as a total installation in his studio before moving it to Horsens. To secure the continued existence of the work, we decided to acquire the entire work in

2014 and its layout was therefore 'fixed' for the first time. The acquisition was made possible thanks to the New Carlsberg Foundation and the Palaces and Culture Agency.

Bearing in mind Emil Westman Hertz' practice, the work might have been split up, if not completely, then into smaller self-contained units which the artist considered would make sense, or specific elements would be incorporated into future works.

Following consultation with the artist, it was decided to place the sculpture in a specially constructed showcase, deeply inspired by the ones at Galerie de Paléontologie et d'Anatomie comparée in Paris. Showcases whose history go right back to the foundation of the museum in 1898 and whose style, therefore, blends into the old museum and school showcases often used by Emil Westman Hertz as a backdrop for his works. Thankfully, the present arrangement of the work is the artist's own. He came to Horsens and placed the major part of the installation elements in the showcase in February 2016. The reason for changing the character of the work was a wish to preserve it. The individual parts are so fragile that handling, however gentle, would mean changing the work and thereby drastically shortening its lifetime.

As I remember Emil Westman Hertz' garden, it was not particularly structured, but Prinsens have is, as evident in other works by the artist, very structured. We rediscover the systematic museum structure in the arrangement of the individual elements in rows. A significant element in Prinsens Have is that the work does not only comprise the large showcase; drawings, bronze casts of giant hogweed, and a cast of a mummified bird are placed outside the showcase, entering into a dialogue with it.

It is outside the scope of this article to delve into the individual parts of this complex installation. Instead, specific elements will be highlighted.

The dead bees in the medicine cartons are mentioned. The cartons have become burial chambers. A polystyrene podium is surmounted by a beeswax head, just like the sculpture *Det nye ansigt*, created jointly with nature. Emil Westman Hertz modelled the head and placed it in a beehive, where the bees attacked the wax and made innumerable holes. Man and nature come together.

The installation also features several other heads in various sizes, some which the artist has worked up and others developed by the bees.

Naturally, the giant hogweed also features in this work. Bronze casts have been mentioned already, but the showcase also contains plaster casts and self-contained structures primarily built of giant hogweed stalks. They grew in his garden and it was natural, therefore, to include them in Prinsens Have. Another aspect of using giant hogweed could be that the plant is used in leukaemia medical trials, in which Emil Westman Hertz took part.

A central element in Prinsens Have is a small reclining wax figure, unmistakably reminiscent of a human figure but, like the faceless heads, no further identification is possible. Perhaps it is the prince himself. A funnel grows from his chest and, based on the artist's interest in mushrooms, there can be little doubt that this is indeed a mushroom. Fungi that specifically grow on host organisms, and certain species can produce hallucinatory conditions capable of opening up other worlds.

This is not the only mushroom in Prinsens Have or, for that matter, in Emil Westman Hertz' world.

As in many other of Emil Westman Hertz' works, Prinsens Have brings us into a world that is not entirely our own: an unknown place, a vision, or perhaps a hallucinatory world.

A similarly complex work is Telt, which dates from 2016 in its present version. Telt exemplifies how Emil Westman Hertz continuously worked on an element and reused it in new contexts, thus creating new meanings. Emil Westman Hertz travelled in Africa and his tent from those days constitutes a significant part of the installation. The tent was presented to him by the Nakfa Refugee Camp in Eritrea, and he overnighted in it before it became part of an ongoing creation resulting in the work we see today. Presently, the tent shows serious signs of wear and is very fragile from its use in the real world and from its role in several different versions of works. The works of which it was a constituent part have progressed from simplicity to greater complexity, ending up as what could be called an extended simplicity.

The first time Emil Westman Hertz used the tent in an artistic context was for the Artists' Autumn Exhibition at Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art (2003), where the work consisted solely of the tent. In 2012, the tent appeared in the exhibition Erindringens arkæologi (The Archaeology of Reminiscence), Sorø Kunstmuseum. The tent was not properly pitched, but looked more like a large tent-like shape with only a few additional elements forming part of the installation, for example, a camping stove and a couple of giant hogweed stalks placed against the wall.

In 2013, the complexity grew. At the exhibition De smukke drømmes lagune (The Lagoon of Beautiful Dreams), the tent was presented in the part of the exhibition titled Udgravningen (The Excavation). The tent was pitched to serve as living quarters for an archaeologist, an explorer, or perhaps for a shaman. In several of Emil Westman Hertz's drawings, we discover scenes which might suggest that this is part of the African culture he had been exploring.

Several elements have been added to the camping stove. Among them a large wax head, an accumulation of medicine cartons, twigs, etc., not forgetting a largish tooled wax sheet, Constant Spring, placed against the wall. Another mushroom now appeared in Emil Westman Hertz's work.

'Hallucinatory radiant forces, as if engraved on its warm, circular wax surface by the finest stylus from Sumerian times. Are we speaking of the soft underside of the mushroom head or of the skull with the wax tablet of the mind? Metonymically, both head-like shapes link the unconscious with hallucination; both are bearers of change and emotion.'

The arrangement of elements is chaotic. Viewers need to find their own order and way through.

The work is not just a traditional excavation but rather a simultaneous journey in several dimensions, both physical and mental.

Emil Westman Hertz arranged the final version of Telt for the exhibition Under bjerget at Bornholms Kunstmuseum in 2016. Once again, inspiration came from the literary world <sup>20</sup>, namely Ernest Hemingway's short story: The Snows of Kilimanjaro, in which the lead character camps with his wife at the foot of Kilimanjaro. The short story's general theme is death and the lead character's realisation that he has only a short time left to live. The association to Emil Westman Hertz's own situation is obvious; at this point, he realised that time was running out.

The work had yet again changed character and several new elements had been added.

The tent was not pitched properly, marking the artist's weakened state at the time of setting up the installation. Chaos had been replaced by the characteristic arrangement in rows.

Compared to earlier versions, now only the tent was left. Elements seen in other contexts had been added. The plaster flowers, seen earlier in Sømændens Grav, like the bronze head later presented as part of a series of sculptures at the exhibition Alt hvad der var er nu væk.

Furthermore, a glass with an unidentifiable content. Two small plaster tables, a pile of compressed plastic waste, an abstract arrangement featuring a cement element and wood, a trap and, last but not least, the cast of a mummified cat, an image of death.

Telt is perhaps an attempt by Emil Westman Hertz at collecting reminiscences and artistic points of view in a single work. Experiences from his youth revolving around the tent, nature, and the inevitable death symbolised by the cat, humanity's destruction of the world represented by the plastic packaging, the unknown represented by the cement structure, and the face – the new face as a mask enabling the bearer to view themselves and the world in new ways.

The complexity in Emil Westman Hertz's universe is enormous, and yet other issues might have been included in this introduction, but Emil Westman Hertz' oeuvre suggests that people explore by themselves with a very open mind. It is my impression that this is what the artist would have wanted us to do, well knowing, though,



that Western culture's interpretation of visual art will not suffice. Hence it is necessary to apply the more spiritual approaches of other cultures to the forms we call art.