

**ArtSeen**

# William Corwin: *Lethe-Wards*

By **Saul Ostrow**



William Corwin, Long Boat, One Passenger, 2022. Cast Iron. Courtesy the artist and Geary Contemporary.

In 2021, on the occasion of his exhibition *Green Ladder*, I had written that artist William Corwin's works are:

discursive, and recursive, while his subject-matter and contents are heterogeneous, interdisciplinary, and multi-cultural. Often Corwin is a time-traveler filling his sculptures with esoteric, mystical, and mundane knowledge from the past. His point of view is speculative and is rooted in Western Metaphysics.

Given that this all still holds true, let us move onto his most recent installment *Lethe-Wards*, on view at Geary Contemporary in Dutchess County, New York, a Joycean foray into the realm of the symbolic. The exhibition's title references a line from the John Keats poem "Ode to a Nightingale." As for the Lethe, it is one of the five rivers of the underworld of Hades. The dead drink from it to forget.

For this exhibition, Corwin presents a recent series (all 2022) of cast-iron hulls whose interiors reveal structural ribbing while their exteriors tend to be nondescript. Each vessel is accompanied by a ladder either resting in the belly or jutting over the side, and which appear warped or malformed. Among these metal castings is a ghost ship cast in white plaster, *Shallow Charger/The Dig*. All the sculptures are comparable in size, measuring a foot to a foot-and-a-half in length and are similarly titled: *Long Boat*, *Single Passenger*, *Long Boat, one passenger*, *Small Charger/ Curragh*. There are also two differing votive-like representations of the ancient Greek fertility goddess Artemis, both cast in aluminum.

On first encounter, Corwin's sculptures may be mistaken for *objets-decoratif*—crude artifacts encoded with anecdotal meanings, akin to what might be found on a coffee table in a fashionable Upper West Side home. Yet, another, deeper reading attributes to them a self-critical meta-proposition concerning the gap between intentionality and reception. We bring a wide range of entangled associations to Corwin's sculptures of wrecked boats, starting with the story of Charon, the oarsman who ferries the dead across the river Styx to Hades. They also can be identified with the Viking longships found buried in Norway, the sunken vessels of the Spanish *Armanda* located off the coast of Ireland, and the scuttled hull of the *Clotilda*, the last slave ship to arrive in the US from Africa, found in the marshy swamps of Alabama.



William Corwin, *Small Charger, Curragh 2*, 2022. Cast Iron. Courtesy the artist and Geary Contemporary.

Let us not forget we also have such terms as a “ship of fools,” “ship of state,” as well as “lifeboat,” which leads us to heroic captains going down with their ships. As for the ladders, we have the biblical Jacob’s dream of a ladder upon which angels ascend and descend, and culminating in a covenant with God. On the material side there are scaling ladders used for sieging castles and fortifications or for accessing the cliff dwellings of the pueblo peoples. We also have extension ladders, the handy domestic variety as well as make-shift ones found on construction sites, not to mention climbing the ladder of success. Regarding the goddesses Artemis, it is enough to say the two renderings fill out Corwin’s birth-death schema. There is a problem trying to convey meaning by symbolism and iconography even when given the clue that this is all about forgetfulness.

Taking a more deductive, less literary approach, Corwin has made a graveyard of ships. Perhaps we are to voyage along the river Lethe not to drink and forget, but to lash ourselves to the mast like Ulysses and resist the temptation of mindless bliss. We are not meant to read these hulls and ladders as Jungian archetypes which, given our inclinations, would permit us to conjure endless narratives. Instead, see them for what they are: abject simulations of pre-modern archeological artifacts, which in these post-modern times become a means to express in bad faith both a sense of loss, and sentimentality. If we believe this, the truth of Corwin’s work resides in reading these vessels allegorically, as a desire to retain the memories of a bygone era—of knowing where we come from and remembering who we are. A task especially difficult in today’s image-world in which this knowledge is constantly scrambled.



William Corwin, *Artemis Ephesia*, 2022. Cast aluminum. Courtesy the artist and Geary Contemporary.

Just as our guide Keats bemoaned the passing of a pastoral idyll that never was, Corwin’s sculptures as indices reference the passing of an era. As such, I’ll return to the notion that they are self-referential, meta-proposition. How do I come to this conclusion? I find it in the traces of their becoming—where the sprue has been cut, in the sand-casting process, where the original is lost for the sake of producing a more permanent likeness and finally, in the similarity and difference between ladders and boats. Horizontal and vertical motion, ascension versus descension, embarkation and disembarking. Corwin intends to call our attention to sculpture as a metaphoric mode of conveyance made dysfunctional, not unlike a wrecked ship accompanied by a lithe ladder.