

H. C. Westermann. Goin' Home



Vista de sala de la exposición **H.C. WESTERMANN. Volver a casa**
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. Febrero, 2019
Fotografía: Joaquín Cortés/Román Lores. Archivo fotográfico del Museo Reina Sofía

DATES:	5 February, 2019 – 6 May, 2019
PLACE:	Sabatini building, Floor 3
ORGANIZATION:	Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
CURATORSHIP:	Beatriz Velázquez and Manuel Borja-Villel
RELATED ACTIVITIES:	Workshop about H.C. Westermann 7, 14 y 21 March. With Beatriz Velázquez, Carlos Fernández-Pello and Patricia Mayayo.

The Museo Reina Sofía has organized, with the support of the Terra Foundation for American Art, ***H. C. Westermann: Goin' Home***, the **largest retrospective yet held in Europe on Horace Clifford Westermann** (Los Angeles, 1922 – Danbury, USA, 1981), a singular artist who is hard to classify within the history of the sculpture of the mid-20th century, but whose work exerted a great influence on his contemporaries and has subsequently served as an inspiration for new visual languages.

Set apart from the principal trends of his period, such as Minimalism, Abstract Expressionism or Pop Art, this highly individual artist worked in a particular style that combined irony and barbed criticism to examine the weaknesses of the human condition and the preoccupations of American society in the mid-20th century, sunk in the tensions of the Cold War and dominated by consumption and mass culture.

The exhibition presents some **130 works** by Westermann dated between 1954 and 1981. Most of them are intriguing sculptures fashioned with the perfection of a cabinet maker, but also included are lithographs and woodcuts, drawings, letters, and some paintings from his earliest artistic phase. Westermann's imaginary blends autobiography (reflecting, for example, his traumatic experience during the Second World War as a seaman on board an aircraft carrier) with a shrewd understanding of the United States, from its military conflicts to the fascination he felt for its vast and spectacular landscapes.

His eloquent *death ships*, his series of lithographs *See America First* (1968), and the linoleum prints of *Disasters in the Sky* (1962) offer a symbolic portrait of the country, combining the catastrophes of war with the solitude of the big cities or the culture of TV and advertising.

In the meantime, while Westermann's production cannot be reduced to a specific style, it displays a persistent preoccupation with themes like death and continuous work, and above all one constant concern: the longing to find and build a home, a house. In this respect, the curator Beatriz Velázquez explains that "in Westermann, artistic practice means a making, a permanent building, which allows him to inhabit the world, albeit with difficulty. Man is in the world to the extent in which he inhabits, and he inhabits to the extent in which he builds his room, his shelter."

This is perhaps why the works by Westermann on the subject of the house refer to a content of impossibility. From the earliest phase of his career, the house was sometimes a prison, at other times a mausoleum he saw as still living, and on many other occasions an impregnable place that impedes habitation. In these works, the house marks the definitive moment of death. That is, the conquest of the home would arrive only with death, and Westermann's enterprise is therefore a sustained but interminable one of going – or returning – home.



H. C. WESTERMANN
Death Ship [Barco de la muerte], en carta a Dennis Adrian, 1966
The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago; The H. C. Westermann Study Collection, donación de Dennis Adrian en honor a Martha Westermann Renner.
Foto © 2018 Cortesía de The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago
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First works



H.C. WESTERMANN
Chicago Industrial Area, ca. 1954-55
Óleo sobre lienzo
102 x 76 x 2 cm.
Colección Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago
Donación de Mrs. E. A. Birgman 1991.78
Photo: Nathan Keay © MCA Chicago
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The paintings that open the exhibition belong to Westermann's first years of training as a student at the School of Fine Arts of the Art Institute of Chicago. Appreciable in them is the influence of the European avant-gardes, while their organization into clearly delimited color fields already points toward marquetry and anticipates the artist's penchant for work in wood.

The transition between these images and what became his preferred medium, wood, can be observed in *Two Acrobats* and a *Fleeing Man* (1957), where the three figures seem disconnected from their urban setting, anticipating what were to become lasting concerns of the artist, such as the isolated – indeed, unsheltered – condition of the individual in the world. The first sculptures, dating from 1954, approach the same theme, showing the anguish of confinement and death.

The death ships

The death ships room interrupts the chronological sequence of the exhibition to show how often Westermann repeated this motif (as many as twenty times in sculpture, and many more times on paper).

Sailing ships, steamers, merchant ships or warships, all foreshadow a fatal destiny. They have lost their mast, or are listing dangerously. Some are motionless, becalmed or trapped in a sea of pitch, while others drift after being abandoned. The ships are often hidden in their own coffin-like caskets.



H.C. WESTERMANN
Death Ship Runover by a '66 Lincoln Continental [Barco de la muerte arrollado por un Lincoln Continental del '66], 1966.
Madera de pino, placas de vidrio, ébano, billetes de dólar, masilla, latón y tinta.
40 x 83 x 30 cm
Colección particular
Foto Robert Wedemeyer
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With references to different literary sources, as well as to the artist's experiences on board the carrier U.S.S. Enterprise during World War Two, when he witnessed bombings, kamikaze attacks, sinkings and marauding sharks, the ships serve as an allegory for life as a wandering voyage where it is difficult to reach port. Perhaps, however, Westermann's stubbornness in launching his ships again and again is intended in the opposite sense: a tenacious orientation toward home.

Boxes and houses

In the second half of the 1950s, Westermann's pieces started to diversify in both scale and form. Figurines devoted to the sterility of modern life alternated with medium-sized statues where the body is often a carcase incapable of providing a protective covering.

Correspondingly, Westermann started to make boxes that represent reclusion. The box appears as a dwelling for man, who remains shut up inside it, or even as a mausoleum. In the meantime, his actual representations of houses show them to be failed projects. They are on fire, or have been abandoned for no apparent reason.

Memorial to the Idea of Man If He Was an Idea (1958) sums up the failure of taking refuge in house and body. This closet-statue shows a cyclops in whose mouth a tiny figure is seen calling for help. The hollow interior contains a sinking ship, an armless acrobat, and a headless figure who is trying in vain to play baseball. As in the *Odyssey*, this work reflects the misfortunes that occur when we embark on the endlessly postponed re-encounter with home.

In *Mad House* (1958), and in other early sculptures like *He-Whore* (1957), the body is no longer a place of solace. The pessimistic and agitated tone of these works was understood at the time as a response by the art of that moment, after the exhaustion of expressionism in abstraction, to the anguish and dehumanization of the post-war years.



H.C. WESTERMANN
He-Whore [Mujeriego], 1957
Madera contrachapada, distintos tipos de madera, espejo, pintura, cuerda, latón cromado, corcho y moneda de diez centavos
60 x 29 x 51 cm
Colección Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, donación de The Susan and Lewis Manilow Collection of Chicago Artists 1993.35
Photo: Nathan Keay © MCA Chicago
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H.C. WESTERMANN
The Silver Queen [Reina de plata], 1960
Madera de pino, madera contrachapada, molduras de pino, capuchón de v. entallado de metal galvanizado, racores de hierro, esmalte y esmalte alquidico con pigmento de aluminio
203 x 53 x 54 cm
Colección KAWIS. Foto cortesía de Venus Over Manhattan
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Cold War and consumer society

In the late 1950s, the artist turned his gaze onto mass culture. Here the exhibition gathers works that allude to the consumer and entertainment products of the society of opulence while reflecting the anxieties of the Cold War. An example is *Brinkmanship* (1958-1959), with references to atomic disaster and the aggressive war policies of the time.

In his engravings and sculptures, Westermann addressed the possibility of nuclear war by replicating some of the motifs used in dealing with the theme by the science fiction movies of the period, such as technology at the service of the machine of destruction, or the robot of extraterrestrial origin. Taken as a whole, they portray an environment that was perceived as inhospitable despite the domestic comforts of the consumer society.

The artistic context in the USA

As a result of his use of the imagery of popular culture, Westermann started in the early 1960s to participate in several of the exhibitions of the incipient new realisms and Pop Art. Nevertheless, it was his solo exhibition at the Allan Frumkin Gallery in 1963 that situated his heterodox work more neatly into the complex artistic scene of the period, locked in the controversy between late formalism and the minimalists over the question of objecthood.

The sculptures from that exhibition, many of which are gathered in this room, reveal a certain shift toward objecthood on Westermann's part. In describing a carving like *A Rope Tree* (1963), the critic Donald Judd noted its chain of false appearances: the plywood imitates a rope, which in its turn imitates a tree, as if the distance between the representation and the represented denuded the piece's condition as object. Another critic, Dennis Adrian, understood the artist's pieces as objectifications of experience, and ascribed them the attribute of absolute objectivity.



H. C. WESTERMANN
A Rope Tree [Un árbol de soga], 1963
Madera abeto de Douglas, contrachapado marino pino y tinta
159 x 76 x 56 cm
Milwaukee Art Museum, donación conmemorativa de Hope y Abraham Melamed en el centenario del Museo
Foto: Larry Sanders
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H. C. WESTERMANN
He's Lost Interest in Us [Ha perdido interés en nosotros], 1966
en carta a Dennis Adrian
The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago; The H. C. Westermann Study Collection, donación de Dennis Adrian en honor a Martha Westermann Renner.
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Correspondence

Westermann expressed himself on paper in countless letters, for the artist corresponded daily with colleagues and relatives. In them he reported on the progress of his work, with detailed drawings of the pieces he was constructing. He also fitted the images with the text in many different ways as an inseparable part of the messages he sent, using the vocabularies of the comic strip and the animated cartoon. These sources also inspired his sculptural work.

Other missives show scenes and landscapes making up commentaries on issues of the day. In these letter-drawings, we also find the artist's preoccupations with death and residence continuing hand in hand.

In one of them, Westermann relates a suicide he learned about when he was living in San Francisco in 1965. As a farewell, the suicidal man had written the words: "I'm goin' home". The episode made a great impression on the artist, who turned the phrase into material for several of his works.

See America First

See America First is the title adopted by the artist in 1968 for a series of 13 engravings. It was borrowed from an early 20th century tourist campaign slogan aimed at persuading Americans to explore their own country rather than traveling abroad.

The works, some of which record his own journey all over the country, subject the America of the time to a critical scrutiny in a similar way to the earlier sculptures alluding to war.

These sensitively abstract prints of the landscape and panorama of North America use figure types, such as the artist's alter ego in a tuxedo, together with elements taken from the death ships and a whole repertoire of images from popular and suburban culture. The rendition is often indebted to the comic strip at a time, the late 1960s, that saw the gestation of the underground comic. es el título que el artista adoptó en 1968 para una serie de 18 litografías tomando prestado el eslogan de una campaña de turismo de principios del siglo XX que animaba a los ciudadanos estadounidenses a explorar su propio país en lugar de viajar al extranjero.



H.C. WESTERMANN
See America First [Primero conozca América] Serie de 18 litografías
Untitled [Sin título] 2, 17 1968.
55 x 76 o 76 x 55 cm c.u.
The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago; The H. C. Westermann Study
Collection, donación del Estado de Joanna Beall Westermann 2002, 2083-a-q
Foto © 2018 Cortesía de The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago
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H.C. WESTERMANN
Antimobile [Antimóvil], 1966
Contrachapado laminado
171 x 92 x 70 cm.
Whitney Museum of American Art, Nueva York, compra con fondos de The Howard and Jean Lipman
Foundation, Inc. e intercambios DS-44-6
Imagen digital © Whitney Museum, N.Y.
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Useless tools and unusable mechanisms

From the mid-1960s, Westermann's objects are marked by various degrees of reduction to the absurd. On the one hand, the artist employs different layers of contradiction between the titles, materials, and represented referents of his pieces, constructing what critics have called visual and material paradoxes. At other times, Westermann focuses on the malfunctioning of mechanisms and structures, as in *Antimobile* (1966).

Westermann's sculpture helps us understand this continuous work as the building of a place for oneself. One of the useless devices, *I'm Goin' Home on the Midnight Train* (1974), contains an inoperative double-headed hammer. The title once more recalls the suicide's words, "I'm goin' home", to situate the home

as the milestone at the end of life. Westermann assembled this piece at a time of convalescence from a serious condition that brought him close to death. In the title of the work, "I'm goin' home" seems to be an autobiographical note, a statement by the artist who finds it harder and harder to work that he is on the point of going "home". By extension, this allows us to understand the project of making a home as the ultimate goal of Westermann's artistic endeavors.

To dwell as to die

Death, as is clear throughout the exhibition, is the second constant that runs through Westermann's oeuvre, accompanying his idea of inhabiting-constructing. The artist also went more deeply into his investigation of the subject in the mid-1960s, producing various objects that replicate the architectural forms of tumuli and funerary monuments. Close to the sense of death as transit is *Suicide Tower* (1965), whose many flights of stairs invite the viewer to recreate the moments immediately prior to a fatal leap.

After this section, the exhibition ends by concentrating on Westermann's graphic work and his late pieces, like the series *The Connecticut Ballroom* (1975), which presents us with unsettling presages of environmental catastrophe and post-nuclear desolation.



H.C. WESTERMANN
Suicide Tower [tomb de suicide], 1965
Madera de caoba, latón, ébano, postales y metal
111 x 28 x 25 cm.
Colección de The Robert Lehman Revocable Trust, cedido a Admes y Robert Lehman
Foto cortesía de Venus Over Manhattan
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Catalogue

On the occasion of the exhibition and under the same title, the Museo Reina Sofía has published a catalogue which, in addition to illustrations of the works on display, includes an essay by curator Beatriz Velázquez, the Spanish translation of a historical text by Dennis Adrian about the artist, and texts by other authors such as Jo Applin, Diedrich Diederichsen and Ana Merino.

Westermann. Goin' Home is supported by the Terra Foundation for American Art as part of Art Design Chicago, an initiative exploring Chicago's art and design legacy

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PRESS OFFICE

MUSEO REINA SOFÍA

prensa1@museoreinasofia.es

prensa3@museoreinasofia.es

(+34) 91 774 10 05 / 06

www.museoreinasofia.es/prensa

