

# H. C. Westermann

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"H. C. Westermann: Goin' Home," installation view, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2019.

Photo: Joaquín Cortés/Román Lores; Archivo fotográfico del Museo Reina Sofía.

In 1963, H. C. Westermann's unorthodox wooden sculptures were described by minimalist painter Donald Judd as "objects in their own right." This long overdue Westermann retrospective, covering a period from 1954 until the Los Angeles-born artist's death in 1981, gathers over one hundred sculptures that very much assert their own idiosyncratic place in the world. Though utterly unique, Westermann's aesthetic could be said to bridge Joseph Cornell's characteristic boxed assemblages with the seemingly improvised, do-it-yourself approach to found materials of B. Wurtz. A constant quest for shelter runs throughout Westermann's art, an impulse that makes its way into sculptural buildings, bodies, machines, and boats, as well as the many prints, letters, drawings, and paintings included in this exhibition. Westermann often evokes haunted humans and temporarily occupied homes in his work, vessels that seem trapped, never quite reaching their destination. For Westermann, to build was to live, but living was also failing. His works' somber tone has often been connected to his experiences in the US Navy during World War II when he was stationed on an aircraft carrier in the Pacific, witnessing bombings and kamikaze attacks that profoundly affected him. At the Reina Sofía this is best exemplified by a room gathering his "Death Ship" works produced during

different periods of his life. These include *Yellow House and Death Ship* (1972), displayed along with its own made-to-measure wooden storage box, like many of the sculptures included. Further "Death Ships" have variously lost their masts, arise from an oil slick sea, or are condemned to permanently drift in shark-infested waters. Westermann took a critical position towards America's conflicted military interests and the lithographic suite "See America First" (1968), indebted to the aesthetics of comics, problematized the positivity projected by consumer culture and entertainment against the inhospitable backdrop of the Cold War. While aware of its futility, Westermann's work is not without humor. A series of objects playfully represents useless sculptor's tools and includes *I'm Goin' Home on the Midnight Train* (1974), an inoperative double-headed hammer neatly strapped into its wooden box with another container that reads "Westermann" on its side. His prodigious craftsmanship is not merely confined to the exquisite marquetry and cabinet-making skills on display, and his obvious care for materials (metal plaques on each object often credit each wood used). It is also latent in the conceptual clarity of his painstaking work and its suggestive accumulation of motifs; not only ships, but ladders, as well as anchors: devices that evoke his painful naval past.