

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

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TOM WESSELMANN

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



the **Body** *electric*

64 ART&ANTIQUES SEPTEMBER 2016



Body electric

Tom Wesselmann combined sensuality and joy with a deep investigation of the nature of representational art.

“MANY CRITICS HAVE described Tom Wesselmann as the most underrated painter of the Pop Art generation that revolutionized the American art world of the 1960s.” So reads the flap copy for a monograph on Wesselmann by Slim Stealingworth that appeared in 1980, when the artist’s reputation was at a low ebb. Just how low is indicated by the fact that Stealingworth was none other than Wesselmann, who felt that the only way to set the record straight about his work was to write about it himself. Doing it under a waggish pseudonym allowed him to combine self-promotion with self-effacement, leavened with humor—a typically Wesselmannian mix.

The artist, generally thought of as the creator of works that delight the eye rather than the mind, was actually an incisive and eloquent writer, and the Stealingworth book figures as one of the best and most reliable artist’s autobiographies we have. Insights into Wesselmann’s creative process abound, as well as cogent statements about how he saw himself within the context of art history. “Wesselmann dislikes the term ‘Pop Art,’” Stealingworth/Wesselmann wrote, “because it causes many art historians, curators and critics to focus excessively on subject matter and assumed sociological commentary. ... Wesselmann’s motivation, what drives his art, is no different than any other fine artist in history—he wants to give form to his own personal discoveries of what is beautiful and exciting to him.”

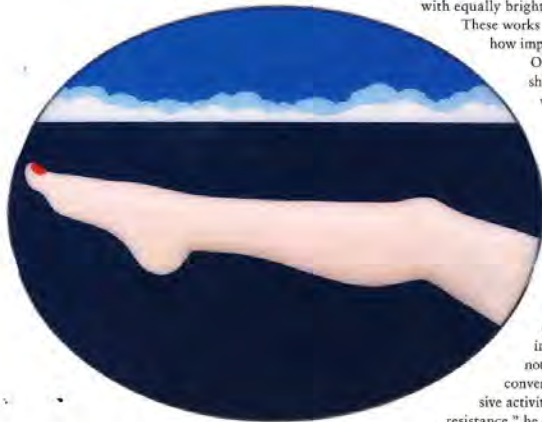
By John Dorfman



the Body electric



Previous spread, clockwise from left: Tom Wesselmann, *Bedroom Painting #38*, 1976, oil on canvas, 84 x 97 inches; *Three Step*, 2003, oil on cut-out aluminum, 84 x 80 x 21 inches; Tom Wesselmann in front of *Great American Nude #16*, 1961. This page, from top: *Quick Sketch from the Train (Italy) #2*, 1987, enamel on cut-out steel, 48 x 100 inches; *Seascape #10*, 1966, molded Plexiglas painted with gripflex, 44 1/2 x 38 1/2 x 1 3/4 inches.



Many things were beautiful and exciting to Wesselmann, but none more so than the female body. Beginning with his "Great American Nudes" series of the 1960s, Wesselmann returned again and again over the course of his nearly 50-year career to this key subject, obviously one deeply embedded in the history of Western art. Wesselmann knew this history well and wanted to make a place for himself in it, but the main impetus for these works was a desire to give pleasure, to transmit to the viewer the sheer joy Wesselmann himself felt when confronted by a woman's body. His nudes abound in sensuous curves, bright-red lips, fingers and toes tipped

with equally bright-red nail polish, tan lines, and, of course, nipples.

These works are exuberant, exciting, provocative, and yet somehow impersonal. There is nothing else in art quite like them.

Over the years, the reaction to Wesselmann's nudes has shifted. In the '60s, their sexual frankness was greeted with enthusiasm, as reflecting the changes in sexual mores under way at the time; later on, they became the cause of discomfort, especially to some feminists who condemned them as exploitative and dehumanizing. Wesselmann, who modeled many of his nudes on his wife, Claire, to whom he was married from 1963 until his death in 2004, felt deeply pained by these criticisms. Late in life, in an interview, he spoke of his lifelong desire to "capture something significant of the beauty of the woman I was confronted with [a reference to his wife]. It was always frustrating because the beauty of the woman was so elusive." In another interview in the early 1980s, Wesselmann sounded a less wistful note, emphasizing the aspect of confrontation in the more conventional sense of the word: "I view art as an aggressive activity—that is, you're asserting something in the face of resistance," he said. "The nude, I feel, is a good way to be aggres-

PREVIOUS PAGE AND LEFT: © ESTIVE OF TOM WESSELMANN/ICENBERG BY VASA, NEW YORK, NY; PHOTO OF TOM WESSELMANN © JERRY BOGDAN



From top: *Still Life #35*, 1963, oil and collage on canvas, 120 x 192 inches; *Smoker #1*, 1967, oil on shaped canvas, 108 1/2 x 82 1/2 inches

sive, figuratively. I want to stir up intensive, explosive reactions in the viewers.” He certainly accomplished that, and today, even though we experience Wesselmann’s outsized, in-your-face nudes with more distance and equanimity than viewers did 40 or 50 years ago, they still have the power to stir up strong and complex reactions.

However, this power has had the effect of blinding viewers and even critics to the diversity and depth of Wesselmann’s art. Far from being a one-note artist, he worked in many genres (still life, landscape, the human figure) and media (painting, collage, assemblage, and a new one he invented himself—laser-cut metal drawing). While he began in the late 1950s as a rebel against abstraction and stayed figurative for most of his career, Wesselmann in the 1990s created some very distinctive abstract works in both two and three dimensions, acknowledging the influence of his first art idol, Willem de Kooning. Through all of these works, Wesselmann was always preoccupied with explorations of space and

perception, line and color. A careful look at his oeuvre shows that behind the Pop veneer, beneath the Pop veneer, is a great deal of intellectual depth. (A broad selection of works by Wesselmann was on view at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York this past spring, and in October, a Wesselmann exhibition opens at Almine Rech Gallery in Paris.)

Tom Wesselmann was born in Cincinnati in 1931 and grew up with little or no exposure to fine art. His first ambition, developed while he was in the Army, stateside during the Korean War, was to be a cartoonist. After his discharge, he studied at the Art Academy of Cincinnati, and by 1954 was publishing cartoons in magazines with names like *1000 Jokes* and *True*. His introduction to the mainstream art world came in 1956, when he moved to New York to attend Cooper Union. In his persona as Stealingworth, he recalled that his “first aesthetic experience...a sensation of high visceral excitement in his stomach,” occurred when he saw Robert Motherwell’s



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From top: *Blue Dance*, 1996/2002, oil on cut-out aluminum, 83 x 116 x 5 inches; *Landscape #5*, 1964-65, oil on canvas and Liquitex and collage on canvas, 84 x 144 1/2 x 18 inches.

Elegy to the Spanish Republic in the Museum of Modern Art. De Kooning's paintings proved to be an even more powerful experience. However, Wesselmann "felt he had to deny to himself all that he loved in de Kooning, and go in as opposite a direction as possible."

That direction was figurative painting, with a twist. Wesselmann was doing traditional subjects but adding collage elements, as Motherwell also did. He would add images cut from magazines, bolts of cloth, and even photographs to his paintings, causing a sense of dislocation in the viewer, a discontinuity in both texture and space. Many of these works from the early '60s feature domestic interiors with a reclining nude and a window opening onto a view of the outside world, which is often collaged rather than painted. Wesselmann cited a Hans Memling *Portrait of a Young Man* from 1482, in which the subject stands before an open window, as an influence; the window motif is also very prevalent in Matisse, as, of course, is the reclining nude. Already Wesselmann was defining himself against the anti-art-history, ancestor-killing attitude of the American Abstract Expressionists. In an era of Action Painting, he was taking his own kind of action.

After a few years teaching art and math in New York City public schools while showing his work at



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small galleries (including one he co-founded with fellow Cincinnati expat Jim Dine), Wesselmann made a hit with his *Great American Nudes* and starting showing his work at prestigious New York venues such as Tanager Gallery and Green Gallery. For this series, he significantly enlarged the scale of his collage paintings. *Great American Nude #1* (1961), places a pink, foreshortened nude, with most of her facial features outside the frame, atop a bed that is draped with a red blanket and an intricately patterned textile. These are fairly standard Matissean picture elements, but the slightly rearranged American flag in the upper right adds an ironically patriotic note to the composition—thus the “Great American” part of the title, a nod to the Great American Novel archetype. The lightly satirical aspect of these works is directly in line with Wesselmann’s original intention to be a cartoonist, and a subtle sense of humor would continue to pervade much if not all of his subsequent work. “Painting, sex, and humor are the most important things in my life,” as he put it to an interviewer.

In 1962, Wesselmann started exploring other themes from American mass culture. In still life paintings and 3-D constructions alike, he used imagery from advertising and consumer packaging, similar to what Warhol, Rosenquist, Lichtenstein, and others were doing at the time. But Wesselmann didn’t see much in common between his work and theirs. He was uncomfortable with the Pop label, which he felt overemphasized superficial similarities in subject matter at the expense of intention. He put images of commercial products in his works not because he wanted to make a point about consumer culture but because he wanted to paint ordinary life. The Old Masters painted fruit, lobsters, and pheasants; Wesselmann painted Hellmann’s mayonnaise, Royal Crown Cola, and a Volkswagen Beetle—because they were there, and because they were colorful building blocks for a composition. In *Still Life # 48* (1964), for example, the mayonnaise jar sits right next to a tomato, the product of industry on par with the product of nature, both equally eye-catching.

In these early works, Wesselmann started breaking out of the flatness of the plane by adding 3-D elements; *Still Life #48* is not a conventional painting but an acrylic, collage, and assemblage on board in which the two objects project outward from the frame in relief and rest on a narrow shelf. In *Still Life #53* (1964), we again get a piece of fruit adjacent to a mass-produced product, an Art Deco-style Bakelite radio, and the three-dimensionality is conveyed by the fact that the work, although painted, is made of



From top: *Still Life #31*, 1963, acrylic and collage on board with live tv, 48 x 60 x 11 inches; *Sunset Nude with Matisse Odalisque*, 2003, oil on canvas, 120 x 100 inches.



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the *Body electric*



Clockwise from top left: *Still Life #48*, 1964, acrylic, collage and assemblage on board, 48 x 60 x 8 inches; *Still Life #53*, 1964, painted molded plastic (Grip-flex on uvex), 47 1/2 x 58 x 5 inches, edition of 4; *Bedroom Painting #68*, 1983, oil on shaped canvas, 89 x 112 1/2 inches; *Interior #2*, 1964, acrylic, collage, assemblage including working fan, clock and fluorescent light, 60 x 48 x 5 inches.

molded plastic. In *Interior #2*, also from 1964, Wesselmann went much further, attaching a real window fan, clock, and fluorescent light to the picture plane, in order to make the viewer feel like he or she is truly inside a kitchen. But the verisimilitude is immediately subverted by the grisaille palette, in which the 7-Up bottle is drained of its characteristic green and red colors. In works such as these, Wesselmann is playing with perception in ways that go well beyond the Pop program.

In the late '60s, Wesselmann began his "Drop-Out" series of paintings, in which the nude is essentially taken apart and abstracted from its environment, and positive and negative space are swapped for each other. In *Seascape #24* (1967), all that remains of the breast, as far as color rendering is concerned, is the nipple, seen against one of Wesselmann's typical sunny beachside skies. The contours of the breast, a leg, and an arm define the form of the paint-



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ing, but the lady herself has vanished. With this series, and with the related “Bedroom Paintings,” which came right afterward, Wesselmann definitively departed from Pop into a realm in which the senses are not just pleased but challenged.

The '70s were a less fertile decade for Wesselmann than the '60s had been, but during the '80s he made a major breakthrough. He had already merged sculpture and painting in the interiors and also in his *Landscape #5* (1964–65), a monumental work in which a Volkswagen Beetle billboard projects outward from the wall-mounted background in trompe l'oeil fashion; now he was collaborating with a metal-cutting studio to create a computer modeling technology in which a drawing could be turned into a sculpture, the lines of the pen being replicated in lines of steel that could then be painted in bright enamel colors. In this new art form, the very personal, intimate act of drawing is merged with mechanical fabrication; the resulting disconnect is startling but also deeply pleasing aesthetically. *Quick Sketch from the Train (Italy) #2* (1987) paradoxically combines the freedom of the quickest of quick sketches with the solidity and permanence of metal. Again, the negative space is more telling than the positive space.

At this stage of his career, two more breakthroughs were waiting for Wesselmann. While playing around with small pieces of colored Mylar making maquettes for his metal sculptures, he started arranging them in patterns. Suddenly, it occurred to him that he should give up his decades-long aversion to non-figurative art, return to his first love, de Kooning's work, and make abstract sculptures. These works from the 1990s are just as joyful and beautiful as the figurative sculptures, showing that, despite his early-career fears, for Wesselmann there really was no conflict.

Finally, in the few years before his death, Wesselmann returned to the female form with his “Sunset Nudes.” In these works, the struggle between negative and positive space is resolved in a way that restores satisfaction to the eye. The contours of the negative space now go *inside* the body, so that each nude, tan and glowing with health, appears to have a ghostly second body inside her. The tropical backgrounds evoke the Mediterranean world of Matisse; in fact, in one of them, *Sunset Nude with Matisse Odalisque* (2003), the French master's borrowed figure sits behind the modern woman, as a kind of presiding spirit. In these magisterial works, Wesselmann combined the modernist project of subverting expectations with American exuberance and a Matissean sense of joy in color and sensual pleasure. With Wesselmann's works in general, we get an education in perception, but painlessly, as if sugar-coated with sheer delight. **A**



From top: *Alice's Front Yard (3-D)*, 1993, oil on cut-out aluminum, 70 x 86 x 5 inches; *Great American Nude #1*, 1961, mixed media and collage on board, 48 x 48 inches.

