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Art in America

American Beauty: Q+A With Co-Curator of Tom Wesselmann Show

Brian Boucher



Tom Wesselmann
Smoker No.1 (Mouth, 12)
1967

Oil on shaped canvas (two parts)
276.6 x 216 cm

*The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Susan Morse Hilles Fund, 1968.
© Estate of Tom Wesselmann / SODRAC, Montreal / VAGA, New York (2012)
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How is it that a canonical American Pop artist is having his first North American retrospective only now? “Beyond Pop: Tom Wesselmann” opens at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) on May 19.

There have been monographs, notably the artist’s own autobiography-cum-artist’s book, written in 1980 under the name Slim Stealingworth, and art historian John Wilmerding’s 2008 volume. A retrospective of Wesselmann’s work traveled in Japan and Europe from 1993–97. But, surprisingly, this is the artist’s first full-dress retrospective on these shores, some eight years after his death.

The show is organized by Stéphane Aquin, curator of contemporary art at the MMFA, and art historian Marco Livingstone. It comprises some 150 works, including paintings, drawings, maquettes, collages, assemblages and sculptures, among them the “Steel Drawings” Wesselmann began making in the mid-’80s, which translated line drawings into laser-cut, wall-hung metal

sculptures.

The ambitious catalogue includes essays by the curators as well as art historian Constance Glenn, Morgan Library curator Isabelle Dervaux and Musée Picasso curator Annabelle Ténèze. There are also statements or essays by artists Eric Fischl, Erik Parker, Richard Phillips, Monica Serra and Mickalene Thomas.

While Wesselmann is best known for his “Great American Nudes” paintings (begun in 1961), the show includes work from other important series, including the “Smokers,” “Seascapes,” and “Abstractions.” He resisted the Pop art label, finding it reductive; his Pop art was, as painter and critic Richard Kalina pointed out in *A.i.A.* in 2006, “rooted in the deep and nourishing ground of modernism (in his case in an abiding interest in Matisse.)”

A.i.A. talked about the show with Aquin, who has previously organized shows devoted to Wesselmann’s contemporaries, including “Global Village: The 60s” (2004) as well as “Warhol Live: Music and Dance in Andy Warhol’s Work” (2008–09).

BRIAN BOUCHER What might explain the fact that this is the first Wesselmann retrospective in North America?

STÉPHANE AQUIN Every time I mention this to a colleague in the States, they say “*What?!*” Part of the explanation is that the ‘70s were the Conceptualist and feminist years. Anything Pop was not “in” anymore. Painting was not “in” anymore. Painting nudes, and moreover female nudes, when you were a white Caucasian male, was not good. He got a bashing in terms of the feminist critique. Then there was a big chill with the ‘80s and the Reagan era, and the Mapplethorpe scandal in Cincinnati, that whole shit storm. American museums have been terrorized. They’re terrified to take on challenging topics.

The other reason, perhaps, is that he’s been thought of as a commercial artist, all the more so after the Steel Drawings, because they look so produced. They got some good reviews in the press, but in ‘85 or ‘86, if it had an industrial look, it was suspect.

BOUCHER This was also in the context of an ascendant expressionism in the art world.

AQUIN Yes, and these works went against the notion of the uniqueness of the artwork. We didn’t yet have editioned video installations and the like. He was stuck with a label of being an artist for the market and not for museums. And that label really sticks.

BOUCHER The feminist backlash you mention seems ironic in the light of Wesselmann’s having been a real family man, whose wife modeled for his Great American Nudes. He doesn’t have a reputation as a womanizer.

AQUIN He never worked from *Playboy* or other pornographic magazines. He worked from art historical nudes. His nudes were part of a larger project to redesign figurative painting from the start based on traditional genres of nude, still life, landscape, etc., and I think his intuition was maybe as fundamental as Lichtenstein’s. They both acknowledged that abstract painting couldn’t be taken any further, so they thought, “Let’s start painting everything over again. Let’s start with the traditional genres, but we have to redefine them.” It’s a radical break in the painting of the ‘60s.

BOUCHER It's maybe hard to see that in retrospect. In the catalogue, Richard Phillips says, "When we talk about Pop art today . . . we're stuck with the success of certain highly mediated images."

AQUIN Yes, Wesselmann is stuck under the banner of the Great American Nude, which we have to look past, because beyond it is a very consistent body of work. He disliked the word Pop. When we think of Pop, we think of subject matter, of advertising, of Campbell's Soup cans, and we forget to think about form. But these guys were totally invested in form, in history, in tradition. He resented the Pop label, because once he was stuck with it, people forgot to look at how serious he was. He was very much a formalist, and an artist's artist.

BOUCHER He's quoted in the catalogue, from one of his journals, saying he actually once considered doing an abstract painting to break out of the stereotype about him: "I actually toyed with the idea of being another artist." This sounds like a guy pretty bitter at the lack of recognition.

AQUIN That's why he wrote his own autobiography under the nom de plume Slim Stealingworth.

BOUCHER Is there anything that surprised you in your research for the show?

AQUIN It's simply the overall consistency and visual impact of the work, from whatever period. It's striking. He has very few weak moments, because he was so systematic, so rigorous in his consideration of formal problems and solutions.

BOUCHER Speaking of surprising: I didn't know that Wesselmann was a country songwriter. He wrote a song for his wife, Claire Wesselmann, called "Pictures on the Wall of Your Heart." It's a terrific metaphor for memories of past lovers, and of course Wesselmann routinely put pictures on the wall in his pictures. In another song he writes, "I'm not someone you imagine, not just clay to fashion." What's the music like?

AQUIN It's classic country. I love country music, and Wesselmann wrote perfect country songs, very well composed, with tight, clever compositions and great melodies. One of the songs was featured in *Brokeback Mountain*: "I Love Doing Texas With You."

BOUCHER Wesselmann once said, "Country's underlying sadness makes me very happy." Do you think there's any lesson there for looking at his artwork?

AQUIN That sentence struck me too. There's something of a deep, sorrowful longing that you feel at the spectacle of beauty. His works are so beautiful and intense. He expresses so well how you can conjure up both sorrow and happiness in the same moment.

He's a great American master, who took the lessons of Matisse and brought them into the American century.

After it closes in Montreal on Oct. 7, the retrospective will travel to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond (Apr. 6–July 25, 2013).