

# Pop's High Modernist

Two recent exhibitions, bracketing Wesselmann's long career, celebrated a sometimes overlooked Pop painter whose sensuous but disciplined work owes as much to Matisse as to mass-media imagery.

BY RICHARD KALINA



Tom Wesselmann, one of the original Pop artists, died in 2004. This past spring two nearly simultaneous gallery exhibitions in New York were devoted to his work. L&M Arts presented "Tom Wesselmann: The Sixties," which featured his earliest Pop work, and Robert Miller Gallery showed his last series, the "Sunset Nudes"—a group of paintings and drawings that the artist finished between 2002 and 2004. It is clear that Pop art, with its interest in commercially pro-

Tom Wesselmann: *Sunset Nude with Matisse*, 2003, oil on canvas, 120 by 100 inches. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.



Still Life #35, 1963, oil and collage on canvas (in four sections), 120 by 192 inches overall. Estate of Tom Wesselmann. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy L&M Arts, New York.

duced imagery, has become the basis for much art made today. Pop's familiarity to a very broad public makes Wesselmann's work, both new and old, seem up to date despite its period references. This familiarity, unfortunately, can also make the early work appear to contemporary eyes to be less innovative than it really was. It is difficult in our irony-tinged and media-saturated world to fully grasp how unnerving this sort of art was when it was first seen. To use images from advertising, the movies, comic books, newspapers and popular magazines, especially in a cool, jokey, ostensibly impersonal manner, seemed an affront to those who valued not just the heroic

spiritual aspirations of the Abstract Expressionists, but also the finely tuned sensibilities of the European modernist tradition. Even for those who didn't hate Pop art, it just seemed too easy; an art form, as Clement Greenberg believed, that was intrinsically minor. It took some time to see that most of the Pop artists were just as formally adroit, historically informed and esthetically ambitious as their predecessors. Wesselmann was typical in this regard. His work broke rules and flouted decorum, but it was also rooted in the deep and nourishing ground of modernism (in his case in an abiding interest in Matisse). While funny and seemingly offhand, it was quite

pointed in its critique of contemporary society, and constructed with considerable formal and technical sophistication.

The L&M and Miller exhibitions spanned more than 40 years, but the art in them demonstrates an admirable consistency. Wesselmann, like many of the Pop artists, was a prodigious worker, with numerous exhibitions to his credit every year. He developed, however, a coherent set of themes early on, and through multiple variations stuck

**For Wesselmann, nudes were sturdy signifiers that held their meaning whether presented as wholes or fragments. Though partly based on pinup photos, most were drawn from models.**



Great American Nude #38, 1962, oil and collage on board, 48 by 60 inches. Collection Stavros Merjos and Honor Fraser.

with them. In this he differed from Roy Lichtenstein, another highly productive artist, who took on a variety of subjects and made them his by casting them in his own crisply graphic mode. A painting by Mondrian, Matisse or de Kooning, a generic kitsch landscape, a comic book image, an ornamental entablature, or a group of American Indian motifs would be fed, as it were, into the Lichtenstein machine, and come out a Lichtenstein. Even though Wesselmann had a recognizable style—surfaces so smoothly painted and graded that they almost seemed airbrushed, crisply sliced edges, and bright, saturated colors with sharp chromatic contrasts—what most readily identifies a Wesselmann is his subject matter. He touched on a variety of topics, from landscapes to household interiors and still lifes (as in the early collages and assemblages, well represented

in the L&M show) to later, cool takes on Abstract Expressionism. Beginning in the mid-'80s, Wesselmann embarked on an extensive series of works that translated exuberant yet highly accurate gestural drawings into large-scale painted steel and aluminum cutouts; a single, restrained example, the monochromatic *Bedroom Brunette with Irises* (1998-2004), was included in the Miller show. But Wesselmann is best known for his paintings of the nude female figure. His "Great American

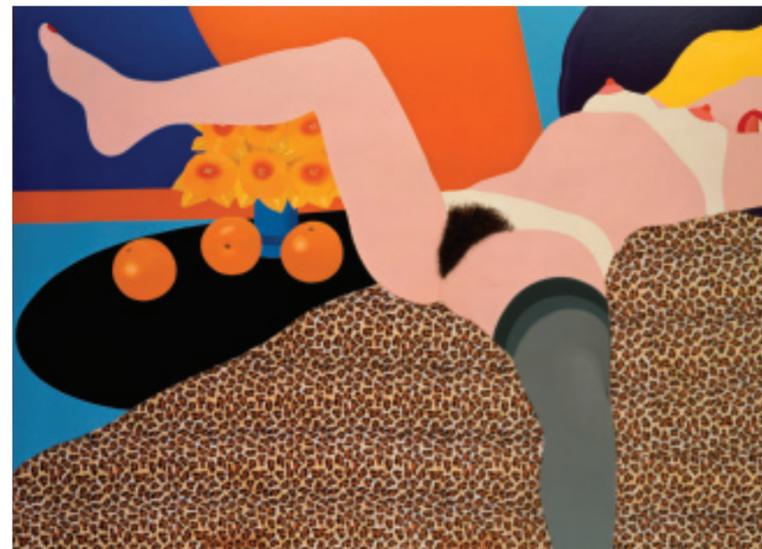
Nudes," which first appeared in 1961 (the title is an interesting variant of that staple of 1950s culture, the Great American Novel), launched his career, and the "Sunset Nudes" concluded it.

For Wesselmann the nude was a sturdy signifier, a subject that held its meaning whether he presented it as a whole or, as he was wont to do, as a fragment. Though based on the sort of pinup poses found in magazines like *Playboy*, Wesselmann's figures, for the most part, were drawn from the model rather than copied from photographs. This is a key element in Wesselmann's art, for drawing allowed him to exercise his fragmenting, collage sensibility while preserving pictorial unity. On the occasions that Wesselmann worked with a figure taken from a photograph, as he did in *Great American Nude #38* (1962), the

image seems to resist integration into the painting. In this work, a blonde nude with skin deeply tanned, except for the stark white area left by her doffed bikini, reclines on a red, white and blue bed. Behind her to the left, on a light orange wall, rests a shield emblazoned in patriotic stars and stripes. To the right, a curtain is pulled back to reveal a tropical beach scene. The figure is taken from a vertical photograph of a pinup girl, and while Wesselmann has tweaked things somewhat—turning her on her side, taking off the swimsuit, and heightening the tonal contrast of the skin—the figure seems a bit stiff and out of place. (A piece painted a month before and not in the show, *Great American Nude #36* [1962, Worcester Museum of Art], uses the same image but with the bikini intact. The effect is no different.)

Wesselmann's small drawings in thinned acrylic and pencil, such as *Nude with Tongue Out* (1966) and *Study for Great American Nude #95* (1967), or the larger late charcoal works—*Friday Nude Drawing* (2000) and *Study for Sunset Nude, Floral Blanket* (2003)—display an engaging spontaneity and great technical skill, and are certainly beautiful things in themselves. Wesselmann drew continuously as an ongoing means of notation and a pathway to invention. It was also an integral part of his painting method. Drawing slowed both the perceptual and the executing processes, enabling him patiently to coax out the perfect contour. This control of contour allowed him to achieve an illusion of depth and substance with the least possible amount of modeling; he was able to maintain flatness without sacrificing verisimilitude. In this he closely followed Matisse's example. Wesselmann's mastery of line-driven form made it easier to break up compositions and reassemble the pieces into vibrant interlocking pictorial structures. He was also able to leave out elements (the eyes and nose, as in *Great American Nude #51*, 1963, for example) while retaining a sense of the figure's integrity. In fact, the act of removal served to emphasize that which remained—in this case, the mouth. It is interesting to compare Wesselmann with Larry Rivers, who also effectively highlighted body parts, not by outright omissions but by elegant blurring and conspicuous partial erasure.

Mouths and lips seemed to have had a particular fascination for Wesselmann. He was scarcely alone in this. A famous precedent is Man Ray's 1934 painting of a giant pair of floating lips, *A l'heure de l'observatoire—les Amoureux*. Closer to Wesselmann's time there were de Kooning's "Women," which were often built around their mouths, and also important works by James Rosenquist and Andy Warhol, all of whom drew inspiration from movie and advertising images. Lip-shaped paintings of giant mouths, often languorously smoking cigarettes, are some of Wesselmann's most striking images. *Mouth #2* (1966) depicts two smiling, softly painted, luscious red lips and a row of perfect



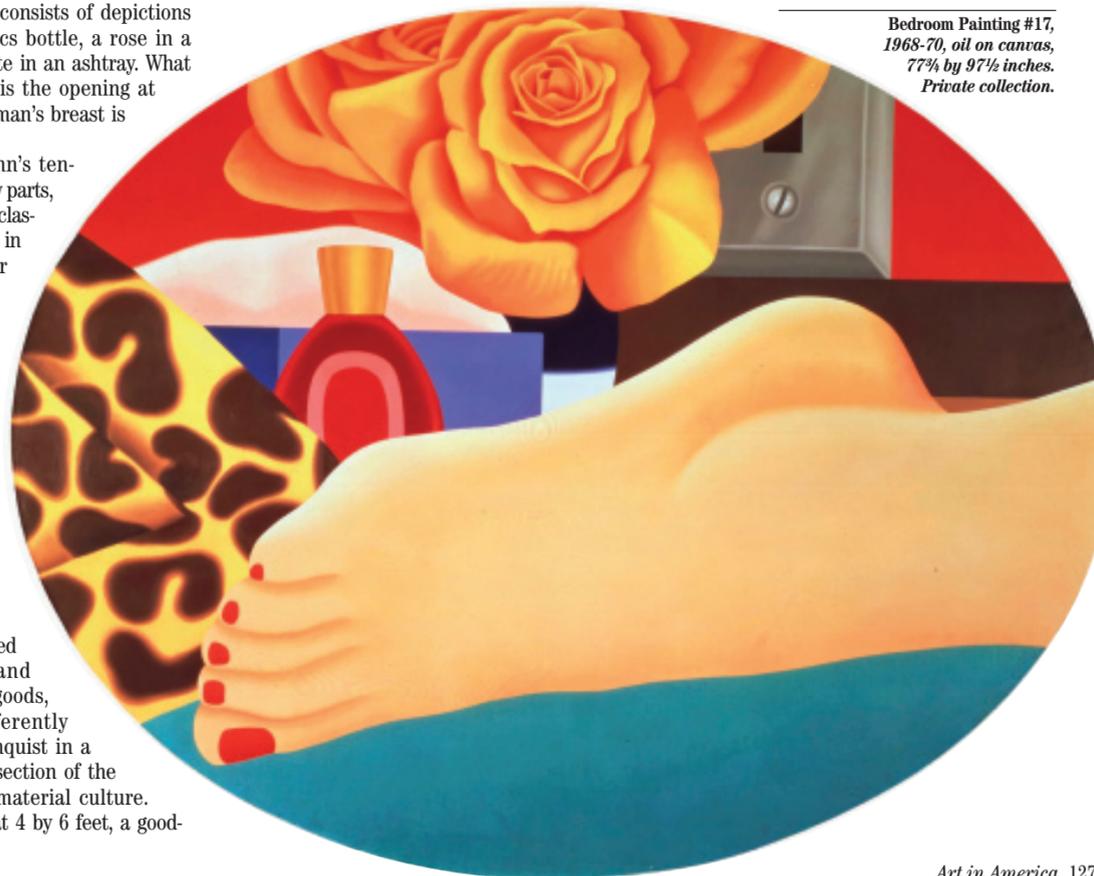
Great American Nude #92, 1967, Liquitex and assemblage on panel, 48 by 66 inches. Private collection, New York.

white teeth. The painting is about 7 feet long. It is in equal parts soothing, sexy and scary. An air of fetishism inhabits paintings like this, and also Wesselmann's numerous portrayals of disembodied feet (in the L&M show, *Bedroom Painting #17*, 1968-70) or breasts (*Bedroom Painting #8*, 1968). A particularly telling example is a 1970 assemblage (not shown), *Bedroom Tit in Box*. It consists of depictions of an orange, a cosmetics bottle, a rose in a small vase and a cigarette in an ashtray. What distinguishes this work is the opening at the top, where a live woman's breast is meant to be inserted.

Looking at Wesselmann's tendency to separate out body parts, we have an example of a classic modernist synecdoche, in which the part stands in for and reinforces the whole. The elliptical mode is an essential part of Cubism. Seen psychologically (or Surrealistically), however, one gets the sense of a fetishistic preoccupation with the part *instead* of the whole. Taken together, these two readings generate considerable interest and a little unease.

If Wesselmann had stayed with his interiors and still lifes of consumer goods, he might be seen differently today, joined with Rosenquist in a humorous but biting dissection of the visual signs of modern material culture. *Still Life #25* (1963) is, at 4 by 6 feet, a good-

sized picture. It shows us a tabletop covered with a checked cloth (painted by the artist), upon which rests a huge, formed-plastic loaf of white bread, the front slices of which protrude three-dimensionally from the painting's surface, and collaged photographic reproductions of two giant ice cream sodas, three apples and two bowls of cereal.



Bedroom Painting #17, 1968-70, oil on canvas, 77 1/2 by 97 1/2 inches. Private collection.

In another photo fragment, we see a woman's hands coming in from the top right, cradling a chunk of blue cheese swaddled in aluminum foil. The background features a window with a segment of lawn visible beyond, an actual red-and-white potholder attached to the wall, and a painted depiction of a white stove front, equipped with real knobs. It is a classic example of early, in-your-face Pop, both a tribute to and a slap at American consumerism.

*Still Life #35* (1963) is even punchier. Executed at billboard scale (10 by 16 feet), the photo-collaged painting puts together a six-pack of Royal Crown Cola, a loaf of bread (its packaging overwhelmed by the image of a cute but somewhat demonic-looking little girl devouring a slice of the product), two lemons, a pack of cigarettes, a can of Libby's beef stew and a Pan Am jet floating over a city in a cloudless blue sky. The painting screams at you—its colors are harsh, the images are pushed up to the picture plane, and everything is huge. My favorite painting in this group, though, is a 4-foot tondo, *Still Life #34* (1963), which combines images of a strawberry ice cream soda, a pear, two walnuts, a pack of Lucky Strikes, a vase of roses and a cut-out metal image of a Coke bottle. The background is a thickly painted slab of glowing orange, further animated by arcs of yellow, red and blue. A

**Despite Wesselmann's interest in the ephemera of consumer goods, his heart lay with the deeper tradition of psychologically charged, formally complex realist painting.**

circular canvas is notoriously difficult to work with, but Wesselmann pulls off the composition with great verve.

For all of his early interest in the impersonal ephemera of consumer culture, Wesselmann's heart lay with the deeper tradition of psychologically charged, formally complex realistic painting. He was more overtly Pop than the sculptor George Segal, his colleague for many decades at the Sidney Janis Gallery, but, like Segal's, Wesselmann's work spoke less to issues of emotional distancing and mechanical reproduction and more to questions of desire, feeling, empathy and beauty. For many years both he and Segal, although highly regarded, extensively exhibited and well-collected, were cast as backup players to those who were seen as the first rank of Pop artists. In spite of his long and distinguished career, Wesselmann has not yet had a museum retrospective in the U.S. An issue with Wesselmann's art has been the overt eroticism of his nudes. There is no getting around the sexual charge of a work like *Great American Nude #92* (1967). In it a woman with an open mouth and prominent breasts lies spread-eagled on a leopard-skin bedspread. She wears one gray stocking, and her pubic hair is an applied wiry thatch. That kind of frank sexual presentation might at one time have offended a variety of viewers and made museums nervous, and perhaps it still does. Considering, however, what gets shown in galleries and museums these days, Wesselmann's art today comes off as a bit racy, at most.

Issues of public relations and career management aside, I believe it is Segal's and Wesselmann's clear and essentially nonironic appeal to both the emotions and the esthetic sense that has stood in the way of greater acclaim. This may ultimately turn out to be their strong suit. Segal's relationship to prominent figurative sculptors like Kiki Smith and Robert Gober seems evident, and I would not be surprised to see Wesselmann's work, with its combination of formal elegance and psychological obsession, gain admirers among savvy younger artists as well. In fact, this past March *Interview* magazine published an appreciation of Wesselmann by the very up-to-the-moment artist Tom Sachs.

Wesselmann's ambition never flagged as he got older. The "Sunset Nudes" contains his largest single panel paintings since the 1960s. The paintings in this group are also among his most chromatically declarative and state in no uncertain terms his allegiance to Matisse. *Sunset Nude with Matisse Odalisque* (2003) measures 10 feet high by more than 8 feet wide. A cascade of hot oranges, yellows and reds, tempered by a few cool greens and blues, it features a seated blonde Wesselmann odalisque, hands crossed behind her head, her left knee hiked up. Behind her on an orange and green striped chair, and echoing the other's pose, sits an odalisque taken straight from one of Matisse's Nice pictures. Except for a vertical that might possibly be part of a frame, there is no sense that the women inhabit two different spatial spheres. The Matissean woman seems in fact to be more detailed and "lifelike" than the Wesselmann nude, whose modeling is flatter and more schematic. The latter has, as do the other "Sunset Nudes," a sharply delineated area of white corresponding to the portions of the body closest to the viewer, and her body is edged with a thick red line reminiscent of the bold lines that surround the figures in Matisse's 1905 painting *The Joy of Life*. Any doubt about who Wesselmann thought was looking over his shoulder would be immediately resolved with a glance at *Sunset Nude with Matisse Self-Portrait* (2004). There's a grisaille Henri Matisse himself in the upper right corner peering in at a highly schematic nude in turquoise stockings. Thinking of these last Wesselmann works, enlivened with palm trees, warm blue seas and glowing sunsets, I can't help recalling that great late Matisse painting, *Memories of Oceania*, a work that evokes the warmth and pleasure of both the tropics and of memory.

Wesselmann was an artist who, thanks to his disciplined work habits and the length of his career, was able to explore a variety of approaches to his preferred subjects and deal with each of them in depth. Something that distinguished the Pop artists was their grasp of scale. This was one of Wesselmann's great strengths. Not only was he able to work effectively in small, medium and quite large formats, but he knew how to adjust the size of the elements within his paintings to achieve maximum impact. These exhibitions, which bracketed Wesselmann's career and could be considered a retrospective of sorts (even though three decades of his work were omitted), let us see that. But there are many big Wesselmann works that would look best in a museum setting. The two shows under consideration, satisfying and well curated as they were, served to whet our appetites for something more substantial. □

*"Tom Wesselmann: The Sixties" was on view at L&M Arts [Feb. 23-Apr. 15], and "Tom Wesselmann: Sunset Nudes" was at Robert Miller Gallery [Mar. 9-Apr. 22], both in New York.*

Author: Richard Katina is a painter who writes about art.



Sunset Nude with Matisse Self-Portrait, 2004, oil on canvas, 72 by 75 inches. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.