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The Most Famous Pop Artist You Don't Know

Tom Wesselmann's paintings alienated some in the '70s and '80s, but his wholesome eroticism looks remarkably fresh today.

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"Smoker #8," 1973, oil on shaped canvas. Credit© The Estate of Tom Wesselmann/licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

The New York art world of the '60s can seem impossibly small to us now, almost sitcom-size. Everybody knew everybody, drinking and arguing and exchanging ideas in their now anachronistic suits and ties: Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein and James Rosenquist, Robert Indiana and Claes Oldenburg and a guy named Tom Wesselmann, the most famous artist that you don't know.

A sunny workaholic who made pink bikini-line nudes as much a Pop Art staple back in the '60s as the Campbell's Soup can, Wesselmann was a lucky man — lucky in love and art and beloved by everyone, it seemed, except the critics and curators of his day — or at least not enough of them that he ever got a full-scale retrospective at an American museum while he was alive. But attention, both positive and negative, seems to have had little effect on his productivity.

Throughout the decades of underappreciation that followed his original success, the shy, slim Cincinnati native produced a polished and graphically appealing body of work that, nearly 12 years after his death and 40 or so after the first cold shoulder, is re-emerging as a joyful, innocent rejoinder to the cynical materialism of much of contemporary art. And in Paris, in October, the Almine Rech Gallery will recreate most of a Wesselmann solo show from his Pop prime, including his most absurdist assemblage, a shoebox-size version of a Joseph Cornell box that includes sculpted elements (an orange, a cigarette in an ashtray, a vase with roses) and a single

human breast — or, as the 1970 Sidney Janis Gallery catalog puts it: “Bedroom Tit Box,” oil, acrylic, collage and live breast.

His current reconsideration has something to do with the record prices for Pop contemporaries like Warhol and Lichtenstein soaring up near the \$100 million mark and beyond, making Wesselmann an attractive target for trophy hunters. But it has more to do with the rise of a new generation of figurative artists inspired by his work — including Erik Parker, Matthew Palladino and particularly Mickalene Thomas, who feels that she is continuing his “psychologically and sensually charged” conversation.

In the beginning, Wesselmann’s greatest ambition was to write gags and cartoons. All that changed after he landed in New York to study at Cooper Union in 1956, where he met his lifelong muse, a tall blond classmate named Claire Selley. She posed for him, and he turned those quick sketches into collages using bits of wallpaper and scraps of ads he pilfered from the subway. In 1961, inspired by a dream, he began painting her in patriotic red, white, blue and gold (for the fringe on older flags) and called the series the “Great American Nude.”

His work, up until then, had mostly been knockoffs of his then-favorite artist, Willem de Kooning, but now he began to find his own style, particularly when the paintings grew to life size and larger. Suddenly the intimate nudes — almost all recognizable likenesses of Claire — took on an amplified, neon eroticism that felt like his answer to the aggressiveness he admired in de Kooning. At first he experimented with abstract versions, but he soon found that the electrifying effect increased the simpler he made them — just outlines, tan lines, parted lips and nipples big as the mouthpiece on a sousaphone. He made 101 of them. Most look like they were painted yesterday.

Soon after Wesselmann started the “Great American Nude” series, his career took off. He got his first solo show in 1961 at the Tanager gallery through a onetime art teacher, Alex Katz. He joined in the happenings at the Judson Gallery that he’d co-founded with Oldenburg. Ivan Karp, who helped launch the careers of Warhol, Lichtenstein and Robert Rauschenberg, introduced him to major collectors such as Harry N. Abrams and Robert and Ethel Scull, who snapped up his giant nudes and even bigger still lifes, made out of leftover billboards — collages of Royal Crown Cola bottles, Pall Mall cigarettes, a can of Budweiser.

Success never approached the downpour of money that young artists deal with now, but Wesselmann’s paintings sold well and soon he was making a living from them. He had supported himself teaching art and math in public schools, and he was able to quit that job, move to a bigger studio and marry Claire, by then a graphic designer. (She would design many of his early posters, as well as a 1980 monograph.)

Wesselmann and his New York art pals were like a hive mind, dipping into pop culture in their work in a surprisingly uniform, straight-faced reaction to the angry, angsty aesthetics of the Abstract Expressionist movement. Even though he never felt comfortable with the Pop artist label himself, Wesselmann’s still lifes appeared in the first major group show in New York devoted to Pop Art (called New Realism in those days). Almost immediately the Europeans caught onto the movement, and Wesselmann’s works became de rigueur in the shows there. For the United States Pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal, a Buckminster Fuller geodesic dome, Wesselmann offered a 10-foot mouth, wide open and lipstick red.

Then, all of a sudden, it was like he was the fifth Beatle — a moment in history. Although collectors continued to buy his work throughout his life, the spotlight had shifted and early supporters began abandoning him. The curator Henry Geldzahler, one of his earliest champions, left him out of his landmark show, “New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970,” the Metropolitan Museum’s maiden foray into contemporary art. Lawrence Alloway, the British critic widely credited with coining the term Pop Art, afforded Wesselmann only a token presence in his 1974 Whitney Museum survey of Pop. In the late ’70s and early ’80s, a few feminist critics made Wesselmann the whipping boy for the male gaze, but more damaging was the unwillingness of American museums to show the nudes. In the wake of the obscenity trial that haunted the Robert Mapplethorpe show in the ’90s, curators treated his brand of wholesome eroticism as if it was an advertisement for unprotected sex.

Wesselmann’s reaction to the silence was typically industrious: He published a richly illustrated critical appreciation of his own work, with the help of one of his earliest collectors, the publisher Harry N. Abrams, with text he wrote himself under the delightfully silly pseudonym Slim Stealingworth. (As Slim, he wrote, “Wesselmann was aware of a relationship between scale and eroticism. Too big a scale and eroticism decreases — perhaps because it is too hard to relate to a 15-foot woman.”) It’s still the most useful book on the painter, and a primer for working artists on cheerful, relentless, slightly ironic reinvention.

Oddly enough, he thrived throughout the decades of disregard, calling the period the happiest and most rewarding of his life. While he was completing the last of his “Great American Nude” series, he invented several remarkable genres. The first he called “Drop-Out” paintings, after an advertising term. They’re masterpieces of intimacy — shaped canvases depicting, say, a seascape, a bedside tableau or even a self-portrait, with edges that trace the outline of a naked woman (her leg, arm, stomach, breast), and only a nipple in the painted portion. The nudity is domestic, not libidinous, somewhere between Bonnard’s glowing portraits of his wife at her bath and the idle vacation nudity of *Éric Rohmer’s* films from the mid-1970s.

Wesselmann also pioneered a method of turning drawings into laser-cut steel, so that his quick, sure-handed sketches from life could be turned into something solid. “It is really like being able to pick up a delicate line drawing from the paper,” he wrote later. The painter Eric Fischl, who visited Wesselmann’s second floor studio on Bowery in the ’80s, remembers spotting the steel-cut works and being jealous. But much as he wanted to try it out, he never did because Tom “owns that technique completely.”

In 1993, Wesselmann suffered a heart attack, and after this brush with mortality, he brought Claire out of retirement and returned to his defining subject. In the resulting series, the “Sunset Nudes,” his forms are extremely simplified — thick pink outlines and dropout whites compete for attention, the figure flickering between slim youth and Cycladic figurine, with the rest of his bright forms (flowers, the patterns of a chair) reduced almost to insignia. His career-long admiration for the work of a French master plays out in one of his last paintings, “Sunset Nude with Matisse Odalisque,” from 2003, the year before his death. The blond figure raises her arms over her head in an echo of a 1923 Matisse nude that Wesselmann tucked in the corner above her. “One upshot of the heart attack is that it has brought Claire and I to an intense closeness,” he wrote in his journal. “I’m wildly in love with Claire.”