

## GAGOSIAN

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**Pop Artist Tom Wesselmann's Larger-Than-Life Paintings Go On View**  
*The late artist is known for his nudes, but a new exhibit tests the market for his broader body of work*

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*Tom Wesselmann's 1973 painting 'Still Life #60,' one of the large-scale still lifes on view at Gagosian. THE ESTATE OF TOM WESSELMANN/VAGA, NY/GAGOSIAN*

Sunglasses the size of an SUV. A lipstick tube as long as a park bench. A belt big enough to pass for a playground slide.

These are some of the gargantuan still lifes created by Tom Wesselmann, a pioneering Pop artist better known for painting female nudes, now on view at New York's Gagosian Gallery.

In one of the works, 1972's "Still Life #59," Wesselmann zooms in on a group of everyday items like a telephone, a bottle of red nail polish, a crumpled tissue and a vase of pink roses—a tabletop cluster that might be overlooked if tucked into a larger composition. Yet Wesselmann gives each of these elements its own oversize canvas so that the entire work is 16 feet wide and 9 feet tall. The effect is theatrical funhouse.



*'Still Life #59' (1972) PHOTO: THE ESTATE OF TOM WESSELMANN/VAGA, NY/GAGOSIAN*

The show, “Tom Wesselmann: Standing Still Lives,” is also an attempt to supersize the artist’s career. Wesselmann, a Cincinnati native who moved to New York in the 1950s, gained a spot in Pop-art history for his depictions of disrobed women with bikini tan lines, surrounded by stars and other patriotic motifs.

His paintings channeled the lush palettes of European painters like Henri Matisse, but Wesselmann’s iconography felt distinctly American. The combination set him apart from the chaotic, abstract expressionists who came before him.

By the time he died in 2004, his works had been collected by at least 50 museums, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York. A few years later, Sotheby’s sold one of his 1963 works, “Great American Nude No. 48,” for \$10.6 million.

Yet in the past decade, Wesselmann’s market has struggled. None of his nudes have since sold at auction for anywhere near his high mark, even as prices surged for his peers like Robert Rauschenberg, whose works have sold for up to \$18.6 million, and Andy Warhol, whose works have topped \$100 million.

Less than two years ago, Wesselmann’s estate signed up to work with Gagosian, a powerhouse gallery known for boosting prices for Pablo Picasso’s late-era works, which had previously been considered mediocre. The same gallery also pushed hard to market Jean-Michel Basquiat’s graffiti-style paintings to newly wealthy buyers in Asia and elsewhere, leading to soaring prices for the late artist.

With this show, Gagosian is campaigning for Wesselmann’s reassessment—by asking collectors to take a closer look at more than his nudes. The gallery has gathered nine still lifes that the artist created between 1967 and 1981 but never showed together. MoMA lent one of the pieces from 1969-70, “Still Life #57,” but most of the others went unsold when they were initially shown and have remained in the artist’s estate.



*'Still Life #61' (1976) PHOTO: THE ESTATE OF TOM WESSELMANN/VAGA, NY/GAGOSIAN*

Jeffrey Sturges, the artist's longtime studio assistant who now directs exhibitions for the estate, said Wesselmann expanded his format because he wanted to recreate the rush he felt whenever he stood before bold abstract works like those of Mark Rothko. But as Wesselmann didn't want to resort to that style, he instead achieved it by painting everyday objects using bright colors on a wall-size scale.

"Scale is something you feel, and it changes as you move around it," Mr. Sturges said. "He wanted you to feel that punch without going abstract."

The problem was that dealers in the 1970s found these large-scale still-lives "overwhelming and difficult to place," since fewer collectors at the time bought art to put into warehouses or display in cavernous, private museums. Now, immersive art is fashionable, making this show a potential comeback test for Wesselmann's broader oeuvre.

Gagosian declined to say what it plans to ask for the still lifes in its show, but one of the pieces on view, 1981's "Still Life with Belt and Sneaker," sold at Sotheby's in 2010 for \$650,500.