

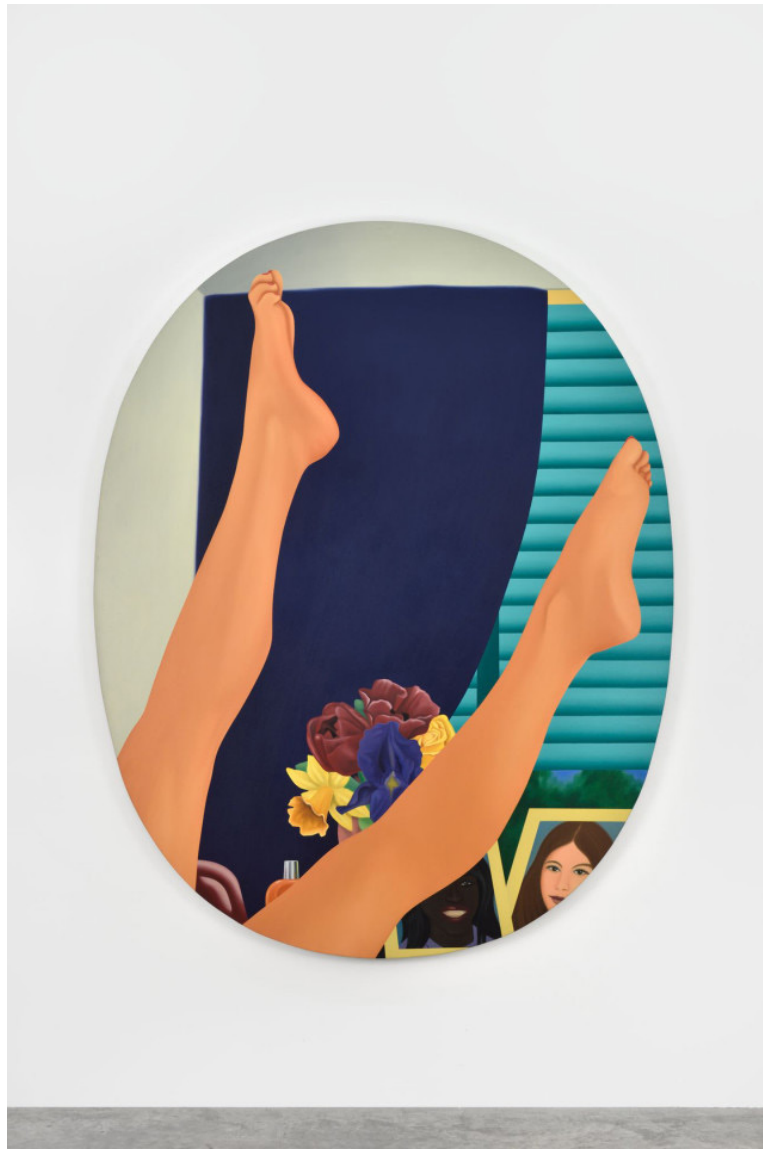


Bedroom Tit Box, 1968-1970

Courtesy: The Estate of Tom Wesselmann and Almine Rech Gallery.

Photo: Rebecca Fanuele

Undeniably, Tom Wesselmann's women are different. As opposed to bodies that act as host to the male gaze, internalizing its damaging ideologies, the women partake in a process of desire. As the title of Wesselmann's recent exhibition at Almine Rech would indicate, it takes "a different kind of woman" to take responsibility for her pleasure and the lust it elicits, whilst allowing herself to be the subject of someone's sexuality. It is understandable that many critics—both male and female—have deemed Wesselmann's work as a commercialization of the body, especially considering that it often levels the nude with consumer objects, alluding to its domestication in the home, and by proxy, the co-optation of sex as affective labor. This reading, though certainly based on a pre-Laura Mulvey conception of the male gaze, strikes as ironic. After all, the 1960s and 1970s saw the rise of first-wave feminist critique, the emancipation of sex under the likes of Alfred Kinsey or Lyndon B. Johnson (the first American president to endorse oral contraceptives), and particularly literature such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which explicitly argued that women should be encouraged to partake and take pleasure in sex. Wesselmann certainly mystifies female sexuality, yet does so in order to express a curiosity, an interest to gaze into a woman's pleasure points and to explore the surface of their desire. To claim that they are dehumanized, sexualized, or to assume that they forgo female sexuality is not only reductive but also portends close-mindedness and fuels an insidious internalization of patriarchal values.



Bedroom Painting #35, 1967-1975

Courtesy: The Estate of Tom Wesselmann and Almine Rech Gallery.

Photo: Rebecca Fanuele

Objectification, when treated as a denial of autonomy, emotionality, personality, or predilections—or as a claim to ownership—is an inherently degrading act. Nevertheless, even Martha Nussbaum acknowledged that not all types of objectification are necessarily damaging, especially when they take into account a woman’s consent and sexual subjectivity. The muse is a classic embodiment of this participatory instrumentalization: She consents to being subject to someone’s gaze, emptied and reduced to surface, yet sanctions the act by recognizing it as an exchange of power. Claire Selley, Wesselmann’s wife and lifelong model, is precisely that kind of woman. Legs rendered in simplified forms and colors are kicked into the air, the contour lines that define her shape lead to centers of pleasure, which are just out of sight. The frame of this image, *Bedroom Painting #35* (1967-75) is shaped as a gaping O: an oval opening granting access to a private moment, in which the viewer is given the succinct pleasure of peeping through a keyhole or a perforation in the wall. Insouciantly lifted against a backdrop of family photos and a bouquet of flowers, the legs are stilled in mid-air. If this must be considered a pose, it assumes a presentation of sensuality. Significantly, the pleasure is her own; the absence of a partner suggesting that she’s either getting herself off or getting head. The artist-as-voyeur is pointed to in his absence, most likely standing behind an easel paying due attention to her *jouissance*.



View of the exhibition A Different Kind of Woman
Courtesy: The Estate of Tom Wesselmann and Almine Rech Gallery.
Photo: Rebecca Fanuele



View of the exhibition A Different Kind of Woman
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In *Bedroom Blonde with T.V.* (1984-93,) Claire reclines on a bed with pouty lips, eyes closed and heavy with blue eyeshadow. In full makeup and pearl earrings, we can assume she isn't asleep; her head tilting back into the pillow, spine slightly arched, she is pointed to as a recipient of pleasure. Notably, the TV embedded into the frame is real and functioning—a collaged *mise-en-scene* common in Wesselmann's later work. In the gallery, it plays French shows on repeat; though watching television with your wife splayed naked could be interpreted as a peril to "domestic bliss"—sex that suffers under quotidian drags—Wesselmann's own descriptions of his work allude to the erotics implicit in such casual encounters. Imagine a woman, post-party, slipping her dress off to seduce an unsuspecting husband; she assumes control over their sex life by showcasing her own lust. Counteracting the ennui of the home, she redirects the "male gaze" from the TV to her body, which is to say, her desire. Echoing a sentiment belonging to Jane Bowles, it seems to say: "I'm so wily and feminine that I could live by your side and deceive you afresh everyday."^[1]



Smoker #3 (Mouth #17), 1968

Courtesy: The Estate of Tom Wesselmann and Almine
Rech Gallery.

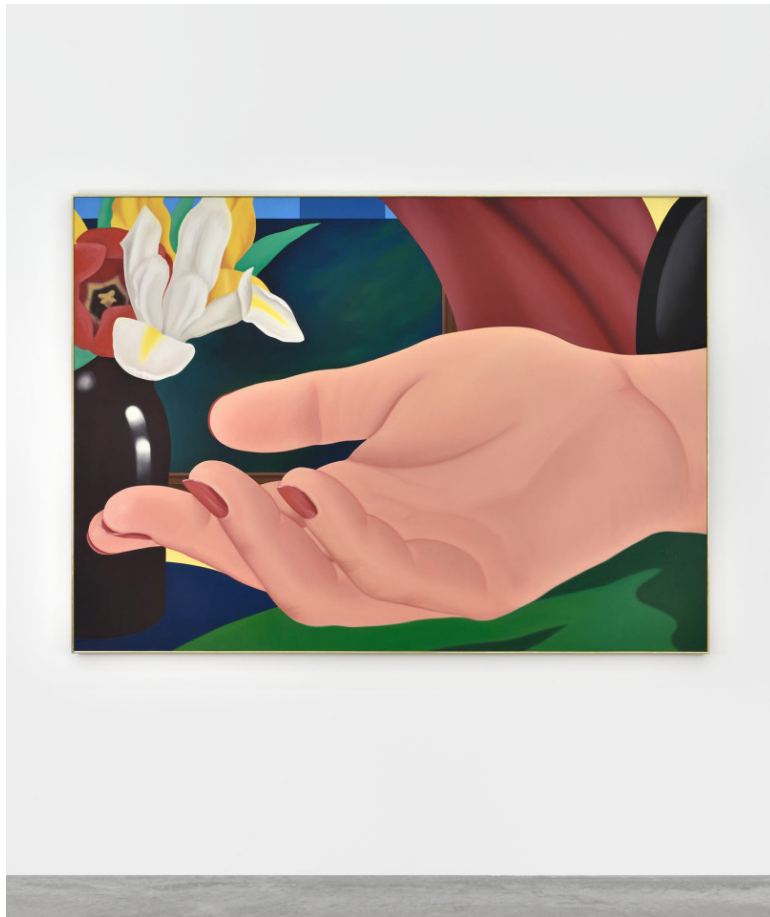
Photo: Rebecca Fanuele

^[1] Bowles, Jane. *My Sister's Hand in Mine: The Collected Works of Jane Bowles* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 447.



View of the exhibition A Different Kind of Woman
Courtesy: The Estate of Tom Wesselmann and Almine Rech Gallery.
Photo: Rebecca Fanuele

The women in Wesselmann's paintings do not "deceive" to give men the illusion of power but rather put on a performance of sexuality, in which both partners can partake. *Bedroom Tit Box* (1968-70) is a similar staging: During designated gallery hours; the viewer is invited to stare into a small box embedded into the wall. The *mise-en-scene* inside consists of small objects made of oil, acrylic, and assemblage. There's an orange, an ashtray with a half-smoked cigarette, a vase filled with plush, pink roses, and a baby-blue perfume bottle. Iconography aside, the objects become props for the strangest of performances, in which a hatch opens from the top only for a human breast to slowly lower into it. The woman's cleavage, quite literally cut from the woman's body, becomes a formal object to be considered for its shape and color, and as a constituent to the composition of the box. The form is supple and curved, an inverted triangle with one facet slightly swollen; the nipple, a peachy apex. Against a cardboard cutout, painted white and cut into the shape of a wave, the box fills with subtle motion; the simple shapes and balmy colors of the objects mirror the femininity of the breast. Finding its rose-colored glasses, the "male gaze" is filtered with admiration—and, arguably, for those not titillated (pun intended) by the female sex, astonishment. Seduction aside, the breast eclipses the objects with an awkward wit, the lissome nipple a digression from the severity of the white cube that encompasses the diorama. Blushed with the intimacy of a slow striptease, Wesselmann's box is a reenactment of what happens behind closed doors, when lust becomes an exalting study of each inch of another body.



Gina's Hand, 1972-1982

Courtesy: The Estate of Tom Wesselmann and Almine Rech Gallery.

Photo: Rebecca Fanuele

In works such as the now-iconic *Smoker #3 (Mouth #17)* (1968), Wesselmann focuses his exaltation on specifics, like a canvas shaped as a sumptuous, apple-red mouth, slightly spread open. A cigarette hangs loosely between its lips, inviting the viewer into a post-coital moment screaming of guilty pleasures. An undeniably kitsch image, the emptied imagery of *Smoker* speaks to an American brand of sex, which is licentious and up for sale, yet nonetheless alluring. Suggesting that moment where orgasm becomes a lull and the slow cigarette smoke its placid aftermath, the painting's suggestive pornography aims to arouse. Wesselmann is selling sex, especially if one can consider sex as something cerebral, where the mind dwells in a representation, which alludes to some salacious place beyond the frame. *Black Bra and Green Shoes* (1981) alludes to an unseen act in a similar stimulation of fantasy. A bra hangs haphazardly atop a pair of stilettos, no doubt kicked off to pursue other pleasures, fixating the gaze only to displace thought. Again, the familiarity of such "accidental" still lives seems to be the driving force; the hasty undressing an appreciable scene for lovers whose lust, at times, will trump the need to put clothes back into place. Though the bright green sandals and lacey bra allure in their own right, their power lies in an acknowledgement of the erotics of boredom, the sex contained on its surface and, significantly, the presence of such affects within the confines of a home.

Though Wesselmann's nudes exist predominantly as surface, his brand of sex is still inherently cerebral. The time spent in another's image indicates a thought process, a slow seduction, which happens within the artist's studio practice. Painting becomes an accentuation of the eroticism of the initial encounter, an exacerbation necessary to scale the interaction and locate its affect. This reading is particularly underscored by the size of the works (*Bedroom Tit Box* excluded), which enlarges the women to an Amazonian scale; the large cutouts overwhelm and dominate to render the women elusive and impossible, yet all the more alluring and seductive for it. Aligned with the zeitgeist of America, circa 1970-80, the paintings do reflect the psychological powers of advertising, like large billboards designed to draw in passersby. Idealistically, selling the women's allure is less a commercialization than an attempt to make female sexuality public. The artist's internal debate over what can and what cannot be released of the actual encounter seems implicit in the choice to essentialize detail. It preserves something personal, resorts to an anonymity that provides a psychological shelter for not only the women but Wesselmann's relationships to them. Rather than "dehumanizing," he abstracts to see how much one can simplify and still preserve the woman's allure and sexual subjectivity. Think Manet's *Olympia*, Rossetti's *Sancta Lilies*. Reduced to shapes, sets of primary colors, and objects assemblaged to create domestic scenographies, Wesselmann's *Different Kind of Woman* is the quintessential American muse—liberated under the publicization of female pleasure, the consensual surrender to lust that vitalizes, dissects, and enthralls. In the words of another illustrious, iconic American blonde, Mae West: "A woman that knows the ropes isn't likely to get tied up." Unless that's what gets her off, of course.



View of the exhibition *A Different Kind of Woman*
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Black Bra and Green Shoes, 1981

Courtesy: The Estate of Tom Wesselmann and Almine Rech Gallery.
Photo: Rebecca Fanuele



Bedroom Blonde with T.V., 1984-1993

Courtesy: The Estate of Tom Wesselmann and Almine Rech Gallery.
Photo: Rebecca Fanuele