

'Get wild' — 10 things to know about Tom Wesselmann

A guide to the Pop artist celebrated for his big, bold and beautiful nudes and vibrant still lifes. Illustrated with works offered in New York on 4 and 5 March

1. Before turning to art, Wesselmann studied psychology and served in the US Army

Tom Wesselmann was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1931. His friend Jim Dine was born in the same city four years later. Fellow Pop artists Roy Lichtenstein (1923-1997) and R.B. Kitaj (1932-2007) also spent their formative years in the Buckeye State.

In 1952, after a year's studying psychology at the University of Cincinnati, Wesselmann was drafted into the US Army, two years into the Korean War. While serving he learned, and then taught, the interpretation of aerial photographs. He also began to draw cartoons about his experiences.

2. Wesselmann initially wanted to be a cartoonist

After returning to Ohio to complete his degree, Wesselmann pursued his ambition to become a cartoonist by enrolling at the Art Academy of Cincinnati. He earned enough money from having work published in magazines such as *True*, *1000 Jokes* and the *Saturday Evening Post* to move to New York City.

Wesselmann enrolled at Cooper Union, where his attention gradually turned to fine art. He received his diploma in 1959, and was poised to become one of the leading Pop artists of the next decade.



Tom Wesselmann (1931-2004), *Smoker*, 1976. Lithograph in colours with embossing, on Arches paper. Sheet: 22 x 29% in (559 x 759 mm). Estimate: \$3,000-5,000. Offered in Contemporary Edition on 4 March 2020 at Christie's in New York

3. Wesselmann adopted the pseudonym Slim Stealingworth to write his own autobiography

Wesselmann, penned by the artist as Slim Stealingworth, was published in 1980. The book, in which the artist was referenced in the third person, recalled the impact of seeing a Robert Motherwell (1915-1991) painting called *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* in the late 1950s: 'The first aesthetic experience... He felt a sensation of high visceral excitement in his stomach, and it seemed as though his eyes and stomach were directly connected'.

See below for all upcoming works by Tom Wesselmann offered at Christie's

Wesselmann also found himself drawn to the work of Willem de Kooning (1904-1997). 'He was what I wanted to be,' he told *Art News* in 1964. Stealingworth reported the influence of de Kooning in seminal terms: 'He realised he had to find his own passion [...] he felt he had to deny to himself all that he loved in de Kooning, and go in as opposite a direction as possible. The traditional situations of painting would be the subjects: the reclining nude, a still life on a table, a portrait, an interior, etc.'

4. He collaborated with other leading Pop artists

Together with Jim Dine and Mark Ratliff, Wesselmann founded the Judson Gallery in the basement of a church in Greenwich Village, where the first show included three-dimensional works by Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929). Wesselmann showed a number of small collages in a two-man show alongside Ratliff.

Two years earlier Wesselmann had met fellow art student Claire Selley, the model for many of his works, who would later become his wife.



Tom Wesselmann (1931-2004), *Claire Sitting with Robe Half Off (Vivienne)*, from *Portfolio 90*, 1993. Screenprint in colours, on museum board. Sheet: 61 x 48 in (1549 x 1219 mm). Estimate: \$10,000-15,000. Offered in Contemporary Edition on 4 March 2020 at Christie's in New York

5. Wesselmann's breakthrough came with 'The Great American Nude' series

Wesselmann had a dream about the phrase 'red, white and blue', and in 1961 decided to paint a 'Great American Nude' — with its echoes of the fabled Great American Dream and Great American Novel — featuring these and other patriotic colours, as well as motifs such as stars and stripes.

It would be the first of many canvases that also combined prosaic aspects of American life — advertising and fast food, for example — with references to modern masters such as Matisse, Mondrian and Modigliani.

Wesselmann's work was included in a number of the groundbreaking Pop Art exhibitions of the early 1960s, including New Realists at the Sidney Janis Gallery, and The Popular Image, staged at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art.



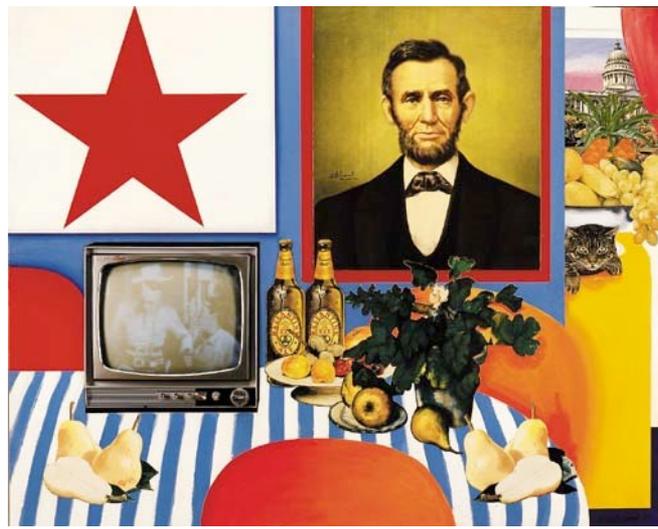
Tom Wesselmann (1931-2004), Great American Nude # 21, executed in 1961. Casein, enamel, graphite, printed paper, fabric, linoleum and embroidery on board. 60 x 48 in (152.4 x 121.9 cm). Sold for \$3,330,500 on 11 May 2011 at Christie's in New York. Artwork: © Estate of Tom Wesselmann/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2020

6. A series of still lifes begun in 1962 continued the use of collage — and incorporated real objects

Referencing the tradition of European still lifes that exalt the beauty and harmony of the assembled objects, Wesselmann arranged scenes in which bold-hued, mass-produced objects — sliced white bread, a packet of cigarettes, a milkshake, a bottle of beer — are juxtaposed and seem to compete for our attention.

Ultimately these still lifes came to embrace real objects. Still Life #20 (1962) includes a three-dimensional cabinet above a sink, plus a light that can be turned on or off, alongside images of food and drink in two dimensions. Still Life #24 (1962) incorporates a plastic corn cob that Wesselmann bought from a corn seller for \$50.

Wesselmann even went so far as to include a working television in Still Life #28 (1963). Stealingworth noted that he was interested in 'the competitive demands that a TV, with moving images and giving off light and sound, can make on painted portions'.



Tom Wesselmann (b. 1931), *Still Life #28*, executed in March 1963. Acrylic and cardboard collage on board with working television. 48 x 60 in (122 x 151.4 cm). Sold for \$798,000 on 13 November 2001 at Christie's in New York. Artwork: © Estate of Tom Wesselmann/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2020

7. His choices of objects, colours and textures were intended to make his art 'get wild'

Again talking to *Art News* in 1964, Wesselmann said that what he was looking for in his tableaux was 'Not just the differences between what [the objects] were, but the aura each had with it. They each had such a fulfilled reality: the reverberations seemed a way of making a picture more intense.'

'A painted pack of cigarettes next to a painted apple wasn't enough for me. They are both the same kind of thing. But if one is from a cigarette ad and the other a painted apple, they are two different realities and they trade on each other.'

'At first glance, my pictures seem well-behaved, as if — that is a still life, OK. But these things have such crazy give-and-take that I feel they get really very wild.'

8. He painted nudes using 'his own Pop visual language'

Where some see the objectification of women in Wesselmann's nudes, others find a celebration of sexuality. 'Painting, sex and humour are the most important things in my life,' the artist said in a 1984 interview.

'People think of him as a one-dimensional artist who focused only on naked women,' says Lindsay Griffith, International Head of Contemporary Editions. 'The reality is that he was thinking about the artist's muse in a very different way — in his own Pop visual language — and I think that should be his legacy.'



Tom Wesselmann (1931-2004), *Stockinged Nude #7*, executed in 1980. Liquitex and graphite on paperboard. 8 x 18 ¾ in (20.3 x 47.6 cm). Estimate: \$40,000-60,000. Offered in *Post-War to Present* on 5 March 2020 at Christie's in New York

Wesselmann remained married to his wife Claire from 1963 until his death in 2004. ‘Claire was certainly his muse,’ notes Griffith. ‘There’s a tradition of painting the female muse throughout art history, and I think Wesselmann is a continuation of that. Clearly how we consider these images is going to change over time, but I think Wesselmann’s investment in continuing and reinventing that tradition is worth celebrating.’

Monica Serra, whom he met in the 1980s, was another frequently painted model. ‘He thought of me as ethereal — something special,’ she told the *The Guardian* newspaper in 2016.

Having started out depicting the entire nude female form, Wesselmann later shifted to disembodied, individual body parts such as the mouth, feet, and breasts. Seductive, ominous, and alluring, the mouth, with its delicate wisps of cigarette smoke being exhaled, has become the most identifiable and desired image of this type of work.



Tom Wesselmann (1931-2004), *Study for Mouth #19*, painted in 1969. 12 x 10 in (30.5 x 25.5 cm). Estimate: \$250,000-350,000. Offered in *Post-War to Present* on 5 March 2020 at Christie’s in New York

‘These are women who are very confident and have total control of their bodies and the way that they are being showcased in his art,’ observes Rachel White Young, a specialist in the Post-War and Contemporary Art department in New York.

‘That focus on the sexual revolution of the 1960s is a very important part of his oeuvre. I think Wesselmann is able to toe the line very gracefully in a way that some other artists are not. Something about Wesselmann still feels classic.’

9. Wesselmann was a ceaselessly inventive workaholic

Wesselmann would walk to his huge studio in Cooper Square in Manhattan six days a week for 32 years. He put in long hours, producing series that included the billboard-sized ‘Landscapes’; the ‘Seascapes’, in which women’s breasts and nipples often loom large in silhouette; ‘Mouths’, frequently embracing cigarettes and clouds of smoke; and the ‘Bedroom Paintings’, which offered fragmented close-ups of the nude alongside pillows, curtains, light switches or flowers.

In the 1980s he began to recreate the lines of quick pen sketches he had made using painted cut-out steel and aluminium. ‘The enlarged, brightly coloured “Steel Drawings” are such an important part of his work. He pursued them until his death, and it’s these in particular that are really having a moment,’ says Griffith.

After a long hiatus, Wesselmann also revisited *The Great American Nudes* — these later works have been dubbed *The Sunset Nudes*. As he neared the end of his life in 2004, he became so frail that Claire had to escort him to his studio: ‘He said to me that every brushstroke was physically painful, but he couldn’t stop.’



Tom Wesselmann (1931-2004), *Bedroom Painting #37*, painted in 1977. Oil on canvas. 70 x 68 in (177.8 x 172.7 cm). Sold for \$3,218,500 on 12 November 2008 at Christie's in New York. Artwork: © Estate of Tom Wesselmann/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2020

10. His market is growing, and has the potential to go further

‘Wesselmann has been undervalued in relation to his peers, a bit like James Rosenquist,’ says Griffith. ‘When you think how much Warhol and Lichtenstein have been appreciated — Wesselmann was a tremendously talented artist and he worked in every decade, with this really personal and topical imagery, in just the same way that they did. He was also innovative in a way that people don’t really know. He had a very different spin to the other Pop artists, using different materials and mediums.’

Wesselmann’s unpretentious attitude may have contributed to the fact he was never given a major retrospective at an American museum during his lifetime. His assessment of his career was characteristically unassuming: ‘I’m in favour of beauty,’ he said in 1988. ‘Good, old-fashioned, no-holds-barred beauty.’

Main image:

Tom Wesselmann in his Bowery studio, New York, 1992. Photo: © Thomas Hoepker/Magnum Photos. Artwork: © Estate of Tom Wesselmann/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2020