ALMINE RECH

Tom Wesselmann
Up Close

Mar 5 — Apr 12, 2025 | London

An Electrifying Image. All Parts Erotic. Painting, Sex and Humor.

A confession: Until recently I knew nothing of Tom Wesselmann's paintings showing a certain part of his own naked body. His paintings of reclining nude women are as familiar as Art History 101. Triumphantly and earnestly erotic, his models grin, spread their legs, and display their tan lines, all in a joyous celebration right in line with the 1960s sexual revolution and with the artist's happy new relationship with Claire Selley, a fellow student at New York's Cooper Union, whom he would marry in 1963. These images are very much in the mainstream of an art history stocked with nudes, though their sexual content sets them apart from other Pop artists.

But, if you'll forgive an ahistorical moniker (it's too easy to look at these painted images from today's perspective), Tom Wesselmann's dick pics? They're new to me.

Artists have had a long and fruitful relationship with the naked human body, and with genitals specifically. Men's erotic and even pornographic renditions of women are legion. Women have turned the tables, depicting men's genitalia; think of Louise Bourgeois and Judith Bernstein. But what did these paintings mean to Wesselmann?

This show places the penis paintings in the context of his overall program. Wesselmann once wrote in his journal that "The prime mission of my art . . . is to make figurative art as exciting as abstract art." He had early on grappled with his favorite artist, Willem de Kooning, and it can be fruitful to study Wesselmann's compositions for their abstract qualities. The closest context for the penis works is his *Bedroom Paintings*. Begun in 1967, this group consists of close-up views of body parts in combination with commonplace objects that might appear on a night table, such as flowers, fruit, and boxes of tissues.

The nudes were observed at very close range, as we see in photos of the artist at work, and blown up to massive scale. A breast no less than seven feet across dominates *Bedroom Painting #30 (BP30)*, 1974, where it rests alongside other artifacts that often appear in this series: a burning cigarette resting in an ashtray, for example, and a framed photograph of Claire. This allowed Wesselmann to combine his fascination with the body with an ongoing exploration of still life. Body parts and objects become triangles (breasts), cylinders (penises), and rectangles (a tissue box), combined and recombined across canvases as Wesselmann sought out compositions with maximum impact.

Several works in the show feature feet—including a delightfully unlikely naked one, dominating the image in a 1970 study for a poster promoting the Olympic Games. In a 1980 monograph, Slim Stealingworth wrote that "While not a foot fetishist, Wesselmann says he does find a beautiful bare foot to be rather erotic. (Although, he adds, he finds all parts of the body to be rather erotic.)" Another arresting presence in 'Up Close' are the voluptuous red lips; three studies show either a smiling woman's mouth or a mouth mysteriously sticking out its tongue. The canvas *Cut-Out Mouth (77-50)*, 1977, exemplifies the artist's shaped canvases, along with *Bedroom Painting #67*, 1983, in which a nude woman's torso is cut away, and *Seascape #27*, 1967-1969, where the painting's shape is determined by the contours of a penis along with a puff of cloud.

But if a foot is erotic, and naked breasts can seem natural, an erect penis borders on the pornographic. "Wesselmann introduced the penis into the [Bedroom paintings] series in 1967," wrote Stealingworth. "He had intended to use it in his paintings for a long time—it was an incredibly vivid, even electrifying, image. In these works he is no longer the viewer but the subject, and they take on a bit of exhibitionism. In most of these works the erect penis is horizontal, so that it rather literally takes the place of the reclining nude as subject."

The twist? "Stealingworth" was none other than Wesselmann. The artist reveals himself in this text as if from a remove, but in fact in the most personal way possible. In the penis paintings, in parallel, we see his body as if from the point of view of an observer, while it's actually him revealing himself.

But even if that 14-foot-wide *Bedroom Painting* contains a titanic breast, the most confrontational image in this show may be the foot-high 1967 drawing *Shaved Cunt*, which recalls Stealingworth's observation that Wesselmann found shaved pubic areas to be "blatantly erotic and consequently visually aggressive," adding, "To him a shaved vagina had the same vividness and immediacy as a strong red."

Wesselmann once said that the most important things in his life were painting, sex and humor. In the penis paintings, he seems to have brought the three together, as he himself saw: "It's not easy to stand there with a straight face, I think," the artist allowed in a 1984 conversation with critic Irving Sandler, adding, "I think it is rather amusing." And while his naked women have perhaps lost a degree of sexual heat through familiarity, the images of Wesselmann's hard member, even amid the flood of imagery made since he painted them, retain considerable spark, challenge, and an honest, healthy charge.

— Brian Boucher, editor and writer

Ostentatio genitalium
Tom Wesselmann and the Penisgeist

Ecce Homo, or Behold the Man is a title that conjures centuries worth of art history. But what about Ecce virīlitās—Behold the Manhood? So scream the lesser-known, still-jarring penis paintings by Tom Wesselmann, executed between 1967-70 at the height of the Sexual Revolution. Considered part of his groundbreaking *Bedroom Series* which depicts sultry female nudes, close ups of eroticized body parts (breasts, nipples, pudenda, feet) and intimate still-lifes drawn from a sex-soaked boudoir. Yet it is the audaciously tumescent, primarily caucasian cocks which dominate five canvases in Wesselmann's oeuvre that retain their shock value via their unapologetic declaration of sexual liberation[1]. Even at the dawn of the "Golden Age of Porn"—a period that is often cited as beginning with the 1969 release of Andy Warhol's explicit film *Blue Movie* and continued with the widespread distribution of X-rated films such as *Deep Throat* in 1972 and *The Devil and Miss Jones* in 1973—Wesselmann's temerarious isolation of the erect penis as the central compositional feature of his canvases are nothing short of confrontational. Without any narrative recourse to explain what or who is the object of longing, the picture itself does not reveal if these are straight or gay boners; the indeterminacy of their sexual orientation adds to their radicality. Yet for years these works were suspected of misogyny because of the artist's heterosexual identity. When read at face value, Wesselmann's paintings are less about a specific desire or identity politics, than a celebration of erotic agency as such. His pricks are Popified—deliberately simplified forms (barely perceptible veins! not too much anatomical accuracy!), flat bold color, unflinching compositions in which the male member occupies the horizon line, layered over a seascape or a domestic interior. Along with his other fragmented genitalia paintings, these penis paintings function as unadulterated totems of libidinal liberation.

Liberation was the ethos of the late 1960s and early 70s. Writing in *The Dialect of Sex*, feminist revolutionary Shulamith Firestone proclaimed that men's liberation would be a necessary byproduct of dismantling patriarchy, arguing that the feminist revolution would free all individuals—regardless of gender—from the constraints of the sexual class system. Seen through the era's emancipatory *air du temps*, Wesselmann's body part paintings could be understood as part of a veritable "Penisgeist" that had sprung forth in the work of numerous of his artist-peers, many of whom were women. A group of phallic feminists led by artist Anita Steckel, a group of New York women artists united under the banner "Fight Censorship" to proclaim the right to depict graphic sexual imagery, particularly transgressing prohibitions against penile imagery. Her arguments were summed up with a zinger of a thesis, "If the erect penis is not 'wholesome' enough to go into museums—it should not be considered 'wholesome' enough to go into women. And if the erect penis is 'wholesome' enough to go into women, then it is more than 'wholesome' enough to go into the greatest art museums."[2] In 1968, Louise Bourgeois paraded around the city with her giant latex phallus sculpture, ironically entitled *Fillette* ("little girl" in French). From 1969 to '75, Carolee Schneeman exhibited her *Sexual Performance Chart*, detailing the exact sizes of her male lovers' cocks with clinical objectivity. From 1973 onwards, Judith Bernstein drew giant, hairy anthropomorphic screws whose "heads" left little to the imagination. Betty Tompkins embarked on her monumental, photo realist *Fuck Painting* series in 1968 using hardcore pornographic source materials. Cropping out faces and bodies, Tompkins' compositions exclusively depicted "the money shot" (coitus) although her political eroticism proved too much for the art world, as well as her fellow feminists, resulting in censorship and decades of repression. Male artists were at it too, explicitly deploying the male member in their work throughout the 60s and 70s—from Vito Acconci's performance *Seedbed* (1972) which infamously involved public masturbation to the wider discovery of Tom of Finland's explicit homoerotic drawings, and culminating with Warhol's *Sex Parts* series based on explicit bathhouse photo shoots he organized with Victor Hugo in 1977 and Robert Mapplethorpe's throbbing silver gelatin *Erection* in 1979. Looking back from this zenith point of a decade's worth of phallocentric iconography, Wesselmann's *Bedroom series* was a precocious forerunner of the Penisgeist.

Ostentatio genitalium of course did not begin during the Sexual Revolution. A Latin neologism coined by art historian Leo Steinberg, the "display of the genitals" was at its peak during the Renaissance. In his exhaustive study *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (1983), Steinberg argues that Jesus's penis was the compositional and narrative focal point of much of the period. Whether discussing depictions of baby Jesus or the dead Christ, Steinberg revolutionized Renaissance scholarship by arguing that the prominent representation of Jesus's manhood was the result of artists' attempts to visualize complex Catholic theology. Akin to the showing of the wounds (*ostentio vulnerum*) in *Ecce Homo* paintings, the unveiling of Christ's cock was crucial to enforcing Church doctrine. Steinberg argues in his analysis of hundreds of paintings that it is the "demonstrative emphasis"[3] of Christ's sexual member that furnished "palatable proof"[4] that the Son of God was really human, not a divine creature. Foregrounding the penis was a way to visualize how Jesus became flesh and lived among us, thus sharing the same temptations and desires as the rest of humankind. "For a Western artist nurtured in Catholic orthodoxy - for him the objective was not so much to proclaim the divinity of the babe as to declare the humanisation of God," explains Steinberg. "And this declaration becomes the set theme of every Renaissance Nativity, Adoration, Holy Family or Madonna and Child." The penis thus became a visual vehicle to confirm Christ's lived humanity.

What if, in the spirit of Steinberg, we contemplate Wesselmann's version of *ostentatio genitalium* in a similar humanizing vein? Writing about the first exhibition of the *Bedroom series* at Sidney Janis Gallery in 1970, Peter Schjeldahl opines "Wesselmann has introduced the subject of a really prodigious erect penis, an innovation that seems rather studied and jokey, more distracting than anything." The artist staunchly objected to Schjeldahl's accusation of jokiness–both in his journal writing and in an interview with Irving Sandler.[5] Steinberg conceded that the representation of the penis might be understood in a spirit of "ribaldry" rather than reverence. Might Wesselmann's penis paintings be an assertion of masculine vulnerability? When the fig leaf is shed, the exposed phallus becomes the object of our gaze, released from Puritan sexual repression and yet unshielded from moral judgement, political attack, or personal ridicule. Not only can the erect penis be understood as a symbol of patriarchal power, as it can also be perceived through the lens of vulnerability in which a man's virility becomes a public spectacle, subject to castration anxiety, performance pressure, romantic rejection and even social stigma in terms of "measuring up." Wesselmann's groundbreaking depictions are fraught with risk—to pictorially disclose his "manhood" is to also concede to the fragility and strengths of being fully human. *Ecce homo*: behold the man *and* his manhood in all of his glory, psychological terror, and complex desires. Laid bare for all to see.

— Alison Gingeras, curator and writer

[1] Wesselmann made five canvases depicting penises. Two are with seascape backdrops and three are with bedroom backdrops. Only one is not caucasian though curiously the penis is painted in a shade closer to Mars Black as opposed to a more naturalistic palette that would suggest an actual African-American subject.
[2] Anita Steckel, *Statement on Censorship*, March 8, 1973. Courtesy Anita Steckel Archives and The Suzanne Geiss Company, New York.
[3] Leo Steinberg. *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon/October Book, 1983) p. 1.
[4] Ibid, Steinberg, p. 8
[5] Tom Wesselmann Journal, c.1960-1970, p. 46; Oral history interview with Tom Wesselmann, 1984 January 3-February 8. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.