ALMINE RECH

Tom Wesselmann
After Matisse

Jun 11 — Jul 30, 2022 | Paris

Almine Rech Paris is pleased to present Tom Wesselmann's fourth solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from June 11 to July 30, 2022.

Tom Wesselmann (1931-2004) forged his distinctive, figurative fusion of color and line through a longtime engagement with Matisse. Wesselmann first learned about the French master while studying at Cooper Union (1956–59), where his teacher Nicholas Marsicano encouraged him "to find your own way. . . You can't do what Matisse did."[1]

Wesselmann's goal to bypass De Kooning and find his own direction was satisfied by his adaptations of the controlled, precise contours; bold, flat colors; and sensual imagery popularized by Matisse[2]. The exhibition of Matisse's cut-outs in 1961 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, may have reaffirmed his interest in Matisse as a precedent for exploring variations of a subject in serial form.[3]

Wesselmann repeatedly referenced Matisse in the *Great American Nude* series, launched in 1961-- eventually creating one hundred works, spanning almost ten years. In the 1980s Wesselmann launched a series of laser-cut, painted metal drawings, several of which were based on one of his favorite models, Monica Serra[4]. Wesselmann also created a series of cut-out aluminum still lifes adapting Matisse's motifs in the 80s, amplifying this theme in the 1990s in such homages to Matisse and his contemporaries as *Still Life with Matisse and Johns* (*3D*) of 1993[5]. Wesselmann saw the the landmark 1992 Matisse retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art which was an "overwhelming" experience for him.

Wesselmann's last major series, the monumental *Sunset Nudes*, were among his most ambitious and chromatically brilliant, asserting "in no uncertain terms his allegiance to Matisse."[6] As observed by John Wilmerding, Matisse seemed to return to Wesselmann during his final months, "not just as his most potent inspiration but also as an almost hallucinatory vision."[7] As Wesselmann was slowed down by heart disease, he perhaps found allegiance with Matisse, who had faced his own daunting challenges late in life. The master himself appears in *Sunset Nude with Matisse Self-Portrait* and related studies in the form of a 1937 self-portrait charcoal drawing, "in convincingly trompe l'oeil shades of black and white."[8] Gazing at the artist and the viewer, Matisse surveys an eroticized, schematic nude with turquoise stockings embedded in an abstract colorful environment evoking the precisely contoured forms and hedonistic warmth of Matisse's cut-outs. The Matisse references in these late works are painted rather than collaged, creating a greater sense of unity among polarities shared by the two artists: color and line, abstraction and figuration, sensuality and intellect.

For Wesselmann, Matisse's work served as a springboard into a more overt, brash eroticism that is specifically American. Noting his own use of oversimplified curves and greater involvement with strongly colored, positive/negative shapes to disrupt compositional harmony, Wesselmann stated, "Subtlety is the European concept and does not interest me."[9] Nevertheless, Wesselmann's oeuvre, especially his late work, suggests that he saw himself as an American heir of Matisse's, flouting decorum with the discipline of a highly skilled artist who made multiple studies and worked in a variety of mediums. Consulting his library of Matisse publications from 1931 to 1992, Wesselmann created inventive variations on Matisse's classic themes of the nude and the still life that are highly original compositions in their own right.[10]

— Gail Stavitsky, author and Chief Curator, Montclair Art Museum

[1] Wesselmann, interview with Irving Sandler, January 3–February 8, 1984, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., p. 12. See also John Wilmerding, *Tom Wesselmann: His Voice and Vision* (New York: Rizzoli, 2008), p. 36, citing the importance of Ernst Gombrich's *The Story of Art* for introducing Wesselmann to art-historical precedents for the nude and to Matisse.

[2] David McCarthy, *The Nude in American Painting, 1950–1980* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 92–94.

[3] Wesselmann did not, however, own a copy of the exhibition catalogue and there are no journal entries referring to him visiting the show; information courtesy of Jeffrey Sturges.

[4] Wilmerding, *Tom Wesselmann*, p. 144, 160.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Richard Kalina, "Pop's High Modernist," *Art in America* (December 2006): 126.

[7] Wilmerding, *Tom Wesselmann,* p. 253.

[8] Judd Tully, *Tom Wesselmann—Sunset Nudes,* exh. cat. (New York: Robert Miller Gallery, 2006), n.p.

[9] Journal, year, p. 4, copy courtesy of Jeffrey Sturges. See also Slim Stealingworth, *Tom Wesselmann,* pp. 18–20: "The ideal was competition rather than harmony. . . . The curves were not from Matisse; they were a means to help the positive and negative shapes break free from each other."

[10] There are eleven publications on Matisse in Wesselmann's library, including several with marked pages, such as the 1970 centenary exhibition catalogue.