ALMINE RECH

Tom Wesselmann

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Occasionally for artists toward the end of their careers, a sense of accomplishment can set in, liberating them from decades-long concerns about their reception. A devil-may-care attitude inhabits their psyche, giving way to an openness that can dominate their art. Subject matter may change or expand in unexpected ways. Their last works are often more joyous and can confound or shock their most ardent followers. Such is true of the final decade of Tom Wesselmann's prolific career.

An acknowledged practitioner of the Pop art movement (although he dismissed the association), Wesselmann is most often recognized for his distinctive treatment of the female nude. Indeed, Wesselmann's work held tight to the aesthetics of that pictorial language for the forty-five years he produced art work. Wesselmann's earliest artistic investigations, however, began altogether differently. Like many artists, especially in New York in the late 1950s when abstraction dominated art school curriculums, gallery shows, and collectors' walls, Wesselmann first worked exclusively as an abstract artist. The art world may never have known Tom Wesselmann had the recent Cooper Union graduate continued creating art in this vein. Yet, it was a chance encounter in the summer of 1993 with the materials used in making his "*steel drawings*" (the term he assigned his figurative aluminum cut-out wall sculptures begun in the 1980s) that brought Wesselmann, with great verve and originality, back to his origins. He recorded the incident in his journal:

Some weeks ago, another little change arose. I had finished a laser metal work. I cut up the mylar painting of it (first state of the work is to cover it with mylar and resolve the painting, rapidly applied and changed liquitex) before throwing it away. These numerous small sections, not totally abstract, were interesting. When overlaid & moved around they had an irresistible appeal to my eye. I rather quickly laid out an abstract painting. . . I resolved to follow this thoroughly.

Wesselmann quickly grasped that the strips of colored mylar could be treated as pieces of an "infinitely malleable puzzle," easily shifted, shuffled, sequenced, and ultimately enlarged to full-scale art works. This quantum leap into long-forgotten territory would completely absorb the artist for the remainder of his artistic life. The new works, visually distant from his figurative idiom, were still connected to an equally strong element at the heart of his art: collage. From his first Pop assemblages in the 1960s forward, he placed printed reproductions and manufactured three-dimensional objects, such as television sets or shower curtains, in dynamic juxtapositions. The mylar cut-outs that represented the strips of color populating his later steel drawings now served the same purpose—a massing of collaged components that Wesselmann worked into hard-edged, shaped paintings. His resultant abstract works were in essence schematic collage compositions that suggest distillations of modern colorists such as the geometry of Piet Mondrian or the brushwork of Willem de Kooning.

Although this abstract vein pushed and pulled Wesselmann, he continually returned to painting his primary subject, the female nude, reserving Fridays when the studio was quiet to bond again with this leitmotif. Until his death in December 2004, he worked simultaneously in abstraction and figuration, metaphorically running a parallel race that culminated in the luscious and succulent *Sunset Nude s*and his most arabesque hard-edged abstract paintings. Examples of both comprise this exhibition. Despite the stark differences between them, each body of work shares intense color and a high degree of finish.

The forthright and unapologetic *Sunset Nudes* were both super-charged and grandly scaled. Their figure is Amazonian in stature, larger and more dominant, recumbently posed, luxuriating across the canvas. Here, the handmade quality of Wesselmann's 1960s *Great American Nudes* is given over to a more sophisticated and stripped-down use of color and imagery. The *Sunset Nudes* are idealized, almost abstracted composite versions of all his previous models. Flat expanses of color dominate in slick, shiny applications of the artist's signature primary colors. As was his custom, he omitted the female gaze by excluding the most revealing facial feature, the eyes. He further reduced her body by partially delineating it as an ultra-slim white form, outlined—or rather sandwiched—between broad contours of fleshy pink tones, the contrast suggesting swaths of bright light twittering on the edge of the canvas. The bands of color swatches are the same that define Wesselmann's concurrent abstract paintings. The series title derives from the paintings' landscape backgrounds, and gains irony as the works literally became the sunset of Wesselmann's career.

Wesselmann was a meticulous artist who followed a highly prescribed methodology in creating his art. Process was almost as important to him as the finished product. He planned every stage of a work as it proceeded from drawings to maquettes (both formats often in multiple versions) to full-scale paintings. This approach was very much in keeping with his commitment to describing his own intentions as realized in *Exhibition Detail.* More than any other, this final assemblage—publicly unveiled here—is a physical summation of the parallel course Wesselmann's artistic vocabulary had traversed in his last years—the abstract paintings and *Sunset Nudes*.

The artist toiled on *Exhibition Detail* as an elaborate studio project, realized in various stages, over a two-year period, as a means to envision how his upcoming exhibition, *Nudes and Abstracts,* might look at the Robert Miller Gallery in 2003 (his last lifetime outing in New York). Long after the exhibition closed, and still relishing his satisfaction of experiencing the harmonious cohabitation of the dual avenues occurring in his art, Wesselmann went a step further. He had a physical corner of his studio constructed as a stage set upon which he would hang scaled-down versions of the two paintings reproduced as the gallery's advertisement/invitation, thereby validating in *Exhibition Detail* the axiom that "opposites attract."

Exhibition Detail thus becomes not so much a treatise on Wesselmann's transition from abstraction back to the female nude, but a visual demonstration of the two threads that defined his art in his last decade. As art historian John Wilmerding rightly observed: "It is one last reminder of how integrated and internally coherent Wesselmann's art was." Fittingly, the artist himself offered his own sentiment in his journal from spring 2003: "In the past year my involvement has grown too intense with the [Sunset] nudes, and they simply fight it out with the abstracts on a daily basis." How better to end the fight, so to speak—not that it was ever brutal—than to embrace their co-existence and allow each body of work to shine in all its vivid color and confidence.

Susan Davidson