ALMINE RECH

Tom Wesselmann
Monica with Wesselmann

Jun 7 — Jul 20, 2024 | Paris, Matignon

Almine Rech Paris, Matignon is pleased to present *Monica with Wesselmann,* Tom Wesselmann's fifth solo exhibition with the gallery, organized in conjunction with the Estate of Tom Wesselmann. The show will be on view from June 7 to July 20, 2024.

We don't hear from artists' models often enough. Yet their accounts are valuable, like the one offered today by Monica Serra, who was Tom Wesselmann's model from 1982 until the end of his career in 2004. She was much younger than he when they met at an exhibition of the *Standing Still Lifes* at the Sydney Janis Gallery. Wesselmann was then known as one of the big names in American Pop Art, having become famous in the 1960s with his *Great American Nudes* series. From their first meeting, Monica and Tom appreciated each other and became friends. They shared a love of music, which they both composed and performed—in his case, country, and in hers, alternative rock, since she sang with her band in New York clubs such as CBGB, the Peppermint Lounge, or Danceteria. Two different worlds, but so much the better, for Tom wanted to enter the 1980s and was looking for a new point of departure. It would be Monica, with her dramatic bangs, and her arrival also corresponds to the beginning of the laser-cut pieces: "something about me matched the process," as she explains.

In the beginning, she posed only for portraits, before becoming his main model, following Claire, Tom's wife, who was also an artist and had embodied his painting in the 1960s and 1970s. For that was what it meant, since the model, and more specifically the nude model, was so essential to Wesselmann's art, and he had made this a specialty. Monica's account teaches us something important in this regard: that we are in the presence of an experience that belongs to another register and goes beyond the triviality of a man looking at a nude woman. We understand here that Monica is not only a model, but also an assistant, and, even more, a collaborator and close friend of the artist. She describes the studio and her posing sessions. Her words are precise and thoughtful. Although we're in New York, in a loft on the Bowery, she describes a traditional studio practice that has been repeated for generations by Western painters. Basically, there's nothing out of the ordinary, except that the eroticism and its visual language explored by Wesselmann's painting are light-years away from what Monica explains to us. From her point of view, the experience, what happens in reality, is something sacred, supernatural, as if the painter and his model, and the whole small theater of creativity that this scene suggests, entered a different space together to which she gives no location, no name. But we understand that it is simply the space of Painting, with a capital P: no longer a reality but the evocation of an ideal.

— Claudine Grammont, head of the graphic arts department at the Centre Pompidou

"At first, I thought of modeling for Tom as just a job. A starving artist, so to speak, coming to NYC needs some work to support her art, and I was lucky enough to land a job working as Tom Wesselmann's model. That was the starting point, and it was amazing in itself. Later, I would become an assistant, mixing his paint, keeping his records, helping him manage his clients and his sales, singing his country songs, and being his friend. At first, it was not a steady job, being just the model, but later by adding in studio work, it became my permanent gig. And little did I know I was entering history.

I am both a painter and a songwriter so when I started modelling for Tom I was used to having eyes on me, as a front singer in a rock band and modelling for art classes for my fellow artists. There is a kind of synergy that takes place in those situations. You are no longer just you. You are part of a whole experience. The ego subsides, presence appears, and transformation occurs. The other band members plus the audience become part of the whole process; the artist and model become collaborators. You enter into an honest dynamic that is bigger than you.

When I met Tom Wesselmann, through my new friend and neighbor Candy Spilner, who was already working for Tom as his solo assistant, I knew that he was famous. But I was also in the limelight, albeit on a much smaller scale, playing shows at CBGB, Peppermint Lounge, Danceteria and all those cool NYC venues. I thought I had made it somehow. That is the innocence or maybe arrogance of youth.

Because of the work I was doing, and my naïveté, I took to Tom as a fellow artist. And he let me in as though we were equals. I believe it was this casualness and his humility that made us comfortable together. I didn't know enough to be intimidated, and he found no need to intimidate me. Looking back, I think he was even intrigued by this very nonchalance on my part. Looking back, I am embarrassed at my boldness.

In the 80s Tom was having a renaissance along with a world that was changing. There was something in the air. We all knew it, but when you're in it, it's hard to see. NYC was reinventing itself and so was Tom.

Tom was very clever as well as creative. He was excited and itching to incorporate his new idea – the development of the laser cut metal pieces. Something about me matched the process. He was already testing this new medium when I arrived on the scene. His wife and favorite model, Claire, was busy raising their children, so Tom was using various other models after her. But he was looking for someone longer lasting. Someone who would represent this new stage of his artistic vision. I became that person.

Once, Tom told me that he would've met me whether Candy had introduced us or not. In his mind, it was fate.

I would arrive at Tom's studio, and he would hand down the key to me on a fishing pole through his window, knee bent, foot against the window casing, dressed in his khaki corduroys and blue work shirt, his consistent studio work clothes.

I will never forget that place, 231 Bowery 2nd floor. It was recently demolished, and now it is only a memory. On the ground floor was Daroma, an Israeli company that sold restaurant equipment. But the building housed other artists, and Tom was on the second floor. After going through the outside industrial door, I would take a walk through the dark, dank, dusty hallway, walk up the steps and enter into the bright lights of a very busy artist's loft. It was a dream to me, with the smell of oil paint, images everywhere, and an excited stillness. Tom's everyday worktable that he would use for preparatory work was now set up as a model stand to the right next to the wall. When I first met Tom, I was only posing for portraits. He would ask me to move my mouth this way and that, tilt my head or smile, and he would draw and sometimes photograph my face. There were only a few drawings that came out of these.

My real work came when he later asked me to model nude. I was reluctant at first, since we had become friends, so that seemed tricky, but I decided it might be a good job, one that I already knew how to do, and it could fuel my own creativity.

So, I said yes, and we committed to our work as artist and model. It would last on and off for many years to come, pretty much until the end of his life.

Tom had a Chinese robe for me to wear as I was preparing to model, one that he often used in his work. I never got over feeling nervous when I first took off this robe. There was a choice, either to become naked or to become sacred. I chose sacred, and Tom went along.

This space that we entered is very hard to describe. It was charged with a kind of intense yet safe force, and we both sat in that field of intensity and worked. The constant was the flow of country music wafting in the background. The sessions were long, lasting his full workday, and they were tough for the model. There was hard work going on.

Sometimes Tom would ask me what I was working on and we would start to talk about art or music. He always wanted to know where we were playing, what I was writing about, what I was painting, what I was doing, although he never came to the gigs. He never went anywhere. He worked and went home. Still, it seemed natural (in hindsight, amazing) that he was genuinely interested in my work. He honestly treated me as a fellow artist as I sat there with him, alone and vulnerable.

Although these sessions started out animated, they became quite quiet by the end. And no matter what, I was aiming at making him succeed in his drawing. I was concentrating on that energy between us, trying to keep him interested in his work, drawing a body as though it were supernatural, something meaningful, worthwhile, more than it was. Something that would matter. We were both after something more than a nude woman as seen by a man. It was unspoken, but we both knew. This wasn't going to be carnal; this would be magical. This would be art, and it would be something new and made in metal. All of this was exciting for him. And it was my job to keep it that way.

A whole bunch of drawings would come out in one session. He would churn out maybe 15 drawings each time. I would have to invent four or more new poses for each sitting. And while I would be getting into place he would have a vague idea, recline, sit, or wear this necklace, or just move my arm up or down, head this way or that. I never brought a prop. If there were any other features, a hat or beads, they came from him. Tom was always kind and gentle to me during these sessions. He mostly would exclaim that he couldn't capture the beauty. Although that was nice to hear, I wanted him to say, "Got it!" So, we kept working. He never said those words, but later on many of these drawings became major works.

My time with Tom goes deeper than our work as artist and model. We laughed and painted and visited and sang songs. He was my boss and followed the boundaries, but I knew that he loved me. And I loved him as well. As an assistant he treated me as such, but as a person he thought of me as more than that. It was unspoken but felt.

One thing is for sure. He loved that I was a singer. He loved that I wrote songs. That was where I was different, where I became an angel to him. I could sing."

— Monica Serra