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Big, bold and beautiful: *Tom Wesselmann Still Life, Nude, Landscape: The Late Prints* at Alan Cristea Gallery

Tom Wesselmann Still Life, Nude, Landscape: The Late Prints at Alan Cristea Gallery is an all-American confection of fruit sundae with an unashamed cherry on the top, and a spirited lashing of chutzpah on the side.

Christine Holley 19th November 2013



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The Tom Wesselmann exhibition at Alan Cristea Gallery, [Original listing details](#)

31 and 34 Cork Street is, as the exhibition catalogue proclaims, big, bold and beautiful. It can also be considered a one-man celebration of late American 20th-century art. This is because this American artist became a leading figure of Pop Art, much of his art parodying 1960s American consumerism. He also created and perpetuated what he termed "The Great American Nude".

Tom Wesselmann was born in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1931 and died in New York in 2004. It was during his time in the US army that he first started producing cartoons. On his discharge in 1954 he embarked on a Fine Art course at the Art Academy of Cincinnati and two years later enrolled at the Science and Art Institute, Cooper Union in New York where, as he says in a 1984 interview, he fell in with "the wrong crowd who thought and had ideas". He was of course referring to artists such as Willem de Kooning, Jim Dine and Andy Warhol. These artists, together with Wesselmann and others formed the American Pop Art movement, of which Wesselmann became a major force.

Influenced and inspired by these artists, Wesselmann's response was to work in ways that contrasted with their oeuvre. Artists such as Robert Motherwell worked in large scale Abstract Expressionist sizes and so he worked in smaller sizes; figurative work was shunned, so he produced images of the female nude.

In 1961 he embarked on his aforementioned series of paintings *The Great American Nude*, in which he aimed to create an iconic genre in the same way that Steinbeck, Mailer and Hemingway sought to create the "Great American Novel". Many of the prints in this exhibition are an extension of this series for, here at the Alan Cristea Gallery, you'll see the work of an artist who most definitely appreciated the female form and female sexuality. Yes, there are landscapes and still life images too – but the strongest theme is one of females, portrayed nude; provocative; sometimes orgasmic, as in the series *Bedroom Face*, and always in a glossy, glamorous way. These are executed in pure lines, cartoon-style without reference to individual likenesses, fleshy tones or unnecessary anatomical detail – for these elements don't feature among his artistic concerns. Overtly sexual, if you like the work and erotic charge of Allen Jones's art, then you'll appreciate this.

The late prints – and the subject of this exhibition – all date from 1990 and are mostly on paper or board. Sharply defined in a bold, reductive line, the works pack an immediate punch. Relating closely to his previous paintings on canvas, they are bold, brash and very American.

Yet it seems that this All-American artist was still wedded to the great European masters of his initial fine art training, as closer inspection reveals. In some cases – as in *Monica Nude with Cezanne* (1994) – he makes this clear in the title. (Note the background still life detail reminiscent of Cezanne's paintings). In others, the influence is still there if not named. Take, for instance, the mono aquatint *Monica Nude and the Purple Robe* (1990). The subject lies spread-legged in a conspicuously inviting and sexually free way, but there is also, in this hedonistic image, a decorative background akin to the paintings of Matisse – a self-declared inspiration for Wesselmann. This mono version in the *Monica* series is a good one to head for as, without the distractions of colour, you can begin to fully appreciate Wesselmann's surety of line and excellent draughtsmanship. Other prints also reference Léger and his contemporaries Motherwell and Lichtenstein.

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Still Life with Lilies, Petunias and Fruit (1988), is a screenprint executed in – we are told – 31 colours, an uplifting image with fruit and flowers given a similar treatment to the cut-outs Matisse produced later in life. It has a structure and orderliness about it and a simplicity which is deceiving as, on scrutiny, it's quite complex, fine-tuned and intricate in composition. The overall effect achieves that same celebration and joy of colour that we see in the still life paintings of Matisse, but updated.

The Wesselmann exhibition is an orgy of life-affirming images in flat, bold and brilliant primary colour.

Date reviewed: Friday 15th November 2013

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