

bernard jacobson gallery

Tom Wesselmann

Journeys into the Landscape

26th November 2008 – 10th January 2009

Tom Wesselmann was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1931 and rose to prominence in the New York scene of the early 1960s, as one of the pioneering figures of what was soon to become labelled as the Pop Art movement. Sincere, innovative and un-ostentatious, the Landscape works on display at Bernard Jacobson Gallery from the 26th November 2008, date from the 1980s and '90s and reveal Wesselmann still at his best - engaging for the first time with the rural environments which were to exert a consistent influence over his life, in a manner that enlivened, stretched and fulfilled his constantly expanding aesthetic interests.

Wesselmann's relationship with the rural American landscape began during his childhood on the outskirts of Cincinnati, where he and his brother enjoyed an active existence fishing and taking off on week-long cycling trips across the hills of Ohio. In 1957, having moved to New York City to study fine art at Cooper Union, Wesselmann finally decided to become a painter during a trip to upstate New York where he found himself once more, 'in the midst of a real landscape, the most challenging and demanding subject he could imagine'. Despite this and the summers spent each year from 1969 until his death in 2004, with his wife and their children at their home in the Catskills, meticulously studying the local environment, fishing and stocking his lake with bass and building an array of small habitats and ecosystems for wild animals, it was not until the 1980s that Wesselmann finally found an effective means by which to incorporate this aspect of his life into his artistic oeuvre.

The idea which allowed Wesselmann to turn his attention to the rural environment was one he had in the early 1980s, 'to make drawings in steel, retaining all spontaneous lines, etc. that tend to deny its being made in steel and affirming that it is really a drawing'. The idea predated the existence of the technology necessary to see its execution, and it was to take a decade of solid experimentation and innovation in collaboration with industrial pioneers before Wesselmann arrived at the laser-cutting technique by which he was able to transfer the small-scale sketches of landscape scenes made on paper and Bristol board into large-scale steel works composed solely of lines, which appear to have been somehow lifted directly from the page.

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The resultant works are worthy testaments to the artist's lifelong engagement with rural America. The preserved spontaneity of the lines combined with dislocating enlargements of scale and the shifting presence of the wall upon which the works hang gives these visions a striking immediacy. Eschewing quaint pastoralism the depictions of everyday rural scenes - homesteads, barns and flower lined roads - mark a decisive point in the American landscape tradition, moving beyond the romantic visions of the Hudson River School or the existential angst of Hopper to incorporate the low-key beauty of the modern day rural environment.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue, which, alongside an introductory essay, will feature the first publication of Tom Wesselmann's journal entries regarding the evolution of the steel-cut process.