

*VAULT* sat down with Ambera Wellmann to strip back the layers of her work, ahead of the artist's exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

FEATURE by TAI MITSUJI

# AMBERA WELLMANN

AN ARTISTIC PALIMPSEST







Naked bodies interlock and couple. I say bodies because I am not certain how many people are lying on the bed in front of me – or, for that matter, whether it is a bed. In Ambera Wellmann's *Provender* (2019), the painted lines that typically define and delineate form have (for the most part) been left behind: replaced with gestural marks that allude to, rather than prescribe, the presence of the body. It is not just that the spaces between the bodies have been dissolved in the painting; it is that the very boundaries of form appear to have also melted away. The scene is visceral, dark, and psychologically riven; it paradoxically feels both honest and opaque.

*Provender* is one of several paintings that Wellmann will be presenting in *On Vulnerability and Doubt*, a forthcoming exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) in Melbourne. The show includes a spread of Australian and international artists, and focuses on – in the words of the gallery – “questions of intimacy, vulnerability, doubt, desire, modesty, awkwardness and love.” Glancing through this thematic inventory, it is easy to see how Wellmann's work could find a home among the ideas.

The Canadian expat has lived in Berlin for the past few years, yet I can still hear traces of her homeland in the voice that answers my call. After a few inevitable minutes of struggling to hear one another we get to the motif at the centre of Wellmann's work: the female form. “I feel that violence and eroticism have been disguised or suppressed successfully for a long time in art history,” she explains. “The woman's body is a locus on which the patriarchy has been focused for so long.” Wellmann deploys art-historical references with the fluency of one who has spent many hours considering the politics of representation. Yet there is nothing dry or academic about her works. They contain the complexity of a thesis, yet are animated by elements of the personal. “My figures are not necessarily always active; they straddle the space between the subject and object in the paintings, and I think that is a more realistic reflection of sexual experience.”

So how do Wellmann's works begin? How do they come into existence? Slowly, by all accounts. “They usually evolve out of the contact between two figures – the way two figures touch is the axis of the wheel around which the painting revolves,” the artist recounts. “My initial ideas for paintings are always terrible – they are the worst. In my head, I'll be like, ‘this is great’ and then when I see it realised it is just so bad: it's corny or sappy.” Wellmann's paintings are palimpsests, which continue to grow as she adds layer after layer in search of that single elusive composition. “It's extremely frustrating and annoying because they take forever and I have to be very patient with this process,” Wellmann explains. “I can't say that I enjoy painting that much because it drives me crazy.” We both laugh at this, although I'm not sure that either of us know whether she is joking.

Below  
AMBERA WELLMANN  
*Grip*, 2018  
oil and soft pastel on linen  
52 x 49 cm

Opposite  
AMBERA WELLMANN  
*The Nose (detail)*, 2018  
oil on linen  
52 x 49 cm

Page 20  
AMBERA WELLMANN  
*The subject*, 2019  
oil on linen  
52 x 52 cm  
Private collection,  
Hong Kong

Page 21  
AMBERA WELLMANN  
*Pastoral*, 2018  
oil on linen  
56 x 51 cm  
Collection of Kadist Foundation,  
San Francisco/Paris

Photos: Ramiro Chavez  
Courtesy of the artist, Lulu,  
Mexico City and Kraupa-  
Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin

There is something refreshing about the way that Wellmann discusses her art. There is no affectation or gesturing towards the entrenched ideal of the tortured artist, which so often accompanies a discussion of creativity or process. Indeed, the very fact that her practice appears to resemble this archetype seems to be a great inconvenience to Wellmann. But I suspect that she privately regards the attempts and failures that are written into the under-layers of her work as integral and necessary. “It's important that they aren't staged and that they contain these moments of accidental inclusion: moments basically when the painting takes over itself and produces its own logic, where I can't plan.”

The artist explains that her work is a painted synthesis of both personal experience and reference material. “I look through pornography, but not in the sense that I'm looking for a scenario; it's more that I might be looking for the qualities of light, or foreshortened body parts,” she recalls. There is something fantastic and a little absurd about watching pornography and focusing on its formal qualities and aesthetic minutiae. Yet as Wellmann observes, not all pornography is created equal.



Top to bottom  
**AMBERA WELLMANN**  
*Orison*, 2018  
 oil and soft pastel on linen  
 51 x 56 cm

**AMBERA WELLMANN**  
*Dispossession*, 2018  
 oil and synthetic polymer  
 paint on linen  
 51 x 56 cm

Opposite  
**AMBERA WELLMANN**  
*Pink*, 2018  
 oil and synthetic polymer  
 paint on linen  
 68 x 63 cm

Courtesy of the artist,  
 Lulu, Mexico City and  
 Kraupa-Tuskany  
 Zeidler, Berlin



“Contemporary pornography is the most un-erotic thing ever. I find it sexually really sterile,” she says. “I use older pornography where people still had hair and where lighting was bad – where they weren’t using a staged house in LA to produce it.” These images amalgamate with the artist’s own experience, infusing further dimensions into the work. “I tend to work a lot from personal experience because it anchors the emotional weight of the paintings to something more specific,” she explains. “And that is often where the vulnerability and, I’ll use that dangerous word, the sincerity comes from.”

To paint in this fashion inevitably involves exposing oneself, a reality with which Wellmann is all too well acquainted. “There are so many men in power and I’ve had plenty of #MeToo moments in the art world, with curators and gallerists, and it’s completely fucked,” she says. “They know that my practice is a feminist practice, but you would be surprised how many men see sexual content and literally treat it like an invitation.” While Wellmann does not view her paintings as self-portraits, I struggle to imagine how it must feel to go through the physical and emotional labour of producing a work only to have it reduced to a sexual invitation. “There is a lot about the art world that I don’t like, but I won’t get into that.” Somewhat inevitably, however, we do.

“[The art world] has all of this utopic delusions about itself,” Wellmann says. “But you get there and you realise that the higher up the ladder you go, the more sexism you encounter, the more patriarchy.” Wellmann is concerned about her work and her identity becoming instrumentalised and used for the optics, rather than the substance, of equality. “I think that there are a lot of men that want to validate their spaces by validating women’s work and they want to validate their curatorial practices, or their writing, or what have you, by covering or exhibiting feminist work,” she observes. “But they don’t employ the principles of feminism when they are interacting with you or other women. They preach, but they don’t practise.” She remarks, for instance, that only a “fraction of the artists exhibiting in the entire city” in Gallery Weekend Berlin were female artists – and how other galleries don’t even measure up to this standard, as they have no women in their rosters at all. “I just think that structurally there need to be intensive changes, and not just for women but for people of colour, as well,” she concludes.

Through the course of our discussion, I get the sense that Wellmann disapproves of not only the entrenched structures that have come to define our consumption of art, but also our very consumption. “I closed my Instagram account almost a month ago, and I had – I don’t know? – like 80,000 followers and it had become too much,” she says. “I became totally overwhelmed by the responses, whether they were negative or positive; when you post something and a hundred people comment ‘it’s great,’

'it's great,' 'it's great,' or 'this is shit,' – both of those things to me are bad, because neither of them are thorough or critical." Wellmann recalls how her paintings slowly began to suffer from her obsession with these online responses, as she would constantly be asking the questions that all of us have, at one stage or another, asked: Who has liked my post? And, more importantly, who hasn't? Before she used Instagram, the artist would sit and paint uninterrupted for six hours at a time, yet afterwards she could not go 20 minutes without scrolling her feed. "The more followers I got the less agency I felt like I had, and so I shut it down and I feel really good."

But there is, of course, a tension here – one which Wellmann recognises. While Instagram may have directly hindered her artistic practice, it also played a critical role in broadcasting it. Indeed, Wellmann qualifies her comments against the reality that social media undoubtedly helped to buoy her profile; the likes of art critic Jerry Saltz have reposted her work. And for my part, I cannot help but let my mind wander to that other universe in which she did not receive online traction. Would we still be having this interview? Would she still be exhibiting at ACCA? Of course she would. But also maybe, just maybe, she wouldn't. What I'm suggesting is entirely reductive; my idle speculation neglects the years of work and raw talent that are foundational to her success. Yet I am also not completely alone in these thoughts. "The ego side of

me didn't want to lose the attention and the ego side of me was worried about, 'What if everybody forgets me and I disappear and nobody cares about my work anymore?'," Wellmann confides. "And then I realised, I don't care if that happens."

I ask Wellmann whether she always knew that she was going to be an artist. "I was a super shy kid and it's funny how you make something that is external of yourself and you feel visible as a result," she replies. "I always identified when looking at paintings; even if it was a painting that I hadn't seen before, there was something familiar and familiar about it." Wellmann's words are intended to describe her own experiences, yet they could just as easily be narrating the immediacy of her work, and its ability to connect on some fundamental level with its viewer. I already know the answer, but I ask the question again: Did she ever doubt that she would become an artist? "It's weird because it was always there – and I think that that sounds so stupid – but it was always there." **V**

*On Vulnerability and Doubt* is at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne until September 1, 2019.

*Paint, also known as blood: Women, Affect and Desire in Contemporary Painting*, Museum of Modern Art, Poland, runs until August 11, 2019.

Ambera Wellmann is represented by Kraupa-Tuskany

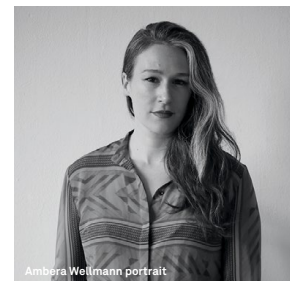
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amberawellmann.com



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