



## Ambera Wellmann's Fluid Bodies

At Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin, the artist's amorphous figures question traditional gender narratives



BY SONJA-MARIA BORSTNER IN **REVIEWS** | 22 OCT 20



'We are already living in a gender-fluid world, in which we are expected to be feminine and masculine at the same time,' writes Italian feminist and activist Silvia Federici in *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin* (2020). A similar concurrency of gender is at the heart of Ambera Wellmann's solo exhibition at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler. In 'Logic of Ghosts', hauntingly compelling canvases of queer, amorphous bodies are at odds with normative binaries.

In the first gallery, *Less Like Ourselves, More Like Each Other* (2019) depicts a two-headed, pale-pink body against a black background. Caught in a state of limbo, the genderless figure appears to be split in half, its body parts tangled up. It is hard to tell if this engagement is driven by pleasure or rage, but bony black fingers pinching a breast and an arm suggest a violent interaction. As if trying to reach across its own boundaries, the figure seems to press its weight against the right side of the canvas, where its hand pushes black paint over the canvas edge. This inconspicuous detail speaks to the artist's desire to exceed determined spaces and, by extension, social constructs.



Ambera Wellmann, *Less Like Ourselves, More Like Each Other*, 2019, oil on linen, 200 × 225 × 2.5 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin; photograph: Ramiro Chaves

The disruption of figure and ground hierarchies is central to Wellmann's paintings and is reinforced by a mesmerizing chessboard print that covers the floor and walls of the entire gallery space. But the seemingly uniform pattern is, in fact, composed of three differently sized squares (although the variance is almost imperceptible) while the black is actually a deep purple, imprinted with a barely discernible image of two female figures facing each other, limbs entangled. The print is a visual reference to the collaged painting *Scissoring* (2020), whose title refers to both the lesbian sex position and the method of collage-making itself.



Ambera Wellmann, *Landscape with a Figure of a Woman*, 2020, oil on linen, 200 × 200 × 2.5 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin; photograph: Ramiro Chaves

In the second gallery, our perception is similarly challenged in *Landscape with a Figure of a Woman* (2020). While the title suggests the depiction of a female form, the painting instead shows a number of nude figures morphing between different sexes. Multiplying themselves over a smudgy landscape, the forms blur the distinction between figure and ground. Referencing Diego Velázquez's corrections to portraits such as *Queen Elisabeth of France on Horseback* (c.1635) – revealed over time as the surface paint thinned and cracked – Wellmann deliberately exposes earlier layers of paint to encircle the smooth and edgeless bodies like shadows. The image evokes Simone de Beauvoir's famous quote from *The Second Sex* (1949): 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.' Similarly to De Beauvoir, Wellmann seeks to stress, through this exposure of substrata and multiplication of forms, the process of constant personal reinvention provoked by traditional gender narratives.



Ambera Wellmann, *Sharpless*, 2020, installation view, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin. Courtesy: the artist and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler; photograph: def-image

The most striking and apparent art-historical reference can be found in *Sharpless* (2020), an homage to Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* (1781). While the original painting depicts a sleeping woman with a crouching incubus on her chest, Wellmann's adaptation features a fragmented, bent torso on a pink ground enclosed by two legs. The paintings are similar in composition and, while *Sharpless* is less figurative, it's precisely this ambiguousness in Wellmann's work that mirrors the simultaneous display of dream/nightmare and desire/fear that is so central to Fuseli's painting.

In 'Logic of Ghosts', the artist's fluid brushstrokes create peculiar settings for non-binary identities whose 'contested terrain' – to borrow once again from Federici – is 'constantly being fought over and redefined'. Within their otherness, these painterly bodies elude a universalized gaze. Wellmann's interweaving of art-historical references is a means of drawing attention to ambiguous forms of representation that – consciously and unconsciously – have informed our perception of gender today.

***Ambera Wellmann, 'Logic of Ghosts'*** is on view at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin, Germany, until 24 October 2020

Main image: Ambera Wellmann, 'Logic of Ghosts', 2020, exhibition view, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin. Courtesy: the artist and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler; photograph: def-image