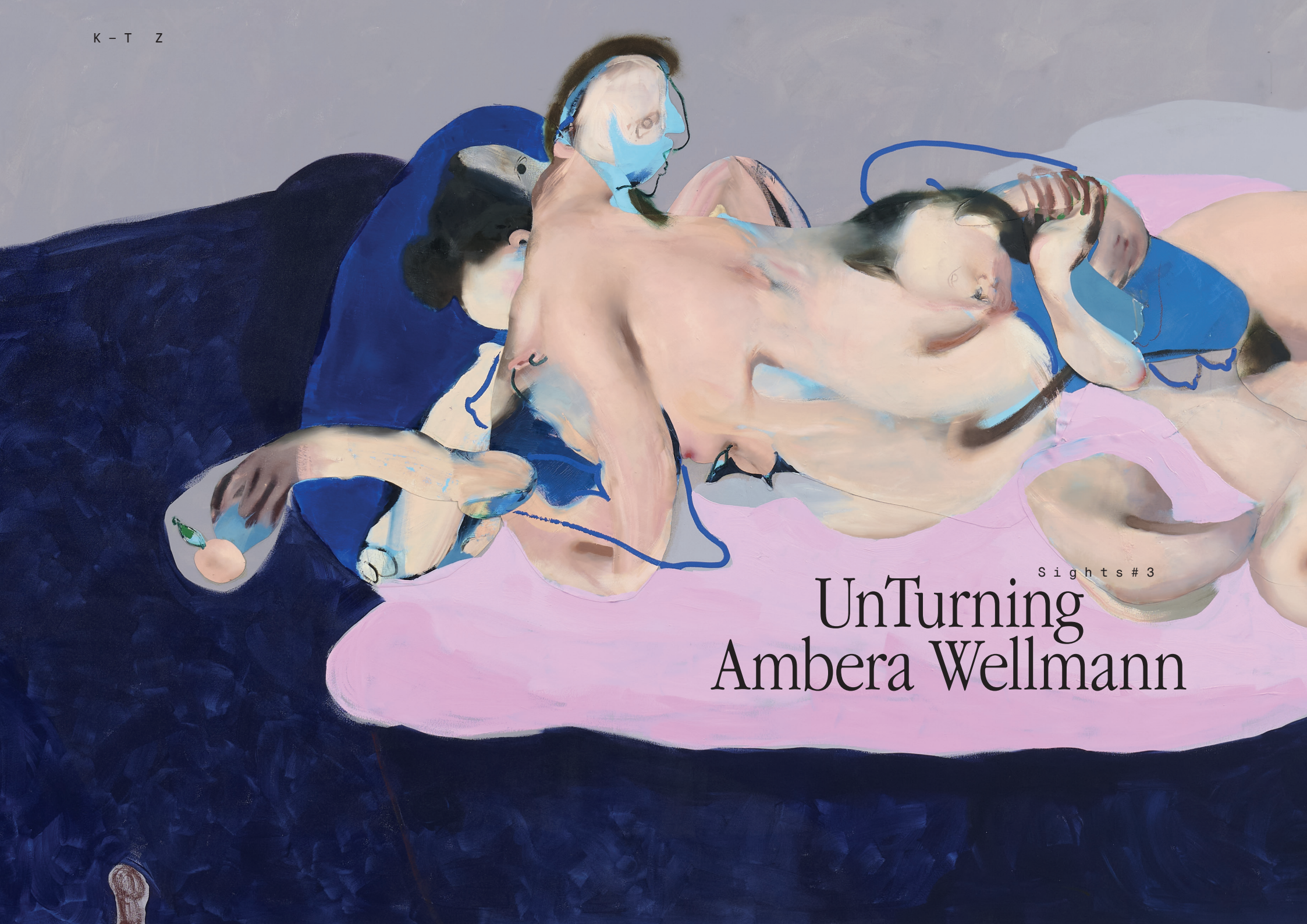


K - T Z



S i g h t s # 3

UnTurning Ambera Wellmann

Ambera Wellmann's works encourage an experience of uncertain intimacy. Portraying human and, on occasion, animal bodies, the figures within her work commingle into numberless, genderless corporealities, resisting the performative power dynamics present in the Western canon of figuration from which she gleans. Wellmann probes the expansive potentiality of a layered array of art-historical syntaxes that span Medieval Art, Romanticism, and Surrealism, allowing viewers to negotiate them anew. Wellmann's works embrace the unpredictable possibilities of an internal gaze, refusing a hetero-normative one. Reflected by a process that embraces chance, error, and vulnerability, Wellmann works in a distinctly feminist and queered perspective.

Ambera Wellmann created 'UnTurning' for the solo exhibition, titled after the work, at Montpellier Contemporary (Mo.Co) in October 2019. The upcoming catalogue to be published by Mo.Co will include texts by Nicolas Bourriaud, Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, and Natalia Sielewicz.

"Instead of imposing a particular type of eroticism, Ambera Wellmann proposes a mental process of how to deconstruct your own."

Frieda Toranzo Jaeger



Ambera Wellmann
UnTurning, 2019
oil on linen
200 × 525 × 2 cm / 78 3/4 × 206 2/3 × 3/4 in
unique

A shadow of a dog, though traced and smudged, remains present in *UnTurning*, as it has been burrowing and crawling from the underlayers of the painting. In another work, *Scorpio Rising*, 2018, a hand from the yellow background reaches out, carving out a bird in the negative space. The bird flies off, while looking at two women making love. These animals' simultaneous presence and absence toys with the domesticated presence of animals encountered in the canonical historical paintings, such as *Olympia* by Manet or *Venus of Urbino* of Titian. In *Scorpio Rising* and in *UnTurning*, in the shadows of the animals, their gaze becomes our own.



Ambera Wellmann, *UnTurning*, detail, 2019

Sky Goodden:

I'd like to (talk) about the gaze within the work, then — the way you depict eyes, typically eliding the distinct features of a face but with pronounced eyes that suggest interchangeability between the human and the animal visage in your work.

Ambera Wellmann:

Yes, I humanize animals a lot and I animalize humans. I find animals are so interesting in paintings because they don't occupy time in the same way that people do. People wear time specifically. Everything, from their fashion to certain faces, fashion, posture, hairstyles. They really occupy time specifically in painting. Which is so interesting, because animals evade that. A dog is always a dog, a horse is always a horse. I had a studio visit with a friend, and there was a little pony painting, and she said, "this looks like it has always existed." And I thought, "what a wonderful quality for a painting to have." Where it's atemporal, or temporally homeless, it gives it a special kind of power. Like how do you make an eye that represents eye?



Ambera Wellmann,
Scorpio Rising, 2018
oil and soft pastel on linen
52 × 49 cm | 20 1/2 × 19 1/3 in
unique

"The strength of Ambera Wellmann's painting consists in asserting art as a commutator of viewpoints, which allows her to deeply bury the phallogocentric, anthropocentric gaze — in short, everything that represents centrality today."

Nicolas Bourriaud



Théodore Géricault, *Severed Limbs*, ca. 1818, oil on canvas.
Paris, Musée du Louvre (photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux)

“(The) process of dissecting the anatomy of painting simultaneously anatomizes the concept of desire... This is the body from which Ambera dissects, severs, and disposes of the unwanted, and from there, begins building a queer and female gaze upon it.”

Frieda Toranzo Jaeger

UnTurning is composed of cutouts of paintings that have been assembled, then painted over and around them. The cutouts appear like body parts that are estranged from the whole. Frieda Toranzo Jaeger notes that they recall one of Wellmann’s favorite paintings, discovered during the installation of UnTurning in Montpellier. Géricault’s “The Study of Feet and Hands”, 1818–1819 was painted in preparation for his masterpiece “The Raft of the Medusa” of the same year.

While “The Raft of the Medusa” retains much of the elements of the traditions of history painting in its composition, the preparatory painting of fragmented body parts reveal a strange sense of tenderness amidst the horrors of the naval frigate *Medusé*.^{*} The fragments of the canvas that Wellmann re-applies on the surface imply the discarded, “the unwanted,” as Jaeger terms. By discarding the ‘Unwanted,’ Wellmann creates space to build anew an alternative desire.

^{*}Darcy Grimaldo Grixby notes the visceral sensitivities in the compositions of the studies for *The Raft of the Medusa*: “The limbs — whose limbs? — refute inanimation: they insist upon an afterlife. We can hardly avoid experiencing our own extremities through them, but in an alienated way.” Grigxby, Darcy Grimaldo, *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-revolutionary France*, p. 207



Ambera Wellmann
Now Now, detail, 2018
oil and soft pastel on canvas
142 × 147 cm | 56 × 57 3/4 in
unique

Sky Goodden:

Can you speak to the intersection of absurdity, grotesquerie, and abjection in your work? Are these terms that resonate?

Ambera Wellmann:

They're such close cousins. But I've always loved the grotesque. I learned recently that "esque" refers to a spiritual essence. I think that's one of the things that differentiates the grotesque from the abject; the abject is guttural, it's bodily; the grotesque points to these things, too, but it also points upwards. A quality I look for in painting — to point to something beyond itself.





Sky Goodden:

It's too rare that an artist admits to her art-historical attachments, and I love that you do. It's a privilege available to the artist, to not look — to choose not to be saddled, or in competition with their contemporaries or their past. But you do.

Ambera Wellmann:

You can choose to sample freely or to ignore art history, it's true. But one of the things I've loved about [looking] is that sensuality, and physicality is a point of access to historical work. And that there is always going to be a source of power in it. I'm interested in the way these images have seduced me. So, I'm picking apart those mechanics a little bit. Using them in this way — like in this Ingres painting you have bright, bright flesh that falls into dark, dark shadow. Full disclosure cascading into complete nothingness. And that's just — that effect is very interesting. Most of the paintings I'm interested in are paintings of women.

“For [Francis] Bacon, horizontality is generally the figure of degradation or pain; for Wellmann, on the contrary, it establishes a democracy of bodies, a place for the re-composition and suspension of meaning.”

Nicolas Bourriaud

“Learning in the space of the bed — in the horizontal —
is about relinquishing the hierarchies between different bodies and their parts.”

Frieda Toranzo Jaeger

Quotes from essay by Nicolas Bourriaud,
for Mo.Co, Montpellier Contemporain
catalogue, UnTurning, to be published in
2020.

Quotes from essay ‘UnWanted’ by
Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, for Mo.Co,
Montpellier Contemporain catalogue,
UnTurning, to be published in 2020.

Excerpts from interview
by Sky Goodden and Ambera Wellmann,
Nov. 13, 2018, Momus.ca online, [link](#).