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Ambera Wellmann: UnTurning

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# Ambera Wellmann: UnTurning

by Pádraig Regan • 08.09.2021

In her introduction to the catalogue of Ambera Wellmann's (b.1982) solo exhibition *UnTurning*, the art historian and curator Natalia Sielewicz begins with a gloss of the French word *faisandage*: a culinary term for the hanging of meat.<sup>1</sup> Reappropriating the term, Sielewicz applies it to the ways in which generations of artists have enacted their simultaneous attraction and revulsion to female sexuality through erotic and grotesque rearrangements of the female form. Think of Goya's *La Maja desnuda* (1795–1800) with her impossible breasts like scoops of buoyant ice cream, or Hans Bellmer's dolls with their anatomies reduced to pure curve and orifice.

Wellmann's paintings are, according to Sielewicz, a refutation of this mode of representing the body, instead allowing for the expression of female sexual pleasure: 'Wellmann depicts bodies lost in passion', she writes, 'but never the *faisandage*' (p.8). Although this may be the case, it is clear that Wellmann is fluent in the visual language of *faisandage* and is familiar with its objects, even if she uses these to subvert its underlying logic; a painting showing a dismembered body boiling in a pot, for example, appears more parodic than threatening **FIG. 1**. Mainstream hardcore pornography is also one of Wellmann's acknowledged sources, as is Théodore Géricault's *Study of Feet and Hands* (1818–19). The present reviewer would also hazard a guess that Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* (1866) is an influence, albeit tempered by Wellmann's tendency to refuse the frontal gaze. However, her reorganisation of the body has nothing to do with the abattoir or the butcher's shop, no matter how drastic it appears to be. In fact, confronting Wellmann's compositions is more akin to the experience of being in the darkroom of a bathhouse. Of course, the look is different – Wellmann's paintings are brightly lit and happen in a palette of blues, yellows and pinks – but there is a similar sense of spatial incoherence and diffuse eroticism: arms, feet, limbs, chests and genitals are all encountered as recognisable objects in three-dimensional space, but never quite coalesce into a unitary body.

For all their sexual explicitness, Wellmann's paintings are not pornographic; instead, we might think of her work as a kind of anti-pornography. Although pornography may be an efficient medium for replicating sexual desire, it is not a particularly skilful medium for representing sex. More haptic than visual, the experience of sex calls for a topology of the body based on the skin, not the eye.

However, because pornography depends on showing the sexual act, it must subjugate the body to the gaze. What Wellmann has achieved in these paintings is a translation of the bodily experience of sex into the visual medium of paint. One of the ways in which she refuses the spatial logic of pornography is an avoidance of the frontal. *Pastoral* FIG. 2 – in which three nude figures turn their backs to the viewer – is one of the more obvious examples of this tendency. Elsewhere, faces are suggested by the quick, curved shorthand of a profile. In *Apologetic Power* FIG. 3, a rare instance of something nearing a portrait, the face is little more than a faint impression of nose and eye sockets.

It is this refusal of the frontal that helps to distinguish Wellmann from another of her fleshly precursors: Francis Bacon, ‘to whom Wellmann is often erroneously compared’, according to Nicolas Bourriaud (p.26). John Berger once wrote of Bacon’s figures that ‘their isolation does not preclude them from being watched [. . .] They are alone but they are utterly without privacy’.<sup>2</sup> Whereas Bacon’s figures are forced to perform their suffering for the viewer, Wellmann’s do not meet or even acknowledge our gaze. Her figures go about their own private contortions, mingling with each other and dissolving into the spaces that surround them. Wellmann’s work poses a serious question to Bacon and, by extension, his influences and imitators: what if the deformation of the human body was developed to articulate not pain, but pleasure?

This is not to say that the bodies Wellmann creates do not suffer, or may not be read as suffering. The animalistic figure bent-double in *Pussyfoot* FIG. 4 is as much constrained by its own strange biology as it is by the canvas that holds it. But in Wellmann’s paintings, the ways in which the extremities of pleasure and pain manifest on the body are often indistinguishable. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the small painting *Autoscopy* FIG. 5, which seems, although we cannot be sure, to depict a clothed man inserting a dildo into the anus of a naked woman, whose upper body disintegrates into a scattering of gestural marks almost completely divorced from any referent. Whether this flailing is a spasm of pleasure or a protest against what she is subjected to is impossible to tell.

The work that gives the exhibition its title is a monumental painting in which the imagery wraps around on itself, so the forms on the far right-hand side are reprised and resolved on the left FIG. 6. *UnTurning* also represents one of Wellmann’s most intriguing formal innovations: her technique of cutting sections from unfinished canvasses and incorporating them into new compositions. Sometimes the joins are painted over, almost to the point of invisibility, and sometimes they form the contour of a body part. This use of collage brings to mind the poet Anne Carson’s words: ‘Eros is an issue of boundaries [. . .]: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the

moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realise I never can'.<sup>3</sup> Wellmann paints both the boundary and its dissolution.



**Fig. 5** *Autoscopy*, by Ambera Wellmann. 2019. Oil and soft pastel on linen, 49 by 52 cm. (Collection of Alexander Köser; exh. MAC, Belfast).



**Fig. 6** *UnTurning*, by Ambera Wellmann. 2019. Oil, collaged oil painting, acrylic and soft pastel on canvas, 200 by 525 cm. (Collection of Andrew Xue, Singapore; exh. MAC, Belfast).

**Exhibition details**    Ambera Wellmann: UnTurning  
MAC, Belfast  
26th May–8th August 2021

## Footnotes

- 1**    An exhibition of the same title was first shown at MO.CO. Panacée, Montpellier, in 2019. The exhibition at MAC, Belfast, in 2021, featured a similar selection of works with the addition of more recent paintings. Catalogue: *Ambera Wellmann: UnTurning*. Edited by Nicolas Bourriaud, with contributions by Natalia Sielewicz and Frieda Toranzo Jaeger. 80 pp. incl. 38 col. ills. (MO.CO. Panacée, Montpellier, 2020). €30. 978-2-4901-2308-7.
- 2**    J. Berger: *About Looking*, New York 1991, p.121.
- 3**    A. Carson: *Eros the Bittersweet*, Princeton 2016, p.30.

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