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CAM exhibit reviews native son Wesselmann's career

Cincinnati Art Museum is the fourth and final stop for the Tom Wesselmann retrospective "Beyond Pop Art."

Wesselmann left his hometown of Cincinnati in 1956 to study art in New York and worked nearly nonstop across six different decades before he died in 2004.

He was called a pop artist because he was of that era and sometimes style, though he never fully embraced the label. Those years of work showed him to be so much more.

"I had no interest in social commentary. I wanted to be an artist in the finest historical sense of the word," he told The Enquirer in a 1995 interview.

A mural of one of Wesselmann's most famous paintings, 1973's "Still Life #60," was installed this summer at Eighth and Main streets as part of ArtWorks Cincinnati's "Cincinnati Masters" series.

For many in a new generation, that mural was their introduction to Wesselmann.

The museum exhibition goes further, telling a chronological story of exploration, experimentation and inventiveness of form within favorite subjects and themes: still life, landscapes and his nudes.

"The content is kind of consistent," said Jeffrey Sturges, studio manager for the Wesselmann estate and one-time studio assistant for the artist. "But how that content is presented,

that's what changes. That's what he really wants you to pay attention to."

The retrospective is the first time his series of four "Great American Nudes" have been exhibited together – two are owned by the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., one by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and one by Claire Wesselmann, his wife and model.

"What people saw over the years of his career, 'Oh, he's still doing that same thing, there's another nude.' They completely miss the thing that it's not the same nude. It's done in a completely different way. That's what's exciting – and that's what he's interested in," Sturges said.

The exhibition puts a fine point on moments of transition in Wesselmann's artistic practice, but the reality is that he kept working along a continuum.

"Each series provides a seed for the next. There are little clues. If you're reconstructing the narrative, there's a clue at each

point," said Matt Distel, Cincinnati Art Museum's adjunct curator for contemporary art.

"It's kind of artificial the way that we're setting up the work, but that's the point, so that you really notice these things," Sturges said. "It's easy to miss, I think, because the making of the work was such a continuous flow. There aren't clear chapters. But we're going to show it that way so that you recognize this was an artist who worked in a very deliberate way."

The original "Still Life #60" from the '70s is there, its shaped and painted canvases installed as Wesselmann intended. Wesselmann often worked on a massive scale and with different materials. Some might call these pieces sculptures, but to Wesselmann it was all paintings and drawings – even the ones rendered in steel, aluminum, plastic or objects. He was the first artist to use laser machines and computers to make steel drawings.

The artist came back to Cincinnati only rarely, even though he was shown regularly at the Carl Solway Gallery. In the early part of his career he would take road trips; he didn't like to fly and he didn't want to take time away from his work.

"I'm a studio artist," he told Enquirer reporter Owen Findsen in 1995. "I paint and I go home." ■