

PEGGY STEFFANS SARNO ORAL HISTORY

Interviewer: Huffa Frobes-Cross (also present: Kate Wesselmann, Monica Serra, and Josie Naron)	Interviewee: Peggy Steffans Sarno	Date of interview: April 28, 2022
Location: New York, New York	Transcribed by: Josie Naron	Interview length: 01:22:35

HUFFA FROBES-CROSS: [00:00:00] My name is Huffa Frobess-Cross, and I am the project manager of the Tom Wesselmann Digital Catalogue Raisonné and Digital Corpus at the Wildenstein Plattner Institute. Um, and I'm here with Peggy Stephans Sarno, uh, for our oral history project. Very happy to be talking with you. So, um, I think we're just gonna get started. And so, I wanted to, I think, go back. I mean, interestingly, we were just talking about this. You met Claire long before you met Tom Wesselmann, right?

PEGGY STEFFANS SARNO: Oh, yes.

HFC: Yeah. So can you tell us a bit about how you first met Claire Wesselmann?

PS: Bayside High School in 1952. And we were in the same sorority. Jeanie wasn't. And I don't know what it was, but we, I mean, Claire and I -- night and day.

HFC: Hm.

PS: And she didn't live near me. She [00:01:00] lived in Bayside West, and she was a, you know, A student, choir, all these things. And I wasn't. But we just became close our freshman year at Bayside High School.

HFC: And you said you were in the same sorority in high school?

PS: Yes.

HFC: Oh, interesting. Yeah.

PS: And I went on to college and Claire went to Cooper Union. I knew, uh, Clara. Is that her name? And, ugh, I forget -- not Brian.

KATE WESSELMANN: Brian.

PS: He was Brian.

Yeah, my mother's parents. Clara and Brian.

HFC: Okay.

PS: Yeah, an unlikely pair. Anyway, Claire [00:02:00] went on to Cooper Union, because I just found an engraving that she did. I mean, she was an incredible artist. So, she went to Cooper Union, and I went to Edinburgh.

HFC: Edinburgh in Scotland?

PS: Yeah. And while I was in Edinburgh, '58, '59, Claire went to Green Camp. Which was a camp for people from Cooper Union. And when I came back, she had met someone called Tom Wesselmann. And I guess he was divorced from Dorothy at that time.

HFC: Yeah, it was right around -- I think it was right around then.

PS: Yeah, '59, he was teaching school, but Claire was involved with Marc [Marcus] Ratliff.

HFC: [00:03:00] Right.

PS: And I came back in '59 and met Tom. But he lived, I guess it was 1 57 Bleecker. Was that where he lived the first time?

And she was on Christopher Street, 89 Christopher Street. 59. So, then in '63, she moved in with Tom.

HFC: Right. But just to go back a little bit, when you first came back, so Claire was still with Marcus Ratliff.

PS: No, she had met Tom.

HFC: She had met Tom at that point. Okay. Yeah.

PS: And I don't think Marc ever got over Claire, because after Tom died, yeah. But it was, [00:04:00] you know, this immediate attraction. And I don't think she told Clara, her mother, that she'd moved in with him. But Tom had a nude painting, which was Claire, you know, the *Great American Nude*, at MoMA. Clara was so upset. She called me. "How dare Tom take a -- paint a nude picture of my daughter. They're not even engaged." Whatever. She couldn't stand Tom.

HFC: Really?

PS: Mm. And I have to say, because I never liked Clara. I liked Brian, but he died. Yeah, shortly after the wedding. But Claire was [00:05:00] extraordinary. Because even though Clara was so against it -- and she was a churchgoer, a Lutheran then. She wasn't an Episcopal. Um, but Tom, [laughs] he was not religious. And at one point, he said, "Where did I go wrong?" Because he couldn't influence Claire to not -- she became Episcopal. But it was the sexual thing with them. It was an unbelievable love and sexual attraction. Nothing Clara could do.

HFC: Can you talk a bit, like, so you came back, they were already together when you came [00:06:00] back.

PS: Yes. But not -- they hadn't moved in.

HFC: They hadn't moved in.

PS: Claire was living at 89 Christopher. And when she moved in with him, I took over, I lived in 89 Christopher, which was \$21 a month. And I roomed with Jeanie. We each paid \$11.

HFC: [laughter] Amazing.

PS: And I don't think Claire told Clara. Yeah, but she moved in with Tom. I mean, he had great influence.

HFC: Tom.

PS: Yes.

HFC: Yeah. So, tell me a bit about your first time meeting him and meeting him with Claire and your impressions when you -- when you first met them together or saw them together and met Tom.

PS: Just that she had found someone. I didn't know about his art. I mean, I saw all the [00:07:00] little, what was her name? One was Judy and one --

HFC: The collage works?

PS: Yeah. [coughs] I mean, he was so young and his humor was so Cincinnati. I mean, it wasn't --

HFC: What does that mean? Tell me what that means.

PS: Well, not Jewish humor or Irish humor.

HFC: Mm-hm.

PS: Cincinnati humor. And he was so serious about his work. Where they lived, the toilet was in the hall, and the landlord wanted to put it in their apartment, but Tom thought it would take up too much room from his studio. [laughter] So he said, "No." So [00:08:00] they still had --

HFC: Wow.

PS: -- the toilet in the hall. He was not like anyone I ever met, but he was, oh, I get goosebumps. He was so pure and honest. Yeah. Not like a goodie-goodie or anything. He was just this rare person who was good. Without religion, all the way through. He -- oh, he just, well, you know. He was just the most exceptional man.

HFC: What gave you that impression at first? What was something that made you think that about him?

PS: Yes. He wasn't [00:09:00] self-absorbed. I mean, he even gave me advice. I was with a real shit. Uh, you could tell Tom about your problems. He really listened. And he was very open about [laughs] his life with Claire. You see, I'm saying this, you probably know it, but his present to Claire on her birthday, March 19th, was taking her to the studio and having sex all day, all afternoon. [laughter] And, I mean, it wasn't like an ego thing. He really was doing her and -- [00:10:00] Claire came from this, I mean, I don't -- oh, that's what Clara said. She said, "How dare Tom paint Claire?" She said, "I never was naked in front of Brian." Her husband. That's what she told me. So, for Claire, to me, Tom, because sex was such a part of his life -- he must have been good at it. And that was her birthday present.

HFC: Well, so this, so when you mentioned this thing about Claire's background, it actually reminds me of something. One

of the things I wanted to ask you about that, uh, I think you would have a lot of insight into. You know, she -- had she done any modeling other than for Tom Wesselmann at this point?

PS: No, no.

HFC: And did she talk to you about how she started doing it or the experience for modeling for, for Tom?

PS: Oh, well that [00:11:00] was nothing, you know, it was Tom. I mean, she would do anything. And basically, Claire didn't take -- maybe her father, because he had an affair and he was going to leave.

KW: [unclear]

PS: Oh yeah. And his aunt talked him into going back to Clara. He was much younger and she was really terrible. But you see, maybe Claire inherited this from her father. So, she had this free spirit and Tom just opened it up. And because of the kind of person Claire was, this [00:12:00] was not just sex. This was sex involved with someone who loved experimenting. He -- I'm not gonna go into the things he told me he used, but he was so pure and he loved her. I mean, he loved women. And Claire was jealous of that French woman. But Tom was not that kind of man. Claire was -- he couldn't have asked for anyone who was more extraordinary and could handle all of his quirks.

HFC: For example?

PS: Well, this happened much later when he went on that diet [laughter] to lower [00:13:00] his cholesterol, or something. When the children were young, Claire made like four different dinners. Tom's dinner to lower the cholesterol, her dinner, which chil-- which child would eat what.

KW: [laughter] I remember strange things, but I didn't know the --

PS: No, but she had to feed you too. Her whole life was cooking. And Tom -- the only time Tom did something terrible to Claire, and you probably know this, too. You were born, and she became very close to me. She could talk on the telephone for hours. My brother gave me a special phone, a Claire phone, [laughter] so I could talk to her for an hour and do [00:14:00] other things. Iron or -- it was called Claire's phone. Because as Clara got Alzheimer's and the way she treated Tom and everything. Uh, she spoke to me because I knew Clara. But Tom at one point said to Claire that she was turning into her mother. You remember that?

KW: I've heard, I've heard this story. Yeah.

PS: And she could call me and cry. He took it back. And he wasn't the kind of person that said Claire couldn't, uh, go to church. She was so involved with Grace Church. He [laughs] was [00:15:00] afraid that she'd become a minister.

HFC: [laughter] Seriously?

PS: Yeah. He said that to me. And that's when he also said, "Where did I go wrong?" That he even allowed her -- but he wasn't that kind of person. But what he did, Claire in the beginning was a model. Oh, what was his name?

KW: Oh, Alex Katz? She did sit for a portrait for him.

PS: No, no. Oh, I know. But she modeled clothes. Tom gave this designer -- he was so famous in the sixties.

KW: Yves Saint Laurent, is that what --

PS: No. Who? No, no that. Oh, I have to think.

KW: We do have a picture of her --

PS: Modeling his clothes. So, Claire was so beautiful and wore makeup [00:16:00] and modeled the clothes.

Jerry Goodman took so many photographs. I can't think of his name. He was gay and he died. And you don't remember, Monica? Anyway. She wore makeup and that's -- Tom said she couldn't wear makeup anymore, but she had to stay a blonde. So, she never wore makeup. Only lipstick, never mascara or eyeshadow, because Tom didn't want her to. But she dyed her hair, because he wanted her to be a blonde. But you see, he gave a speech about [00:17:00] her, I guess, at Cooper Union.

HFC: Really?

PS: Yes. Of what, [sighs] what it meant to him to have met her. So, saying, "I don't want you to wear makeup," it wasn't one of those macho men, or he was never that. And when they went, I guess it was '64, to Wellfleet. And Claire couldn't get pregnant. So, they had a raccoon as a baby. You remember it? And --

HFC: A real racoon, really? Wow.

PS: A real raccoon. And [00:18:00] when -- let's see, so that's '64 and Claire didn't get pregnant until 1970. And that's when Douglas was killed. Her brother was killed in an automobile accident. But Tom had this therapist, Dr. Randall. And he had -- he had a brother and sister. Ann, I think her name was. I forget the brother.

KW: Bruce?

PS: What?

KW: Bruce?

PS: Yeah. And he was close as he could be to his parents. I mean, they, [00:19:00] they were parents, but -- that's the other thing. Claire got pregnant again, five years later, and had Lane. She was so glad that she had a girl and a boy, but Tom with his therapy wanted three children. You know that.

KW: I was always told that he would say to me that he just felt like they weren't complete and they needed -- that there was just something missing and that he wanted to have another one. I didn't know it had to do with therapy. [laughter]

PS: But that's what Tom -- he felt he had to have three children. And in his way, I mean, his work was [00:21:00] his life, but his family was his life too. Didn't you feel that? I mean, the kindest -- so many Christmases, well before the children were born, on Christmas Day, Claire had Christmas Day. And I mean, my parents came. We postponed Christmas, because we went to the Wesselmans. [laughter] And you see, Tom, I remember, now what was it? It must have been for Easter that he didn't -- he wanted the carbonara, it was. So Claire made a special, you know, ham for the children and this pasta for [00:22:00] Tom. He was so specific. Just an extraordinary -- because most artists and he didn't go, they went to all the parties. I think before the children. Because there were so many, and Tom was the only one, practically, that stayed with his wife.

HFC: Yeah, take me back to that. So were you -- when, during that sixties moment, when you came back to New York and they were first together, were you going to those parties? Were you a part of that scene in downtown New York?

PS: Yes.

HFC: You were going to those parties.

PS: Because Jeanie, the third one of the three of us, because we had birthday dinners at different restaurants until we settled on [00:23:00] Balthazar. For every birthday. Mine in October, Claire's in March, and Jeanie's in May, until Claire couldn't do it anymore. Uh, Jeanie was like I was; fucking everyone. And many times, the same man. Jeanie first. And Jeanie went to those parties and I went.

HFC: And were you, when, when you talk about these parties, are these parties that developed out of like, gallery openings? Were these, you know --

PS: No, these were parties. I mean, Andy's on 47th, The Factory, whatever, but we used to go and all the artists went to a place called the [00:24:00] Dom, where we danced. And then later in the sixties, Max's Kansas City, where all the artists went as well. So, it was Jeanie because Tom was not a party-goer.

HFC: Right.

KW: But Jeanie worked at --

PS: The Greene Gallery. But --

HFC: Is this the same -- is this Sidney Janis Jeanie? No, this is different, different Jeanie.

KW: Jean Blake.

HFC: Okay. Jean Blake.

PS: Okay. Yeah, she started with Dick Bellamy.

HFC: Oh, okay. Gotcha.

PS: Yeah. And we were like two peas in a pod. And when I [unclear], I think his name was [Joe Tillson?] Or something like that. A painter. Because I had affairs with painters. And when I went to London -- oh, and there's the one that did [00:25:00] those dots. Anyway, there was a documentary recently and they mentioned him. He lives in the country. I have to think of -- Larry Poons.

HFC: Mm. Okay.

PS: So, if I was in London in the seventies and I went to any gallery, I only had to say, "I'm a friend of Jeanie's." She was really famous in the art world.

HFC: And what were you doing around that time? Like, how -- were you acting at the time? Was that --

PS: Uh, I was acting at the time. Yeah. Since '61. I was involved with another couple. He just [00:26:00] died. Peter Bogdanovich and Polly Platt. Peter was a real shit. Arrogant and horrible. But anyway --

HFC: But you were involved, you were working with them. You were involved with them? Yeah.

PS: Polly and I went to college together. And so, Peter hired me and I was in an Irish play, O'Casey play, and then on Broadway. And at that time, I think Claire and Tom went to opening night. You see, they got married in '63. And I didn't meet Joe until '65, I think.

HFC: '65, okay.

PS: So, I was with Jeanie, [00:27:00] and Christmas with Claire and Tom. Because the first -- Jenny wasn't born until 1970. And they did go to parties then.

KW: Before kids or after kids?

PS: Before. Yeah.

HFC: Yeah. I've seen a few photos of Tom Wesselmann at parties with, with the, the whole --

PS: I mean, he smoked!

HFC: Yeah. Right. Well, okay. That is an interesting question. I've heard later he was not a fan of smoking at all.

PS: No.

HFC: Yeah, yeah.

PS: But he did smoke. Yeah. And he did go to parties. But he wasn't a womanizer, like the other painters. When they became successful, they left their wives.

HFC: But he went, he went to the openings and the parties. Yeah.

PS: Yeah. I [00:28:00] mean, it wasn't just artists. Ivan Karp, everyone left their wives. But not Tom.

HFC: So when, so right around -- so, '65 is right around the time when you meet Joe. It's also right around the time that you start modeling for Tom Wesselmann, right? '65, '66.

PS: I guess so.

HFC: How did that happen? How did that first come about?

PS: Well, oh, I wasn't the only one. Jerry's wife, Helen.

KW: Did he ask you to model?

PS: Yeah, I wouldn't have done it.

HFC: But he'd known you for a while.

PS: Oh yes, since '59.

HFC: Do you know what prompted him to ask you at that time?

PS: No.

HFC: Do you [00:29:00] remember him asking you?

PS: No.

HFC: Hm.

PS: But, and you -- it's either gone now, but when he asked me, he did a drawing of me that I gave back to him. Because I was so careless, something would -- got on it. But he -- I mean, he did Helen, Jerry's wife. Judy, was that Jerry's girlfriend before Helen? No, but someone else. I wonder if Gina --

KW: He did Gina's hand; that's the only time I know that he used Gina. But did he ask you to sit for like, a portrait? Like for --

PS: Yeah, I never. [00:30:00] I could hardly be nude in Joe's films, I was so flat-chested. I never did anything nude.

HFC: Was that because you didn't want to, or he didn't ask?

PS: He didn't ask.

HFC: He just asked to do your face.

PS: Yeah.

HFC: Yeah.

PS: And must have been the studio on Bond Street. Where -- I was a Pall Mall smoker, no filters. He had stopped smoking by then. But to have to sit still so long, that's when I said, "I have to have a cigarette." And I loved smoking. So, I must have inhaled all of that smoke and blew it out.

HFC: Do you remember the moment when this happened and he drew it?

PS: Yes.

HFC: Yeah, tell me about it.

PS: No, it was like an [00:31:00] eureka moment. Uh, it just -- it's because, you know, a lot of people just puff. Now in those days, before my false teeth, I had nice lips. And so, he was drawing all of that, but it's how I inhaled that smoke. That, you know, all the way down, and then blowing all that smoke out. He stopped.

HFC: Did he say anything at that point?

PS: Yeah. Yeah, he did. And he then started a whole series. My lips are in Dallas, but not smoking.

HFC: Right.

PS: And I never had the hands [00:32:00] or -- he never did a painting of me smoking.

HFC: Hm. Really? So, the paintings with smoke in it are not -- never of you?

PS: No.

HFC: Even though you were the inspiration.

PS: Yes.

HFC: Interesting.

PS: It -- because of the smoke coming out. I'm looking at this now. The smoke coming out of my mouth. And Claire didn't smoke then, and maybe no one else. Did you smoke? [aside to Monica Serra] You did. But maybe you didn't inhale like I did. [laughter] And anyway, you were after me. Yeah. I was a big smoker.

HFC: Did he describe -- so, yeah, I mean, it's a really interesting moment, because as you said, he talks about it in [Slim] Stealingworth, right?

PS: Yes.

HFC: I mean, he actually has this -- I mean, I'll read you the quote, how he wrote about it. [00:33:00] He said, you know, "During the productive year, 1967, Wesselmann continued to

refine many projects. One day, he was drawing mouths from a friend, PS. When she took a break and smoked a cigarette, Wesselmann continued drawing, but included the cigarette. And this began the *Smoking* series." So this is -- you know, you're one of the very few people in this entire book who, you know, one thing that you did changed the course of --

PS: I know.

HFC: -- his work. And so, I'm just curious, like, at that moment, did he describe -- did he describe to you anything about what he was interested in? Like, why this --

PS: No, no. But it's just that he really noticed.

HFC: Yeah.

PS: I don't even remember that he went on to draw me smoking because none of the, uh, drawings that he gave to me had me smoking. But you see, I didn't -- well, nudity, [00:34:00] you know, by then, I had lived in Sweden. And the reason I loved it is you could be nude, naked, swimming. So I had nothing against nudity, but that's -- he did my face. And I do remember how I was sitting on a stool [phone chimes] in Bond Street and that he noticed at that break. But he didn't start immediately. I mean, it wasn't like, Oh, I'm -- Tom didn't talk about things like that. Oh, I must do or paint -- he didn't.

HFC: Yeah, yeah. It's just a thing that he did.

PS: Yeah.

HFC: But so, describe to me a bit about -- you know, Monica and I talked about this a lot. Like, what it was like to model

for Wesselmann. Like, what was the experience like, what was he like while he was [00:35:00] drawing you? How did he set up the situation? Just describe the scene.

PS: Well, Monica really needs to talk about that because I didn't -- if he did that in '67, shortly after that, I went to Sweden. I was never really here.

HFC: Mm-hm. I just mean the experiences that you did have. During those moments that you did have when he drew your face and everything, you know?

PS: [pauses] I mean, I don't even remember because he was very serious. Whether I talked about anything; you can't talk and model at the same --

HFC: Right.

PS: You have to be quiet. So, it wasn't like we were friends, because we really were. [00:36:00] This was something I did.

HFC: Mm-hm. And when you saw the drawings and the artworks that were related to, you know, like these drawings, for example, that are right behind you there. Did you, did you recognize yourself in them? What did you think about them when you first saw the drawings that he made from your sessions?

PS: [pauses] He didn't do that many. And that one that I gave back, uh -- I didn't think anything.

HFC: Mm. I mean, you liked his art before, you know, you were an appreciator before.

PS: Oh, yes.

HFC: Did these strike you differently because they were you or did you -- yeah.

PS: No. And I really didn't do it very often.

HFC: Right.

PS: There were very few. [00:37:00] There's this one, another one, [pauses] but he didn't use me as a model. And never nude.

HFC: Right.

PS: There was one I gave to [Phyllis?]. And now -- did she sell it? But it wasn't me. I think Gina modeled more. But he never did a painting, a *Smoker* of me.

HFC: Mm-hm.

KW: Not the one in Dallas? You said that, or --

PS: Yeah, but it was just the lips.

HFC: Just the lips. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

PS: I didn't -- we were very close and I could talk to him a lot, but you don't do that when you're modeling.

HFC: Of course. Yeah. Yeah, no, I was [00:38:00] also curious just after, you know, for example, like the lips in Dallas. Like, after you had done the modeling and you saw these works, you know, what your thoughts about them were, what your reaction to the works that he made that were related to the time that you modeled.

PS: After Tom died there was a show on the 24th floor near -- at Rockefeller Center.

KW: Oh, uh, [unclear?].

PS: Yeah. And there, for the first time, I saw the painting of my lips. Because I wasn't really part of his artwork.

HFC: Right. What'd you think when you saw it? What was your reaction?

PS: Oh, I was very pleased. Yeah. I mean, beautiful lips. And it's funny how when you lose your teeth, your [00:39:00] lips disappear. Yeah, but I, uh -- [pauses] no, I didn't have any -- I always love Tom's work. And if I was in the art world, I really, I get so angry at the museums for not showing his work, where some people just do the same thing over and over and over again. And Tom always -- something new.

HFC: Yeah. And what, what did you, what did you feel like -- what was going on there with that lack of recognition that you saw with Tom's work?

PS: I don't know. But it makes me [00:40:00] very angry when I see the shit that's up. So terrible. And [pauses] that he went on. I mean, from this, to this, to this, to the blue. And he, you see, I have a lot of Tom's work. A wedding present, Joe's 80th birthday. They're not me. They're Tom's nudes. And my mother had Tom's work. Uh, yeah, just extraordinary and not to be recognized. Although, [00:41:00] it's different in Europe.

HFC: But so you, so I -- this is actually another question I was gonna ask. So you have, so you have quite a few, it sounds like, of Tom's --

PS: Yes, I have a wall of. And when I -- because I was always poor with that Joe Sarno. And people would say, uh, sell. I wouldn't.

HFC: Yeah.

PS: Even Jeanie said, but I, you know, there's sacred. But they're Claire or the nudes. And I just sold this one because it was in Sweden and I was only there for two months and didn't have any [00:42:00] money. But I would never sell Tom's work.

HFC: Yeah. It's really interesting. So, I mean, one of the things that was really interesting to me, watching *A Life in Dirty Movies* and thinking about also Tom Wesselmann's work in relation to a lot of the things that you worked on and worked on with Joe Sarno, was that a lot of what was discussed there was about, for example, how Joe Sarno's films were very insightful about the kind of complexities of sexuality. And of course, a lot of Wesselmann's work also deals with these things. So, and, and you were obviously a great appreciator of his work. So, I'm curious when you look at his work, especially as someone who has thought a lot about that, those issues, what do you see that's particular about the way that he kind of represents sexuality? The way he approaches the depiction of women? Like, what is it that's particular about his [00:43:00] work and the way he approaches those issues for you?

PS: You mean Tom?

HFC: Yeah.

PS: You see, I don't see any of that. I know I read about a nude where Tom used wire or something for pubic hair. And all

the -- [sighs] when people criticize his work, I get furious. Because painters over the centuries have done nudes. And some, I mean, why they pick Tom to pick on -- and that #MeToo movement, I could kill all of them. [00:44:00] Really. And with Joe and pornography, I am not a fan of pornography.

HFC: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

PS: That's been going on forever. And the petitions and how they take Tom's work in this way, where it's part of life.

HFC: Mm-hm. I mean, I guess that's what I'm asking about is like, I mean, there's one, there's the criticism, of course. But then there's also the fact that it is an aspect of his work, an aspect that he was interested in. Right. And so, I'm also interested in the way that you kind of see his representation of sexuality in a nude, or, you know, how he did that or didn't. You said you didn't see it at all, or that that's --

PS: Well, there were -- he did many different nudes.

HFC: Of course, yeah.

PS: [00:45:00] Well, I never thought of it in terms of pornography, to talk about it that way. It was his way of portraying -- some were sexy, some weren't. But that's what art is. I never had that feeling that he was exploiting women. I mean, I get as furious at the museums and galleries that won't show him. [exhales] It's been going on. This has nothing to do with it, but I read parents took children to a zoo. I don't know if it was Central Park. And all of a sudden, [00:46:00] the monkeys were having oral sex right in front of the children. The parents almost had heart attacks. But sexuality is part of the animal kingdom, and we are little

advanced animals. But bees do it. I mean, it's in songs. So, why they pick Tom; it is part of life. And in all of it, it was a painting. We are a terrible country, so. So puritanical.

HFC: Yeah. I mean, I think the thing that's interesting to me is to think about sort of if we, you know, I mean, sort of agreeing with you, [00:47:00] right. That this, that sexuality is a legitimate, you know, theme in painting, right? And, you know, a legitimate theme in film, right. And that you have, you know, obviously, as you're saying, like, more and less interesting ways of approaching it, right. And like you said, you didn't have that much interest in pornography. What makes Wesselmann's work not pornography? What makes it more interesting than that? Even if it is about sexuality. Like, I guess that's what I'm trying to -- that's what I'm asking about. Like, what separates it? What makes it more insightful?

PS: Oh. [pauses] I mean, I -- people like pornography. I think it's so medical and mechanical. And Tom's work is action and human and you can [00:48:00] relate to it. Pornography is -- you might as well do a medical film. [laughter] It's so boring. And he doesn't do pornography. He does the human body. Whether it's a vagina -- now, I don't find the vagina artistic. The penis-- you see, I didn't know about circumcision. And I thought [laughs] Michelangelo was doing his own kind of penis [laughter] until I grew up and knew about that. I thought, That's not what penises look like. But I find the penis to be more interesting than the vagina, and Tom found the vagina [00:49:00] interesting.

HFC: Well, he also painted the penis quite frequently. I mean, there's what did you think of those works?

PS: Oh, I know. Yeah. Yeah. I like it. Pornography, I find quite boring and not -- I find I -- [laughs] I'm a sucker for

romantic films. And sexual without showing anything. Now they can show bits and pieces, but that's much more interesting than just shooting a vagina or a cum shot in pornography. But there is something, and everyone's vagina is different, and every penis is different. So, the artist sees it that way. I'm much more -- I appreciate and like [00:50:00] that. And that's why, you know, I forget his name. His wife is named Mary. When he -- when I brought this girl eating the banana, which it wasn't -- to Max, he said, "We can't sell this to an American. It has to be a German." And that's who probably -- you see, in Europe, first, they have nudist camps. I've been to them. It's funny. I'll never forget all the penises playing tennis. [laughter] And I didn't recognize people with their clothes on, because you recognize people not by their bodies, but their clothes. So, I didn't know who they were when they put their clothes on.

Anyway, in Europe, [00:51:00] sexuality -- not all, because in certain Catholic countries they have trouble -- but here, it's so terrible and so puritanical that they pounce on these works. I mean, [laughs] a woman years ago lost her job in Texas because she took children to a museum where there were nude -- and what did Claire's mother say? I never undressed in front of my husband. So, that's this country. I mean, there's that book from India.[00:52:00]

HFC: The *Kama sutra*?

PS: Yeah. I've seen that book. So, I mean, they're way ahead of us.

HFC: Um, yeah, yeah. No, I think, I think the other thing also that I'm just really interested, along with all of these questions around sexuality, is also just like, you know, of course, you collected his work and it sounds like your mother

also collected his work. What else interested you out of, you know, the whole Pop cohort, out of all these people that you were also spending time with and seeing their shows and stuff. What stood out to you about Wesselmann's work? What drew you to his work in particular?

PS: Yeah, the composition and the colors. I mean, vibrant, vibrant colors. [00:53:00] And when in one of his nudes, he had a Matisse, who's one of my favorite paintings, painters. But that's what it is with Tom's work: the composition, the drawing. I mean, he knew how to draw it and he didn't exaggerate the flowers. He had a whole thing. Claire had to -- they always had flowers at home. And yeah, I mean, just that his collage compositions and that color, you can't just walk away from it.

HFC: Mm-hm. The, yeah, I mean --

PS: And the drawing, because my drawings are line drawings. [00:54:00] They're Claire. She had beautiful feet and this blonde hair. It's just beautiful drawings. It's just a pleasure to have them. And they worked together, you know, for that poster for Lincoln Center.

HFC: Tell me more? The --

PS: Oh, I can't tell you how many people I gave that to in Sweden. They all have it in their apartments. Tom did a poster -- the New York Film Festival. Tom did a drawing. I mean, uh, it was just a face. And Claire did the graphics.

HFC: Oh, oh.

KW: [Do you know Lulu?]

PS: What?

KW: Is this Lulu?

HFC: [00:55:00] Interesting. So she did, so --

KW: I'm not sure I know what you're talking about, but I think maybe it's the [Lulu?] print.

HFC: Claire did the graphic design and Tom did the drawings.

PS: Yes. Yeah. And it says graphics, design by Claire.

HFC: Well, this is actually, so this is another question I did wanna ask you that that brings up, because as you said, Claire was a really talented artist --

PS: Yes.

HFC: -- in her own right, right? And what did you -- oh yeah.

PS: Yes, that one.

HFC: Oh, that one. Oh, okay. Yes, in fact, I saw that in *A Life in Dirty Movies*. It's in the background when you're talking in your apartment, so yes.

PS: Yeah.

HFC: So, but here's my question actually, is that, you know, you knew her so well and you knew her work. How do you see the relationship between, you know, her own artwork and Tom and his work and her contribution? Obviously she was a model, but [00:56:00] I feel like there might be other ways in which she

contributed to his work during, you know, throughout his career. I don't know what your thoughts are on that.

PS: Well, they must have talked about it, but Claire was not at all a -- [Tom painter?].

HFC: Right, right. And why do you say that?

PS: Yeah, she was, I mean, this engraving -- do you say engraving? Well, woodcut.

HFC: Woodcut. Okay. Mm-hm.

PS: When she was really young. She would never have gotten into Cooper Union if she wasn't talented.

HFC: Right.

PS: And her portraits, but it -- yeah, she didn't do anything. She became a graphics designer. She worked for -- [Ben Rosen], his name was. On 53rd Street. She [00:57:00] worked up until she was pregnant. She never painted, I don't know if she missed it. She did one of her father, and Tom, I think.

HFC: Oh, really?

PS: Yeah, a portrait, yeah.

HFC: Later? Like, late -- no.

KW: Um, I don't know what year it was, but he's definitely younger in the portrait.

HFC: Interesting.

PS: Yeah.

KW: Probably late sixties, I'm gonna say.

HFC: Okay.

PS: Yeah. She was very, very talented, but believe me, being Tom's wife [laughs] and a mother. And he counted on her coming to the studio. Not just for sex on her birthday, but they would, you know, she was an artist. It -- oh, I don't wanna cry. Because it was an extraordinary marriage [00:58:00] of such respect. And you see, Claire also was this incredibly good person. It's like Jesus Christ married Jesus Christ [laughter]. It's -- and they were just such honest, loving -- and I mean, I would be there. I visited Claire a lot because when our children -- Kate and my son are the same age, but January and December.

HFC: Okay.

PS: But I was at their apartment a lot. And when Tom would come back from the studio, it was like my father, [Matty?], with his wife, my mother. [00:59:00] He would, like, kiss her like he hadn't seen her in years. Each moment. It, you don't see that very often. But he, when he made the speech at Cooper Union, I mean, it was more than Claire was beautiful and a model.

HFC: Right.

PS: And she would never talk about sex. Only Tom. She still was that good Christian. But whatever, but she was an extraordinary human. I had an affair with Tom the butcher while I was married, but I was afraid to tell Claire. Jeanie knew about it, but I never told Claire. And [01:00:00] Claire said -- she wondered why I was so upset about Tom the butcher when he died.

HFC: Tom, the butcher?

PS: Yeah, that's what I called him.

HFC: Was he an -- he was a butcher?

PS: Not to tell my mother. I told her that he was in the fashion industry, you know, Tom, the butcher. But anyway, Claire could pick up on how upset I was and she couldn't understand why I was so upset about a butcher dying. So then I had to tell her finally that I'd been having an affair with him for five years, but I didn't wanna tell you because I was so afraid she would disapprove. But she was never like that. And she never was a gossip. She was -- I mean, when Tom first [01:01:00] saw her, it wasn't just the beauty. Because she had those beautiful -- she was a beautiful woman and she had a wonderful sense of humor, too. She just was extraordinary. So they -- she couldn't have been a painter. She had no time. [laughs] And she could sew, right?

KW: She could do everything.

PS: Yeah. Cook, sew, design --

HFC: And she -- and early on, there were a few times when she actually actively helped him create his work, the painting, right? Yeah.

PS: Yeah. I mean, well, he did it in this tiny apartment --

HFC: Right, right.

PS: -- on Bleecker Street where they -- [laughs] and I mean, Tom [01:02:00] was one of a kind. Just like he didn't want the bathroom put in. Tom contemplated how, if he moved to 12th

Street, their first apartment, how would he -- oh, no, it wasn't. It was moving to 9th Street first. Moving to a -- because they moved from Bleecker to another studio. So, Tom couldn't figure out how he would move to an apartment that had bedrooms. I mean, he took it seriously. No one talks about that. They're just glad to have a bigger apartment or whatever. But for Tom, space was very important. And I -- maybe there was one bedroom on 12th Street.

KW: It probably [01:03:00] was. I mean, they had Jenny when they were on 12th Street.

PS: Yeah, maybe it was. And he really thought a lot about it, moving from Bleecker Street where everything was one room, which is what he was used to and what he liked, to the adjustment. These things were very important to him and Claire just accepted that that's how people were, but they weren't. [laughs] There wasn't another Tom. And I think other painters knew that. I don't know why he was in therapy. He didn't discuss it. But he was. But such a thoughtful person [pauses] about everything. His shoes. [01:04:00] God knows he wouldn't go to a shoe store. Claire had them sent and he would try them out at home. And his pants. You see, he wasn't someone who went shopping. And that's probably why he gave sex to Claire on her birthday, because he would talk to me about, you know, months before March 19th, "What am I going to get Claire for her birthday?" All of these things. Like, he never went shopping for food. Never. That was beyond him. And he just wore the same blue shirt and the same pants and the shoes had to fit. And if they didn't, I think Joe inherited his [01:05:00] shoes, the ones 'cause Tom wouldn't send them back or something.

HFC: Joe, your husband?

PS: Yeah. But Claire took care. I mean, he wasn't a child, but believe me, he took as much caring as a child or more. But for her, it wasn't work.

HFC: Yeah. It seems like they had -- that that dynamic was consistent throughout --

PS: Yeah.

HFC: -- their entire lives together, yeah.

PS: And at the end. And he had real health issues. But at the end, who modeled for him again but Claire.

HFC: Mm. Mm. Well, thank you so much. I -- this is, this has really been amazing. I did, there is [01:06:00] one -- there's one small thing that I didn't get to. It's very -- it's just very -- but I didn't get to tell you that this one observation that I made while I was listening to, watching *A Life in Dirty Movies*. And I was thinking about you, um, modeling for Tom and doing, and I noticed that you had said when you recounted first being asked to be in one of Joe's movies. And you said, you know, that you can't pose nude. You can't be in a sex movie. And then, I guess, David Stone said, "Well, you just have to sit there and smoke and you'll be sexy."

PS: No, but I said, because I was flat-chested, right. And David said, "Just smoke and you'll be sexy." And that's what I did. Yeah.

HFC: And that was right around the time that you then posed for Tom.

PS: Yeah. It must have been. And it's funny because here I am, [01:07:00] going to be 84. And this -- the doctors that I go

to now, one said to me, "How are you?" I -- of course, I'm not well. He said, "Well, you're still sexy." No, and you see, my big thing in life is the affair I had with Fritz Lang.

HFC: [laughs] Really?

PS: Yeah. Tom knew about that.

HFC: When, when did -- when was that?

PS: He didn't want me doing blue movies. Polly Platt got me involved. It's too complicated, but I had an affair and I gave up Fritz Lang for Joe Sarno. He was very upset.

HFC: Fritz Lang was very upset.

PS: Yeah. But I [01:08:00] don't feel it now, but I just, after Joe died, had another affair again. So, maybe the way I smoked a cigarette or Tom just wanted to do my face. There is something in me that my father noticed when I was 12 years old. And that's the other thing that he said. He didn't want me to be a virgin when I was -- before I got married, because you always try on a pair of shoes to see if they fit. So, in my twenties, he said to me, "I didn't tell you to try on every shoe in the shoe store." [01:09:00] But that's how I was. So, Tom never painted me nude, but he must have seen this sexuality which is in me. I mean, I hardly see it. And how a doctor can say that, you know, false teeth, getting bald. But --

KW: How did the girl eating a banana come about? Did you --

PS: No.

KW: -- did you eat a banana and he drew you? I mean, because that's [a sexual?] --

PS: Well, no, you see, that -- so Tom must have seen that sexuality in me. Otherwise, why would he do that? And the thing is, I [01:10:00] only ate the banana to see what it, how my mouth would be. I don't say the word cock, but penis.

KW: So there was a banana involved.

PS: Well, to get the mouth all --

KW: He wanted you to.

PS: Oh yeah. That was nothing about a banana.

KW: Of course, of course. [laughter]

PS: And so, I forget if Tom ever said anything to me, but he knew about all my affairs. I, yeah. I never said anything about Tom the butcher, because Joe was still alive. But -- I don't think of myself that way, but I remember going to the Cannes Film Festival. [01:11:00] Because of a film, not a sex film, but a film I was in that was in the first New York Film Festival. The Mekas brothers. And I can't tell you how many affairs I had then, to sneak into the Carlton Hotel, so no one would know. And some famous French actor who liked young girls invited me to dinner. I mean, I never had trouble attracting men. And I was always flat-chested.

KW: I've seen pictures of you. You were so stunningly beautiful. There's a -- it's not surprising to me.

PS: Well, it isn't beauty that -- but it is a sexuality. And so, Tom must have seen that. [01:12:00] And I used the banana just to get my mouth because a banana --

HFC: Right.

PS: -- a cucumber, there are a lot. And Tom was very sexual. And that's why I don't find any of his paintings pornographic at all.

They're all sensual. Because he was a very sexual person. And the -- all the movie producers, all those men I've been with -- not ever -- but I've had that happen to me. I can't tell you. Those men are not sexual. It's something to do [01:13:00] with the -- either they're fat, or short, and the power. Tom wasn't like that. He appreciated beauty. And that French woman was sexy. And he appreciated, I mean, he was attracted to it. But like my father who was sexual, my father told me very early on, "Even though you may love chocolates, you don't eat them if you get fat." Which was telling me he'd had affairs. Because he also had this thing for women. And it's -- and Tom had it too.

So he -- I mean, I never, he loved Mary Tyler [01:14:00] Moore for whatever reason, but he loved women. And why Claire was only jealous of what's her name -- Danielle -- but that was Tom. But not in the way that these horrible men. He had a real appreciation and a sexual feeling about women and their bodies in the best possible way of men who love women. There were many painters, whoever, I mean, the homosexual painters love men and did beautiful paintings of men [01:15:00] because they were attracted to them and found it -- you can't do those paintings. If you just see a body or you think pornographically, there's nothing to do with that. But the breasts, the mouth, the vagina, the [bum?], everything. You

have to have that. And Tom had it and it shows. But in the best way. But with our puritanical thing, nudity is like pornography, which it isn't at all.

HFC: Yeah, no, I mean, I think you're bringing up a really interesting point, which is that what you're -- and this is very much what I was asking about earlier. It's really interesting. You're seeing in his [01:16:00] work something about his feelings towards his subject.

PS: Yes.

HFC: It's not anatomical. It's not purely -- yeah, right.

PS: And it's not pornographic. Absolutely not. It's a real appreciation and enjoyment from the beauty of women and their sexuality. And there are women that just have none of it. But I have to say that it is part of some woman, women. Tom wouldn't have seen it in me and my whole life of men. But I never felt that about Tom. Oh no, [01:17:00] he was -- as I say, I don't believe in God and all that, and I'm not a Christian, but he was -- it's a different kind of love. I love Tom. There's no one I know who's like him. And his idiosyncrasies, I loved. [pauses] But yeah. And that he's not appreciated in this country where -- [softly] yeah. But even as I talk and I look at that woman's nails and her lips, it's very special. [01:18:00]

HFC: What -- tell me, like, what is it? What are you seeing when you, when you look at that?

PS: Yeah. So, we've been talking so much about sexuality. Now I see the smoke coming out and her feeling for the cigarette. Because smoke after sex, it's something. And all that inhaling. It's all part of it.

HFC: I know we touched on this earlier, but I did wanna go back to this. What do you make of him so disliking smoking and --

PS: Well, because what -- well, he was a smoker. Not a -- he wasn't a great smoker.

HFC: [laughs] I don't think until this interview, I would've understood what that meant, but now I think I do. Yeah, I do understand.

PS: Yeah, no. [01:19:00] But he could see, even though I don't think I was doing, I don't know what I was posing. I don't think it was the banana one. I don't know what I was doing, but whatever it is, either when you have an emotional experience, you need a cigarette. I smoke cigars now, but it's the same inhale, to have it going all the way down. It releases you from this. And that's why you have it after sex. But I don't know why I had it. It wasn't anything to do with Tom, because I wasn't that way with Tom. Maybe just having to be still. [01:20:00] So who knows, but it, it gives you that release and relaxation, smoking. I'll never -- I mean, I have emphysema, but I am not about to stop smoking. I don't do it with my grandchildren. I can, you know, go without it, but I'm not giving it up.

HFC: And I mean, and you've described this kind of release --

PS: Yeah.

HFC: -- related to it. Yeah. And you, do you see that in the painting? Like -- yeah.

PS: Yes. I see it now because I'm talking about it. And Tom the butcher was a smoker, so that was great. But Eric was not

a smoker. I had to go like out of the room to get the rest of the release out. It is part of -- [01:21:00] and in early Hollywood films and in many French films, God, they -- Belmondo. I mean, how many --

HFC: Truly great smoker.

PS: Yeah. But it's part of sex. And I don't know how people do without it. [laughter] It's so much a part of my life. But if you see those films, those French films were sexy, they were all smokers. And I see this now, the way she's holding her cigarette. And Tom must have seen that. And probably studied many more than -- I didn't pose for him very often.

HFC: Well, I am -- I'm, I think, you know, we're [01:22:00] probably a little over time, so I should let -- but thank you. This was amazing. Thank you so much for talking with me about this. This is really fantastic.

PS: I guess I'm like, that you turned me on and then -- how do you turn me off?

HFC: No, I, I would, you know, this has all been so great. I mean, incredibly valuable.

PS: Being an actress, I have this discipline to not think. That's why I'm not a depressed person. I have to put away the fact that I lost that pearl earring in my apartment and concentrate completely on Huffa and Josie.

HFC: I got that. I got that. I appreciate it.

PS: Yeah, but that's being an actress. I don't know how all those actors did it [01:23:00] drunk, because I never drank on stage. I mean, before I went on.

HFC: Mm-hm. Yeah, yeah.

PS: But it's helped me through many -- and working with Joe was -- zeroing, zeroing in and concentrating, right?

HFC: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, like I said, I can tell that you have that skill. [laughs]

PS: Yeah, yeah. I don't think about it. Yeah. But once you ask me, it all flashes.

[END OF AUDIO FILE]