

LA BELLE  
ET LA BÊTE  
AMBERA  
WELLMANN'S  
DRAWINGS

by Meeka Walsh

John Berger has paused before a particular painting by the artist William Drost, a student of Rembrandt's. He doesn't name it, or even locate it with precision. Instead, in *Bento's Sketchbook* (Pantheon Books, New York, 2011), he describes the subject, a woman looking out from the canvas with intense desire, and he reasons she is looking at a man and that the man must be the painter William Drost. Here, Berger makes a credible assumption in saying, "The only thing we know for certain about Drost is that he was desired precisely by this woman." He goes on, "To be so desired—if the desire is also reciprocal—renders the one who is desired fearless.... To be desired is perhaps the closest anybody can reach in this life to feeling immortal."

In Ambra Wellmann's charcoal works on paper in the Portfolio presented here, there is a fearlessness that may well spring from desire. In the drawings of the couples we see the solipsistic self-sufficiency of lovers, unmindful of any scopophilic gaze. In the single figure with which this Portfolio opens, Wellmann challenges the rendering with boldness, joining artist Marlene Dumas's investigation of the role of the female model. There is a ready stylistic parallel with Dumas in this image—a difficult model in every aspect. An undersized, underdeveloped, perhaps malnourished doughy body with eyes like "rissoles in the sand," to quote Dylan Thomas—vacant and maybe a little haunted. Still, in her abjection, somehow stalwart and displaying a sort of fraught good nature. This similarity persists in the shadowed seams, part against part, in other works. You see it as well in Wellmann's assertive placement of the figure on the page—an insistence on your attention. These aren't casual or speculative drawings. Decorum isn't an issue, either. However lyric are Wellmann's subjects, as with Dumas, they are get-out-of-the-way drawings.

In Jean Cocteau's 1946 film, *La Belle et la Bête*, Jean Marais's beast terrified *la belle* Josette Day, but not for long, and her love offered succour to "*la pauvre bête*" who suffered the burden of his monstrous demeanour. Like Belle, Ambra Wellmann is fearless in approaching the beast, who, as an image of male domination, is a familiar figure in art history. He can also represent the unknown, which looms large and dangerous and therefore dark. Charcoal is a traditional drawing medium, so we read black and white without pause. We see the long tradition of women being carried off by all species of male creatures, but Wellmann here taunts cross-species prohibitions and posits instead non-differentiation between lovers where mutuality and not struggle and submission is the outcome. She also taunts the blackness of one figure and the whiteness of the other, where one slips into the other without any pause between them.

Picasso's "Vollard Suite," 1930–37, must come to mind when looking at Wellmann's drawings. Like the images in the "Vollard Suite," hers also have two figures, male and female, one beautiful, the other a beast, or, put more kindly, a handsome bull. In Wellmann's drawings both are equally robust, vital, sensual and well matched in size. But there's a substantial divergence between her pairings and Picasso's where minotaur/artist observes the model sleeping; where he is physically very much larger, and she is the model; where he is always the artist and she remains the model; he, the actor, and she, the passive subject; where the wisdom and authority that come with age are his and she is the model, even if no longer the inspiring or generative muse. In Picasso's etchings the two figures rarely engage; most often they look out, she vacantly and without interest and he appearing distracted, the artist concerned with himself, his diminishing powers; his aging body to her unchanging status as model.

Ambra Wellmann's women are familiar to us, their heads rendered as inherited readings of beauty. One could easily be Picasso's lover and muse, the artist Dora Maar with her strong nose and broad brow. Another head in profile might be one of Matisse's many models with her elegant attenuated neck a perfect cameo.

Always, in Wellmann's work there is a perceived ambiguity in what we see on the canvas or sheet. What body part is where and how is it concluded—in paw or hand or hoof or breast. What abutting part is shadow or seam or opening. What is a wound or an infinite secret. What is complete and what will continue to transform and, in the way it is with lovers and their passion—which is mine and which is yours? You kiss your lover's flesh and your lips are on your own arm; a stretched leg limns the one beside it and both emanate from the same torso. These are lovers in Wellmann's drawings: limbs bent, opened, lifted; he is in the foreground, then she is in front. Her body is small and then large enough to encompass his. He looks at her with tenderness and solicitation, cradling her body, scooping her buttocks and lifting her toward him; she reaches up and loops a long-drawn arm behind his head, hooking one hand gently around his horn. Her look is quiet, introspective, present and rapt in her body's engagement with itself and with her lover.

Wellmann is asserting beauty and the figure as the subjects of her attention in these drawings. Women at the centre, full-size, present and equivalent in every regard. I use "regard" in the multiple ways it can mean: awareness, respect, unguardedness and, here, full pride in a passion mutually and unequivocally experienced and expressed. Regard is what she is giving in these drawings; we, too, can look, with care. ■













