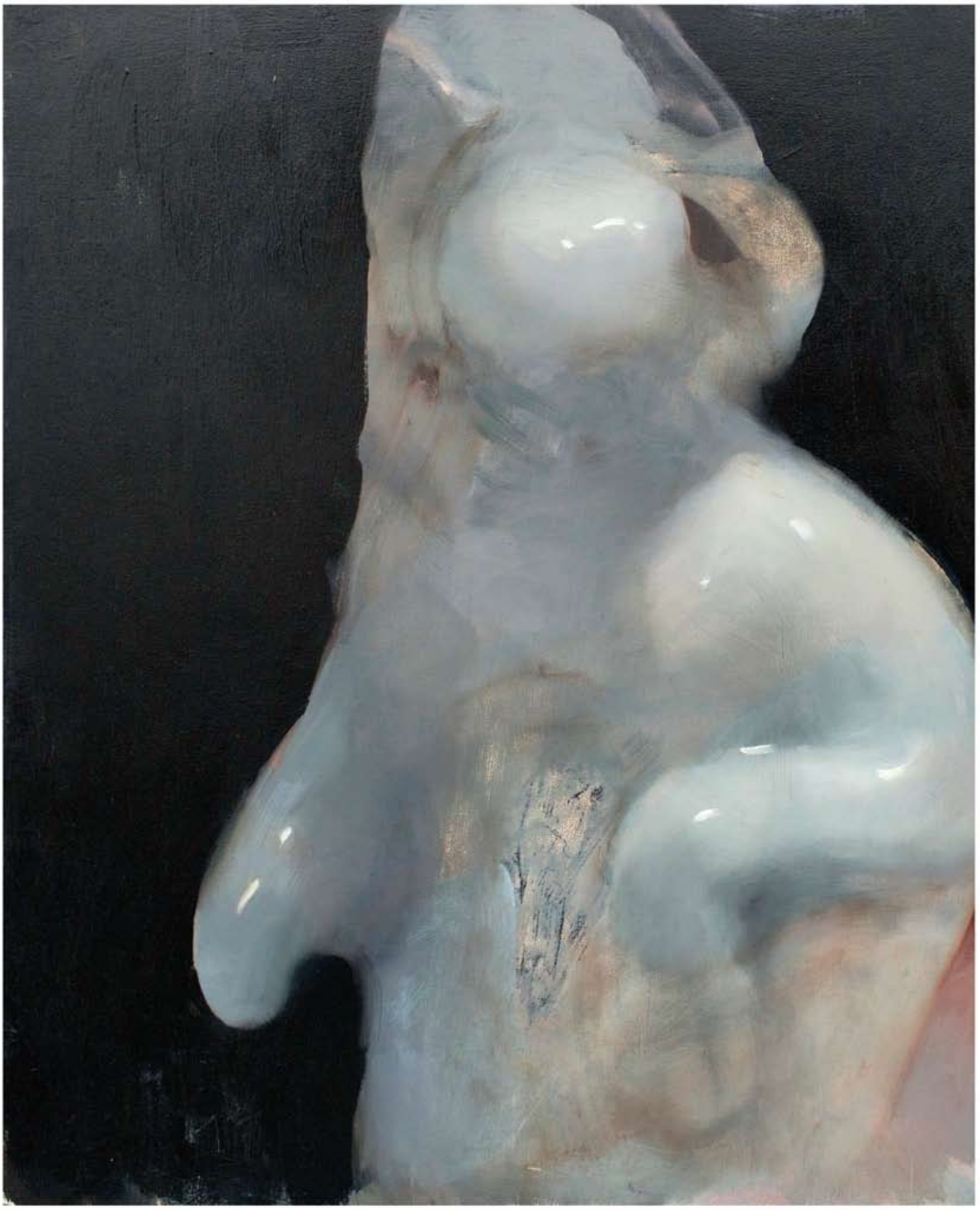

Ambera Wellmann, *Wunde*, 2016, oil on wood, 23 x 25 inches. All images courtesy the artist.

BEAUTY AND THE DEFERRING AND BALANCING BEAST

THE PAINTING OF AMBERA WELLMANN

by Meeka Walsh

The tactile satisfaction of the rounded edges of an old, thick-enamelled sink, where time and use have made the surface satin, the appreciation of the generous application of porcelain to the heavy, metal bowl intended to last in utility forever, its unadorned vernacular straightforwardness unequivocally only one thing, then some distaste, a mild revulsion in finding it isolated from its purpose and your hand perhaps having come in contact with the surface under the lip, the raw edge inside the empty faucet holes where time has accumulated the gummy residue of past use—waste after all, since it is a place to rid yourself of dirt. That's the subject. The object is a preternaturally desirable painting of a sink and the dark space from which it emerges. Ambera Wellmann's *Sunk*, 2015, oil on wood, 23 by 25 inches. It's abject, an abandoned sink without faucets, without function. The holes where the taps would have been are eyes of entreaty, the rounded lip as smiling and benign as a good-natured porpoise and the stain covering much of the bowl barely a disfigurement, more an endearing blemish. There is also, oddly, a sense of composure and containment to this plain object holding its place like a Manet still life. It's these double responses, one following on the other which are the painter's interest; ambiguity is a state with which she is comfortable. Wellmann is a young artist and calling up Manet is applying a good deal of pressure at the outset of a career, but the history is there for her to engage at will, and as she is able. And of course, Robert Gober comes to mind—hers, and ours as viewers, when a sink on a wall in a gallery had, at the very least, to be read as ambiguous. For Wellmann, Gober's sinks were terrifying porcelain-finished body surrogates and real, as she described them, and led to her sink, *Sunk*, which occasioned her shifting from body as the subject carrying the paint, to a porcelain surface, allowing her investigation to focus without the body's literalness intervening.

In his Introduction to *The Painting of Modern Life, Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton University Press, 1984), TJ Clark tells us, referring to his use of the term "Modernism," that "something decisive happened in the history of art around Manet which set painting and the other arts on a new course." He suggests the change could have reflected what he describes

as a scepticism or uncertainty about the nature of representation, and Manet and his circle looked to painters from the 17th century, like Velázquez and Frans Hals, whose work also evidenced attention being paid to the question. They had failed, TJ Clark explained, "to hide the gaps and perplexities inherent in their own procedures." He goes on to note that "these markers in the picture of where the illusion almost ended only served to make the likeness, where it was perceived, the more compelling."

Ambera Wellmann's *Wunde*, 2015, is such a piece. It began with a porcelain figurine. Some explanation and context is helpful here. The porcelain surface of a sink which in its functionality alone is uninflected by narrative is not the same porcelain as a figurine made of that material. Both share porcelain's physical properties which are sensually described—as the material applies to tableware and decorative objects—in one of the important texts used by collectors. The source is *Godden's Guide to English Porcelain* (Granada Publishing, 1978) and the book opens: "The word 'porcelain' is used to describe a unique, quite beautiful material matured and made translucent by great heat." The author offers identifying characteristics which seem, interestingly, to carry values that extend beyond the object. Godden wrote, "Visually the true porcelains, or rather their surfaces, appear white and glittery and they feel cold and unfriendly to British hands." The thingness of the porcelain figurines which become the object/subject or the subject/object of Wellmann's paintings is a determining factor in what draws her to them. The glittery, non-porous surface-as subject presented her, she told *Border Crossings* in a recent interview, with opportunities for formal exploration of surface beyond those that flesh would, although both, where any evidence of mimicry or simulacra can be discerned, are prone to move beyond surface toward narrative. Gober again comes to mind with his metonymous objects.

The figures that interest Wellmann are those which as objects have a sense of incompleteness about them. She doesn't mean broken, and either aware or inadvertently, she is connecting to the artist who produced the object, maybe in the Meissen factory in 1710 or less historically eloquent—as part of a job lot to attract tourist sales. Always, with artists, the desire to communicate. Someone conceived of the piece which in

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1. *Wormhole*, 2015, oil on wood, 16 x 20 inches.

2. *Swum*, 2015, oil on wood, 23 x 23 inches.

3. *Held*, 2016, oil on wood, 28 x 27 inches.

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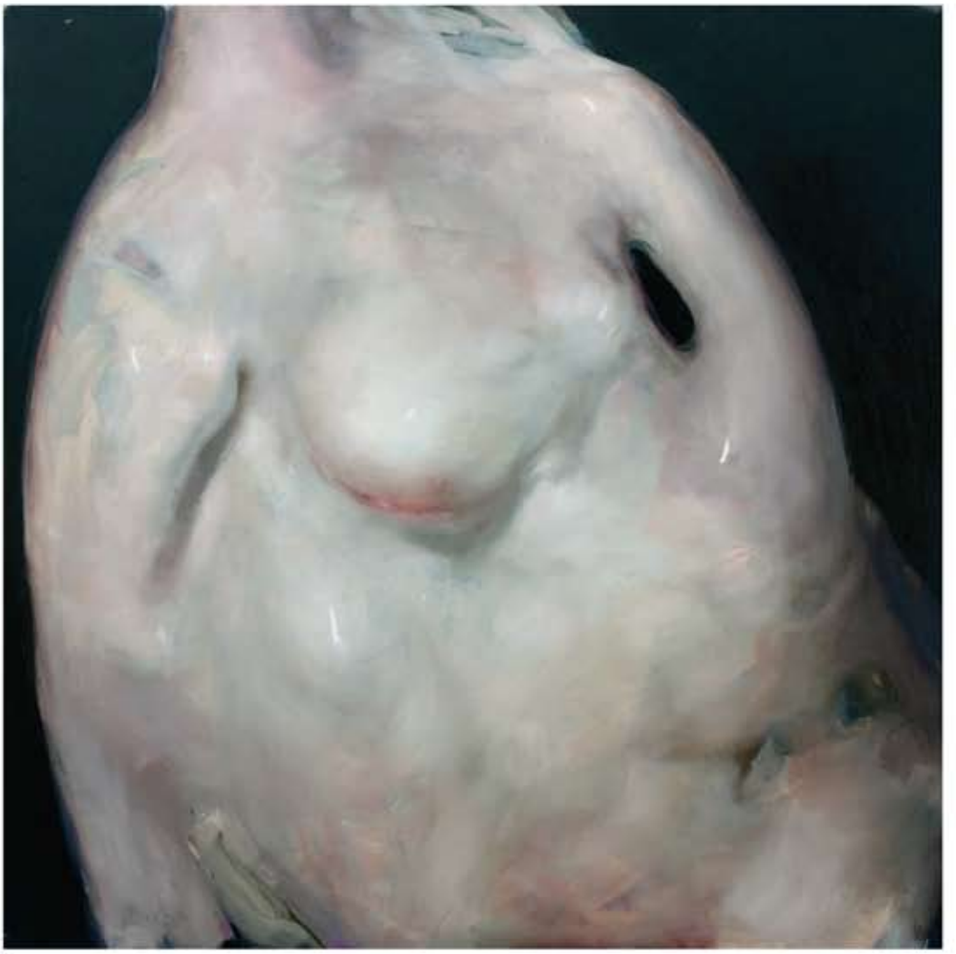
1. *Wife*, 2016, oil on wood, 33 x 28 inches.

2. *Judith*, 2016, oil on wood, 33 x 34 inches.

Wellmann's eyes is unresolved, unfulfilled. It could be empathic transference on her part—this sadness or other emotional state that she identifies, but a necessary one, in order for her to engage with the object, and transform it to a subject in paint.

Any assertions of art-making—in all disciplines—are acts of courage, also requiring preparedness and skill, hubris or some subjectivity, and when the maker intends as well to reveal vulnerability, an interesting tension and dichotomy is set up. Édouard Levé was a wonderful writer. His book, *Autoportrait*, 2015, offered the author to the reader in a work that was both revealing and concealing. But it was an offering of himself. In spite of describing social situations to which he was a party, it seemed there was a prevalent loneliness which, it turned out, was real. In one declaration near the book's end he wrote, "I talk to my things when they are sad," and I see here Ambera Wellmann's connecting similarly to the figurines she paints.

Here is *Wunde*. A figure emerges from a black ground. The light source is above and from the right. The light is on the surface of the figurine, on the surface of the wood panel on which the figurine sits. This doubling of apprehension creates a buzz, almost a visual prevarication, but the honesty of the work precludes any pejorative reading. It's a rabbit; it's a cat. It's whole or broken. It's solid, its self is three-dimensional, the configuration of the head is implied, that is, it's in the right place above the shoulders, and faces us. Its snout or nose is bulbous and very glossy as is the visible shoulder and the limply held paws. In demeanour it hunches or rounds toward the viewer. Its posture is neither relaxed nor tense. It is quietly waiting. The areas of the figure which could be perceived as white are very glossy—porcelain's desirable glittering surface. On the chest, in that cavity, in that place between the left and right ladder of the ribs, the surface appears abraded. The painted surface, the painting's surface or this figurine's surface. We don't know which. The animal who is the subject of the figurine is unknowable or its painting is unknowable as it was transformed from one state to another. For Wellmann this compounds its vulnerability. Who is its "I" then?



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Ambera Wellmann's painting seeks slowness and the attenuation of the moment. The warp is a desirable place for her—suspended and generative. She looks at the rubbed out, ground away, raw spot on the subject's chest in *Wunde* and says she feels it there, in her own chest, and describes it temporally as well as bodily, which is, in fact, how time is marked. "The moment in the chest where it's been rubbed away" is how she describes it. This figurine is the container of all the painting's gestures, marks and erasures and because this is the case, because it is its own entity, it is also, with its rubbed centre, in a state of what the artist describes as un-becoming, in a process of undoing. With its erased core or ground showing it is moving backward in time, the object of its own unravelling, the bearer of its own process, subject to unknowability and therefore vulnerable.

In Spain, at the Prado, Wellmann saw Goya, Velázquez, saw what was evident—that the paint was scraped, applied and scraped again. That age too revealed the pentimento and showed the process which was supposed to be hidden and is now exposed, and the artist and subject are rendered vulnerable. So, *Wunde*. Wellmann is prepared to offer herself, in this state, through her paintings.

The history of artists looking and locating, finding themselves and subsuming influences and effects is long. In Wellmann's *Held*, 2016, it could be said that the painting focuses on a finger. In this painting she is telling us it is the long-fingered elegant hand and wrist of a porcelain figurine. Studying in New York, Wellmann went often to the Frick Museum and stopped on her visits in front of a work in their collection on permanent display, Ingres's *Louise de Broglie, Comtesse d'Haussonville*, 1845. It is a beautiful painting of a beautiful woman in a dazzlingly rendered blue silk gown. About her response to this painting Wellmann told *Border Crossings*, "I know the kind of hypnosis I experience when I look at that Ingres.

It's like slowing time, elongating it as the eye moves across the surface which is actually a composite of parts. And the hypnosis isn't just a magic trick; it's evidence of the eye and hand working together to produce a strange sensation of time."

Ingres comes to mind in *Held*, beyond Wellmann's commenting on the hypnotic effect and in fact, another painting of a beautiful woman in an elaborate blue silk gown, *Joséphine-Eléonore Marie-Pauline de Galard de Brassac de Bearn, Princess de Broglie*, 1853, in the collection of the Met in New York, shows a hand even closer in appearance to the left hand in Wellmann's *Held*.

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1. *Sunk*, 2015, oil on wood, 21 x 23 inches.

2. *Drained*, 2015, oil on wood, 20 x 16 inches.

Other artists have engaged Ingres, in particular Man Ray and his contemporaries in the 1920s who found, in the period following World War I, with its previously unrealized waste and carnage, that Ingres provided on the one hand a sense of visual order and clarity and on the other a covert and disguised physical or bodily violence and distortion. In *Fingering Ingres* (*Art History*, Vol. 23 No. 5, 2001) one chapter, "Le Violin d'Ingres: Man Ray's Variation on Ingres, Deformation, Desire and de Sade," by Kirsten Hoving Powell, discusses Man Ray's rereading primarily of Ingres's *Le Baignuese de Valpinçon*, 1808. Ingres's High Realism, Hoving Powell suggests, paired with his willingness to distort anatomy in order to produce his own ideal form, made him an attractive subject for artists in the fraught post-war period. Think of Ingres's *La Grande Odalesque* with her attenuated, boneless arms, her back curving well beyond the requisite vertebrae a human body would have, her breast having rolled improbably under her right arm like a small melon captured in her armpit, or the extra-long fingers of the visible hand of the earlier-mentioned painting of the Princess de Broglie, where the hand appears as inanimate and disconnected from utility as the flattened white kid glove dropped on the chair on which she leans.

It was Ingres, Hoving Powell points out, who instructed Man Ray about the "power of deformation," referring to the French painter as "the master of multiplying vertebrae and inflatable nudes." From Ingres Man Ray took lessons which are evident in his photograph *Anatomies*, 1929, a thrown-back neck and stretched jaw about which Hoving Powell wrote: "Seen directly from below, the neck is flattened, swollen, abstracted, phallic. The story line is gone, but the eroticism of anatomical deformation is heightened by attention to the part, rather than the whole."

Ambera Wellmann does this, this attention to a part, to its distortion or pronounced quality, to its out-of-place placement, its intentional misreading and the confusion that creates. Look at *Judith*, 2016, referring to the often-painted 16th-century subject of Judith beheading Holofernes. A figure which is a figurine is the subject. It is vessel-shaped, headless, the arms which were necessary and necessarily powerful for the violent act are implied, one rounded toward the belly but showing a gap, which contributes to its sense of being a vessel. For Wellmann it is a vessel, a container of female power and for her, a violent painting showing a balance, she said, between the object's feeling of violence being done to it and reading evidence of the violence from the outside. It's Michael Fried's distinction between immersive and specular where he says, referring in *After Caravaggio* (Yale University Press, 2016) to the painter being engrossed, inside the act of painting, and being able to separate himself from its creation to allow it the distance of being an object at which a viewer can look. He describes these states—immersive and specular—as perpertually shifting and uses the word "oscillation" to describe the tension generated. This process is one I would apply to Wellmann's as well, a sense I have of the communication she wants to set up between

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her making and our seeing, with the work asserting its autonomy and holding quiet or still for neither maker nor viewer.

It is incomplete, with its arms suggested but not modelled, a sense of tension around the neck, were it there, one breast only and this one breast at the chest's centre, and where the nipple is or would be—a red slit, almost a smile or grimace with the corners lifted, almost bloody. The surface is turbulent, rough under the glaze, and the figure emerges alone out of the dark.

Or look at *Wile*, 2016, an almost complete female figurine on the right, listing a little to the left with one hip thrust out in a contrapuntal stance. A rich curl of chestnut hair rests above the left breast, her left arm and hand are draped across the belly, perhaps clasping the right hand coyly on the hip. Two breasts, the left with only a blush of colour alluding to the placement of the nipple, the right breast showing the same wound or slash evident in *Judith*. Abutting the woman, almost along her form, is a columnar figure marked out and then brought to the fore by a series of top-painted vertical stripes in the same colour as the slit on the right breast. The space where the forms meet is charged. Here I think of the heavy, wavering but weighty line in Manet's *The Fifer*, 1866, where the thick black lines along the sides hold the figure in space—obviously a painted gesture applied to a surface, ascertaining its physical presence. On *Wile* the line is viscous and slow, like blood beginning to clot. Against the columnar figure on the far right is a swollen form, a bulge pushing at the place where the small of the back begins—a sensitive point where the kidney could be subject to injury.

The graceful, improbable little finger, the lifted "manners" finger of the left hand in Ambera Wellmann's *Held*, is the picked out part, the anatomical fragment Francette Pacteau refers to as the *blason anatomique* in *The Symptom of Beauty* (Harvard University Press, 1994). It's the reductive apprehension of the female body—not the entire whole female person but only one part, a part selected or isolated from the complex, intact being. Wellmann shows us this in her paintings, uses it in empathy, in anger, in a show of feminine strength. She plays with the implications of the grotesque, which she finds seductive. And it is—this pull between seduction and revulsion, between vulnerability and violence.

The top right side of *Held* is dashed, hard and aggressive. The palette of browns that do this are obliterating colours, not assigned to generating an image. The application slows a little as it moves to the lower part of its gesturing, making cones of the lines Wellmann has laid over the cobalt, Meissen blue which appears to be the underlying ground of the panel's surface. This is quick painting. From the left is that delicate, Ingres-inspired porcelain-figurine hand and wrist. Time has been taken. It's mate, the other hand, the right hand, emerges in an uncertain position—an open hand seeking something to grasp. Its surface is also glazed but less light falls on it and the end of its thumb has been broken off. It's the sad kitchen hand to its elegant drawing-room mate. The hands are slow painting, the upper portion fast in a compositional balance Wellmann struggled to make work, which it does. Nearer, in the foreground, the elegant left hand seems to urge or push back or override the imminent danger of obliteration the quick brush marks imply. It's a nice tension. "Easy, easy there," the refined and delicate hand cautions in a kind of beauty and the beast encounter. And there, in Wellmann's complex, wonderfully articulated paintings we do find beauty and the deferring and balancing beast.▮