

EXHIBIT REVIEW

Sleights of Hand

Andrew Wyeth: Memory and Magic. High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, November 12, 2005–February 26, 2006, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, March 29–July 16, 2006. Curated by ANNE CLASSEN KNUTSON, KATHLEEN A. FOSTER, and MICHAEL TAYLOR.

Andrew Wyeth: Memory and Magic. Edited by ANNE CLASSEN KNUTSON. (New York: High Museum of Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Rizzoli, 2005. 224p. Illustrations, index. \$49.95.)

ALMOST IMMEDIATELY YOU CAN SEE what makes Andrew Wyeth Andrew Wyeth.

On the first wall of Andrew Wyeth: Memory and Magic, as hung in the Philadelphia Museum of Art in the spring and summer of 2006, you are confronted with two images of the sea. The first, *The Lobsterman*, is a watercolor, painted in 1937, early in Wyeth's career, just a year after he held his first public exhibition at the Art Alliance of Philadelphia. The sea dominates the composition, filling fully 80 percent of the paper. The lobsterman, alone on his boat, works with his back to us, underscoring a sense of lonely hard work and self-sufficient isolation. The second, *Adrift* (1982), shows us another man on another small boat, except this time the man is lying down—asleep? dead?—and we are nearly in the boat with him. The sea still fills up the composition, but we are so close to the figure that we can't even see the whole boat.

The first work owes a great and obvious debt to the watercolors of Winslow Homer, one of those artists Andrew Wyeth has acknowledged as an influence. In the second image, however, the blue of the sea has been replaced by Wyeth's characteristic earth tones; watercolor has been replaced by dry brush tempera, a technique that Wyeth resurrected and

made entirely his own; and that Homeresque figure, lonely and set against an impersonal nature, has been replaced with someone far more haunting, spectral, and downright weird. *Adrift* owes no debt to anyone and is entirely and unmistakably a Wyeth.

Memory and Magic is the first large-scale retrospective of Andrew Wyeth's work since 1977 and almost surely the last one to be mounted in the artist's lifetime. Wyeth seems very aware of this, and Memory and Magic has been shaped, in ways subtle and obvious, by the artist's desire to manage our memory of him. Wyeth even speaks to us to an extent unusual for an art show. Quotes from him appear in many of the painting labels and they appear in a few places in large font on the gallery walls themselves. He speaks to us even more in the catalogue essays, which quote him liberally, often from interviews Wyeth has given over the years.

Far from being an omnium-gatherum of Wyeth's life's work, many of the curatorial choices made for this exhibit were made to illustrate the issue I alluded to a moment ago: process. They demonstrate how Wyeth paintings wind up the way they do. Sometimes this involves Wyeth or the curators explaining on the label where the subject, composition, or title came from. In other cases, the exhibit lays out studies of works that we can then watch transform into the final product. It does this most dazzlingly with the 1976 composition *Sea Boots*. On one wall of the show in Philadelphia we see five studies done before we reach the final painting, and it is a remarkable window onto Wyeth's creative process. (Sadly, those five studies are not illustrated in the catalogue, though the final painting is.)

In the catalogue, also titled *Andrew Wyeth: Memory and Magic*, Philadelphia Museum of Art curator Kathleen Foster explores this same issue with a close examination of *Groundhog Day* (1959). In her essay, "Meaning and Medium in Wyeth's Art," Foster traces the complicated path Wyeth followed to produce the deceptively simple scene of Karl and Anna Kuerner's kitchen. At the end of Foster's essay, when we have arrived at the end of the process of creating *Groundhog Day*, Foster quotes Wyeth: "It's not what you put in but what you leave out that counts" (p. 102).

That, as succinctly as anything, summarizes the purpose of putting all this process on display. Wyeth and the curators have chosen to illustrate how his final works result from stripping away, reducing, simplifying. In Foster's essay about *Groundhog Day*, for example, we learn that Wyeth's first attempts included the Kuerner's usually snarling German shepherd

asleep in the corner. As the composition evolved the dog disappeared, though its bared fangs remained in the form of the jagged, uneven cut on the log outside the kitchen window. Anne Classen Knutson also considers the use of absence, substitution, and process in her catalogue essay titled "Andrew Wyeth's Language of Things." Examining Wyeth's still lifes in nature, his paintings of vessels, and his use of thresholds, Knutson explores the way ordinary objects carry the weight of Wyeth's emotions and his memories. If process is what we see unfold, then absence is the recurring theme of this exhibition. Objects standing in for people, landscapes for emotions, the past for the present.

This focus on process and absence seems at one level designed to wrestle with the thorny question of exactly where Wyeth belongs in the history of twentieth-century American art. Certainly the catalogue essays spend some of their time locating Wyeth in an art historical context, generally avoiding more sweeping speculations about interpretation and meaning. Most superficially, he is a realist painter and thus belongs to that long tradition of American—and, even more specifically, Philadelphia—realism. Wyeth himself admits to admiring Edward Hopper, Winslow Homer, and Thomas Eakins, all realists of one kind or another. And his dry point technique produces images of astonishing, almost photographic clarity and precision.

The purpose of this show, however, and of the essays that accompany it, is to demonstrate that Wyeth does not simply paint snapshots of the world around him. His paintings result from the deliberate manipulation, distortion, and reworking over and over of the scenes they represent. In this sense, Wyeth's canvases are at least as much imaginative as they are "real," and no wonder that he was included in a 1943 show at the Museum of Modern Art called "American Realists and Magic Realists." Michael Taylor, in his contribution to the catalogue, has echoed this assessment by locating Wyeth's early work "Between Realism and Surrealism," and, of course, the very title of this retrospective stresses the notion of the magical over the "real."

Yet there is an irony here, though small and unintended perhaps. Wyeth's finished canvases do indeed have a magic quality about them, but the exhibition itself demonstrates just how much labor, how much trial and error is involved in creating this "magic." As with any magician, the illusion only works because of all the practice that has gone into it. The wizard here has pulled the curtain back on himself.

Wyeth came of age in the 1930s when the tradition of American realism was still quite strong. Academic realism had been replaced, early in the twentieth century, with the grittier realism of the Ashcan School, and by the 1930s those painters—John Sloan, William Glackens, George Bellows, and others—had been succeeded by a newer generation including Ben Shahn, Phillip Evergood, and Reginald Marsh. In addition, the 1930s have come down to us now as a golden age of documentary photography; the work of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Berenice Abbott, among others, provides us with the mental images we all carry with us of the Depression decade.

Those artists, however, shared a concern with social engagement, frequently with left-wing politics, and often with the urban scene. To varying degrees the realists of the 1930s saw their art as having a social purpose and they turned their eyes and their work to the crises of the day. Wyeth, clearly, does not belong with these. His images do not include any of the city, or of the particular moment they were created, or anything we might call a social issue.

In his use of the objects and architecture of America's preindustrial past, Wyeth shares something in common with Charles Sheeler (Knutson and Taylor both discuss Wyeth's relationship to Sheeler). Sheeler, however, used Bucks County barns and Williamsburg kitchens as a way of exploring his artistic relationship to European Modernism (Sheeler had gone to Paris after studying at the Pennsylvania Academy), and his compositions that have come to be called "Precisionist" reflect the influence of Cubism and of his European experiences.

Modernism does not seem to have interested Wyeth much either, and when, after the Second World War, American painting moved toward Abstract Expressionism, Wyeth didn't follow. Jackson Pollack started painting in the 1930s as a realist too, but became famous as the heroic figure of "action painting." Wyeth, on the other hand, has continued to explore and refine his particular vision, which began to emerge in the '30s, almost willfully oblivious to developments going on in the art world.

That he resides in the pantheon of twentieth-century American art is certain; just where he resides, however, remains an open question—as technically accomplished as any academically trained painter, though he trained only in his father's studio; socially disengaged at a moment when fellow realists wrestled intensely with the issues of the day; a realist in the midst of abstraction. The exhibition answers the question by asserting

that Wyeth is singular, *sui generis*, and incomparable. That is surely Wyeth's own answer too.

There are other absences here beyond the things and people Wyeth stripped away in order to create individual works. The choices made for this show are remarkable for what has been left out. First and foremost, Helga barely makes an appearance in the galleries or in the catalogue. Wyeth has commented that this period in his life was tumultuous—one can only imagine what his wife, Betsy, felt about it all—and so those paintings, which made such a sensation at the time, have been edited out here.

Wyeth's wife, Betsy, makes a fleeting and carefully choreographed appearance in the exhibition. It is well-known that Wyeth's career and his business affairs have been diligently and skillfully managed by Betsy. In the last gallery of the show in Philadelphia, however, the wall text tells us that Betsy has shaped Wyeth's art in more direct ways as well. She encouraged him to pursue the muted palettes and haunting subjects that have become his trademark. She, apparently, told Wyeth to give up watercolor in favor of tempera as his medium and to heighten, rather than explain, the narrative ambiguities in his compositions. Christopher Crosman examines "Betsy's World" in the last essay for the catalogue. Though the essay is too fawning, Crosman has addressed a fascinating and potentially rich subject, describing her role as household manager, curator, business manager, title-giver, and model. But even he must acknowledge that "the pervasiveness of her presence in his art is strongly sensed, yet remains hidden" (p. 107). Another Wyeth sleight of hand. Something glimpsed at the very end of the exhibition and then concealed again. Did Wyeth become Wyeth, or did Betsy create him? Getting to the last room of the show, and reading the wall text, I had the urge to run back to the beginning and start all over.

Most remarkable of all, at least in my view, is the absence of the twentieth century in Wyeth's work. In this show, there are exactly two images that admit to anything of the modern world: *Renfield*, painted in 1999, and *Otherworld*, painted in 2002. The first puts us inside a spare interior looking out on the traffic of Route 1; in the second we are inside a plush, private jet looking down on Betsy Wyeth as she looks out the portal windows. Out one we see Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania; out the other we see the Wyeth home in Maine. With this painting Wyeth is demonstrating that he very much lives in the world of today—this is the

jet the Wyeths use to get back and forth between Pennsylvania and Maine—but seeing both from the air is an easy gimmick and makes this among Wyeth's least effective paintings.

It is the absence of the modern world, or rather Wyeth's choice to ignore it, that gives his work a quality which is simultaneously timeless and timebound. While the characters we see in Wyeth's paintings change over time—indeed, we can watch some of them die and disappear altogether—the settings do not. The buildings that interest Wyeth all date from the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, and the landscapes that surround them were shaped then too. The interiors of these buildings have also been frozen in some indeterminate pretechnological past: no telephones, dishwashers, or flatscreen TVs anywhere to be seen.

Wyeth's accomplishment has been to create two parallel histories of two places—Chadds Ford and Maine—populated by characters we get to know almost intimately as we watch the paintings progress. Like William Faulkner's Mississippi, Wyeth's world is at once real and entirely of his own making. And the fact that this world exists in some suspended animation before the Second World War or so lends a certain poignancy to many of these paintings.

The absence of the modern world in these pictures, then, serves as a reminder of what these places once looked and felt like. The paintings record a kind of loss. Chadds Ford, after all, and the agricultural landscapes of the Brandywine Valley have largely disappeared under an asphalt tide of sprawl, and Rockport, Maine, is now a major tourist destination for summer vacationers.

Wyeth has witnessed these changes to the places he loves so well; he is perfectly well aware of them. But he has not admitted them to the archive of his memories. The relationship between history and memory is a tricky, complicated, and fluid one, as many historians have noted. Wyeth seems to have erected a wall between them in his work. In this sense, the carefully contrived anachronism of so much of Wyeth's work constitutes a kind of history painting, or rather antihistory painting. In the end, Wyeth's work joins those of artists who have negotiated the rugged terrain between past and present, between memory and history, between fact and truth.