

Contemplating Wyeth

6F - Jackson Hole News&Guide, Wednesday, September 7, 20

Has time tempered the controversy of Andrew Wyeth and his perspective?

By Richard Anderson

To the 21st-century eyes taking in the works by Andrew Wyeth at the Art Association, it is difficult to comprehend how the painter could have been considered “controversial” in his day.

What’s so controversial, after all, about rural landscapes, weather-beaten farm buildings or inscrutable Yankee faces? Many of the Pennsylvania-born artist’s subjects are so humbly aloof, they almost ask to be passed over. What arrests are the emotions roiling just beneath the surface and the classical sense of composition, perspective and light as refined as any Vermeer.

But it was exactly that classical brand of realism that critics of the time reacted to. Since the turn of the 20th century, art had been responding to the rapid changes of the modern age — the mechanization of everyday life, the dehumanization of the individual, the escalating horrors of two world wars. The times demanded that serious artists plumb the darkest corners of the human condition and psyche, and to do so required that they break with long-held conceptions of representation and beauty.

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By the time Wyeth was in ascendance — in the 1940s and into the ’60s — much of representational art was dismissed as “illustration,” and generally anything that smacked of tradition was derided as hackneyed, out of step with the reality of the times, decadent. In the age of Gorky, Pollack, Bacon, Rothko, De Kooning and their abstract expressionist ilk, a painter like Wyeth was an anachronism and had no place in the New York gallery scene.

The writer Robert Hughes — who in the 1970s and ’80s enjoyed a high profile as art critic for Time magazine — rarely missed a chance to dump on Wyeth or on the hordes of “midcult” appreciators who worshipped Wyeth and his “dream of vanishing moral rectitude” over others Hughes deemed more deserving of adulation, most notably “the other Andy,” Warhol. (He may have softened in his criticism, according to Peter Marcelle, who with Jackson native Camille Obering, co-curated the Art Association’s Wyeth show, and who was able to convince Hughes to write the forward to the catalog of a larger Wyeth exhibit staged this fall in Palm Springs, Calif.)

Michael Kimmelman, writing in The New York Times on the occasion of Wyeth’s death, at the age of 91, in January 2006, rehashed the squabble succinctly: “Because of his popularity, a bad sign to many art world insiders, Wyeth came to represent middle-class values and ideals that modernism claimed to reject, so that arguments about his work extended beyond painting to societal splits along class, geographical and educational lines. One art historian, in response to a 1977 survey in Art News magazine about the most underrated and overrated artists of the century, nominated Wyeth for both categories.”

Jackson Hole — with its galleries full of regional, ren-



Andrew Wyeth “Sundown” watercolor on paper

representational art — might be exactly the mid-culture audience Hughes was so clearly frustrated with when it came to Wyeth’s popularity. It also seems like a great place to revisit the “controversy” through a small sample of works by Wyeth — with a few paintings by his father, N.C. Wyeth, and two by his son, Jamie Wyeth — which hangs through Sept. 30 at the ArtSpace Main Gallery in the Center for the Arts.

As soon as they enter the gallery, anyone slightly familiar with Andrew Wyeth will recognize his style in the all-subsuming nature, the sparse Yankee economy, the whistful solitude. Those elements are apparent even in his pencil sketches.

But close inspection reveals surprises. The first shock is how loose and free Wyeth could be, at least when it came to watercolor. Consider “Fording Place,” a farm across a stream, slightly obscured by branches in the foreground.



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Paintings and sketches by Andrew Wyeth are on exhibit in the Art Association's ArtSpace Main Gallery through Sept. 30.

"Big Mac," a busy work of an apple in the crook of a tree, or "Betsy," which sneaks up on a woman sitting alone on a bench swing. In all of these paintings, the abstract strokes and speckles and lines resolve into a clear and fully composed image in a way that is nothing less than magical. And the power and expression of many of those strokes and speckles and lines is undeniable.

Abstraction. Expressionism. Probably, Wyeth was better tuned to the artistic vibes of his time than some give him credit. What's more, he seemed to get more in tune as the years passed. "Marshall Point Light," from 1946, a Maine lighthouse on a craggy shore with winds crashing and wind gusting, is a pretty conventional painting. And "Dogwood at Valley Forge," completed in 1941, is, frankly, fussy and hollow. But the watercolors from the 1960s on have wildness in them, even madness.

Marcelle described how Wyeth would wander the woods of Chadds Ford, Pa., or the heath of Cushing, Maine, stalking the sublime, dowsing for some Thoreauvian truth, lost in his own visions of the world. Then, chancing upon something that resonated with him, he'd rush to commit it to paper in a frenzy of creation. These watercolors — "Fording Place," especially — exemplify what the artist is all about, Marcelle said: design and abstraction, spontaneity and refined composition. "It's not about subject," he said, "it's about emotion."

With just 21 images to take in and ponder, the Art Association manages to pique interest, whet appetites and suggest how much more of Wyeth's world there is to explore. It's an appropriately grand and ambitious show for the nonprofit to present during Fall Arts Festival, and it should attract a crowd for the Sept. 9 Palates & Palettes Gallery Walk.

But be sure to go back for more after the mobs have gone away and spend some time with this small sampling from America's most overrated and most underrated artist.