

## Are we ready to admit yet that Andrew Wyeth was great?

The divisive artist's connection to Kuerner Farm, the subject of a traveling show in North Carolina, was haunted by death.

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Review by [Sebastian Smee](#)

It's often taken for granted that artistic advances happen in cities. By and large, they do. And yet some great 20th-century American art has been made by artists who lived on farms — among them [Georgia O'Keeffe](#), [Sally Mann](#) and [Andrew Wyeth](#).

When art made on farms comes to their attention, city-based critics and curators often don't know quite what to say about it. They have heard about farms, perhaps. They may even have visited a few. But they haven't experienced the calloused feet and filthy fingernails of a feral childhood. They haven't shared space with animals that saunter or stand about, flicking their tails, in muddy fields. And they haven't been present when those animals bellow, copulate, get sick and defecate, only to be slaughtered, skinned, drained of blood, cooked and eaten.

Unsurprisingly, the work made by artists who have lived on farms is often connected to what happens on those farms. It's connected not just to the land, the animals and the seasons, but also to the subtle, often fraught relationships among the people who live there.

In late March, as clouds of pollen swirled through the South, I drove to the Reynolda House Museum of American Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to see "Andrew Wyeth at Kuerner Farm: The Eye of the Earth." It's a small yet riveting show that will travel to the Brandywine Museum of Art in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, and then the Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens in Jacksonville, Florida.

The show displays just a few dozen of the nearly 1,000 works depicting Kuerner Farm made by Wyeth over more than half a century. The majority are watercolors, a medium Wyeth employed with great distinction. But there are also several paintings in egg tempera, the medium he (along with several other mid-century American artists, including Jacob Lawrence, George Tooker and Paul Cadmus) preferred to oil paint.

Among the paintings is a portrait that's almost as central to Wyeth's oeuvre as "[Christina's World](#)" (a product of his long engagement with a farm in Maine). It portrays Karl Kuerner, the grim-faced, blue-eyed immigrant who had fought in the German army during World War I.

It's not a portrait I love: It feels at once too fixated on obtaining a perfect likeness and, in its lighting and symbolism (the hook for drying sausages, the forking crack in the ceiling like lightning), too histrionic. Self-dramatization was Wyeth's weakness. But "Karl" has a resonance that's amplified in this exhibition by the company it keeps.

Wyeth remains a divisive figure. A figurative, farm-dwelling artist with family pedigree and old-school, virtuosic technique, his career coincided with a succession of avant-garde movements whose urban advocates wanted nothing to do with him, or for that matter with anything figurative. It was inevitable that he would be adopted by reactionary people for largely nostalgic reasons.

But the slow collapse of the postwar avant-garde's underlying tenets (no figuration! no storytelling! no obvious skill!) has allowed many to admit that, in his better moments, Wyeth was onto something specific and powerful. Once you are clear about what that was, I find it tends to overwhelm most reservations.

What he was onto, in short, was mortality. On farms, death is not a distant, theoretical prospect. It is immanent. The Kuerner Farm, a short walk from Wyeth's studio in Chadds Ford, was not only soaked in mortality, but permeated by a sense of life haunted and held in abeyance.

Wyeth's father, the great illustrator N.C. Wyeth, had moved to the area in the first years of the 20th century. From a young age, Andrew, who revered his father as "a genius," was attracted to the adjacent farm, which had at its heart a sturdy, foursquare farmhouse built by a Quaker in 1814.

"I didn't go to that farm because it was bucolic," Wyeth explained. What appealed to him was its abstract, almost military quality, and the way "everything is made to be useful."

Wyeth's first depictions of the farm, when he was still a teenager, were sunny and somewhat saccharine. But he quickly picked up on its darker currents, and the mood of his works shifted accordingly.

Then, on Oct. 19, 1945, his father and Andrew's nephew were killed when a freight train plowed into their car on the edge of Kuerner Farm, dragging the vehicle 143 feet and flipping it several times.

"His death shook me to my foundation," Wyeth told the writer Richard Meryman. It also deepened his interest in Kuerner Farm, and in Karl Kuerner especially.

"Karl and my father looked strangely alike," Wyeth told Meryman. Both men, who shared a Germanic background, inspired fear in Andrew. As it dawned on him that he had never painted his father ("Why the hell didn't I ask him?"), he settled on Karl Kuerner as a kind of substitute.

During the painting of "Karl," he told Meryman (and here you can feel his weakness for melodrama kicking in), "I kept thinking about that train whistle blowing and blowing" — a herald, he said, of his father's death. One day, driving in his own car, distracted by the portrait, he was almost hit by a train near the same spot where his father was killed. "In the last second I jammed on the brakes and the train went firing by me."

Whatever we choose to make of this (it's well established that Wyeth had a penchant for fabrication), we can accept, I think, that his father's violent death, the painting of Kuerner that followed, and another painting (not in the show) called "Winter," showing the local boy who discovered the accident running down the hill to the awful scene, together kicked off a major transition in his work.

Just as interesting to Wyeth as Karl Kuerner was Karl's wife, Anna. Lonely, lacking fluency in English, and possibly suffering from mental illness, Anna wore a cap or kerchief tied around her head to alleviate terrible headaches. According to Betsy Wyeth, Andrew's wife and later archivist, Anna was seen arguing with and threatening the portrait of Karl. An indelible image.

Into this tension came Helga Testorf.

Testorf was a married German-born woman employed by the Kuerners to take care of Karl. Over 15 years, Wyeth drew or painted her almost 300 times, often nude, all the while keeping it secret (or so it was maintained) from everyone, including their spouses. The show includes Wyeth's first drawing of Helga, in 1971 — a prim image in profile, early Renaissance style.

The voyeuristic frisson all this generated made the Helga pictures a global sensation when they were made public in 1986.

The Wyeths' suggestion that they had never previously been displayed, and the implication that artist and model had had an affair, was promptly deflated when my predecessor, Washington Post art critic Paul Richard, revealed that several of the Helga pictures had already been prominently displayed and that Betsy James Wyeth was by no means in the dark about them.

The manipulation of publicity, combined with the crassness of the headline-grabbing sales it generated, all contributed to the critical backlash against Wyeth. Peter Schjeldahl described the Helga pictures as "formulaic stuff not very effective even as illustrational 'realism'" and criticized their "deadly dry" surfaces. (Criticizing tempera for looking dry seems unfair — like criticizing De Kooning's work for looking unctuous — but the point is taken.)

"The taste for Wyeth's visually and emotionally starved art," said Schjeldahl, "suggests a self-enjoying puritanical rectitude, the flip side of American consumer gluttony."

Wyeth deliberately favored a parched look, just as he resisted bright colors. He habitually removed detail from his paintings (windows might go missing, so might people) and often left large parts of the paper blank where he wanted white.

In the wake of the collision that killed his father, he drilled down into the essential character of Kuerner Farm. "I was fascinated by the place and all of its associations," he said, "the strange ivory white ... of the plastered wall and how the steps curve up to the attic, and the cool air that comes out of that door when you open it. Every section of that house is full of strange feelings to me."

The resulting images are at once quotidian and poetically charged, silently suggestive of mortality and loss. His late experiments with magic realism, represented here by “Spring,” which shows Kuerner’s body half-shrouded in a patch of spring snow, were unsuccessful.

But everyone can acknowledge that Wyeth had an uncanny ability to capture textures. As if stimulated by the methods of abstract expressionism, he made his processes unusually transparent. You can see how he flicked white paint onto the image to create snow or used drips or a loose swishing of his brush to build texture into a dun-colored wall.

His ability to capture the forking branches of bare winter trees or the blurred, almost furry appearance they take on from a distance, the glint of fence wire, shadows cast by sagging fir branches, the grain of a dry wooden log or the iridescent shine of wet grass excites automatic admiration.

Generally, the simpler Wyeth’s art gets, the more emotionally resonant it is. His drive toward distillation dovetailed with various strains in American culture, some long-standing (the Quakers and Shakers), others more contemporary (mid-century modern design, precisionism, the drastically reduced abstraction of Clyfford Still, Agnes Martin, and Franz Kline and the minimalism of Donald Judd and Carl Andre).

So I don’t see Wyeth’s love of distillation as pandering to “puritanical rectitude.” I see it as an aesthetic response to mortality — and to lived experience of farms.

***Andrew Wyeth at Kuerner Farm: The Eye of the Earth*** through May 25 at the Reynolda House Museum in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, before traveling to the Brandywine Museum of Art in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, and the Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens in Jacksonville, Florida.

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