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Life in the Brandywine Valley

Jamie Wyeth

SIX DECADES OF ART


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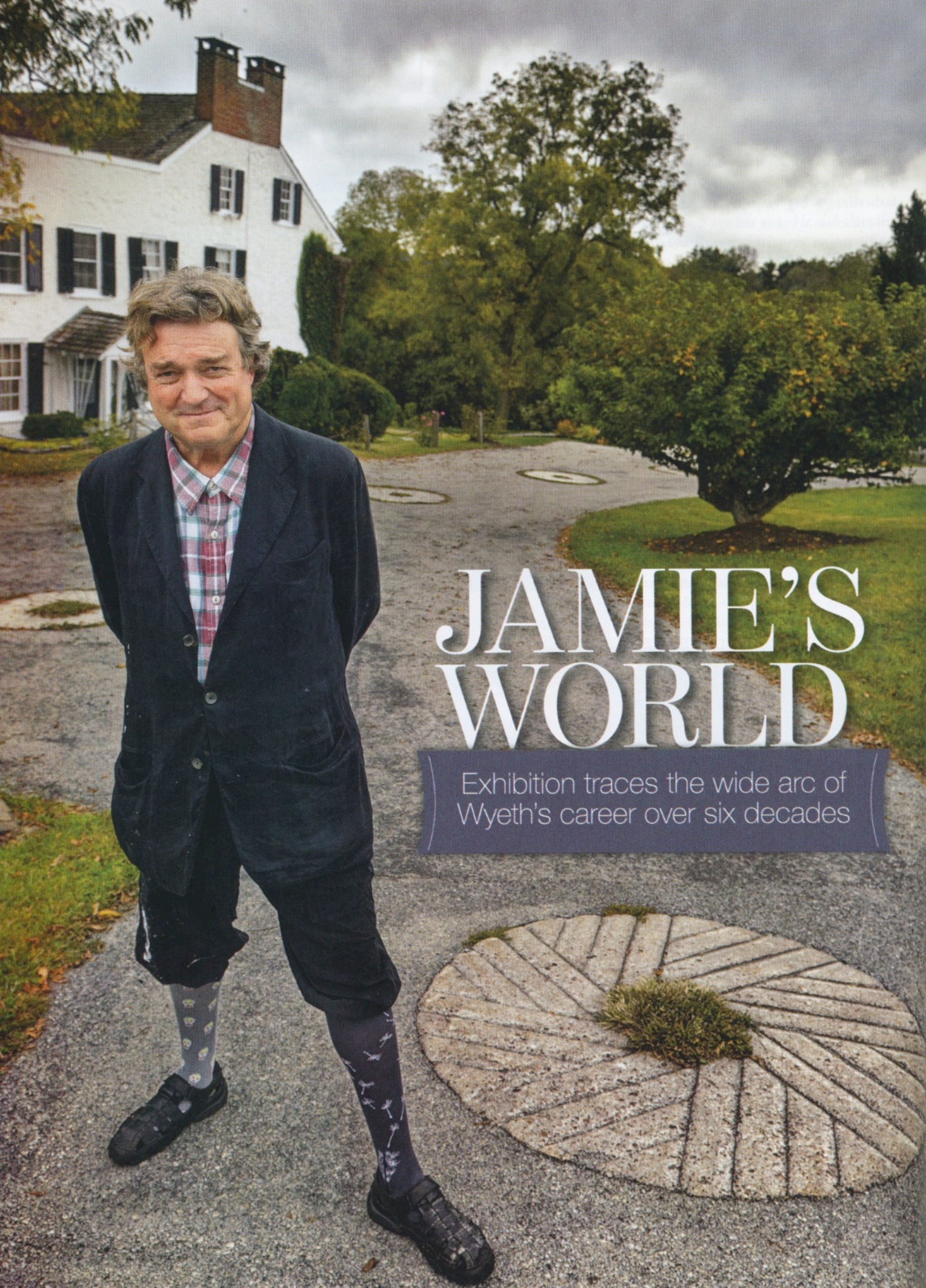
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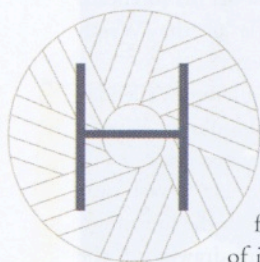
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JAMIE'S WORLD

Exhibition traces the wide arc of
Wyeth's career over six decades

“I look at myself as just a recorder,” Wyeth says. “I just want to record things that interest me in life.”



He lives his life and paints his pictures from the vantage point of isolated islands.

James Browning Wyeth's connection to Monhegan Island—10 nautical miles off the mid-Maine coast—dates to the summers of the late 1950s when he first vacationed there with his father Andrew. Inspired by the rocky landscape, rugged cliffs and dramatic ocean vistas, he eventually purchased the cottage and studio of famed artist Rockwell Kent in 1968. Wyeth also owns a more isolated cottage and studio on Southern Island just off the coast of the picturesque village of Tenants Harbor.

Point Lookout Farm near Chadds Ford is yet another symbolic Wyeth island. It is named for the rocky ridge of land that crosses what was once a major Indian trail and commands a sweeping view of the tumbling Brandywine River below. An isolated property, Point Lookout has been a primary location for the artist's portraits of an odd and magical mix of animals that encompass so much of Wyeth's personality, humor, wit, and sense of wonder.

Wyeth's worlds will all be celebrated in *Jamie Wyeth*, the first retrospective devoted to his career, at the Brandywine Museum of Art—on display from January 17 through April 5. The traveling exhibition will present a full range of work, consisting of 111 paintings, works on paper, illustrations, and mixed media assemblages (collages of three-dimensional items). The artist's works provide an in-depth examination of his stylistic evolution while showcasing the diversity of an artistic output now in its sixth decade.



Finished works will be shown alongside the preparatory drawings and studies. They trace the wide arc of the artist's development from his childhood drawings at age three through various recurring themes inspired by the people, places, and objects that Wyeth knows so well.

“Jamie's work has often struck me as a living embodiment of Howard Pyle's motto—one should paint what one knows,” says Amanda C. Burdan, curator of the exhibition. “When you combine the deep knowledge of something or someone with technical ability the result is a painting that ‘speaks’ with authority. The period of really getting to know a subject is long and once you ‘know’ it, I think it tends to stick with you.”

“I look at myself as just a recorder,” Wyeth says. “I just want to record things that interest me in life.”

Visitors to the show will be exhilarated by the striking portraits. There is a posthumous one of John F. Kennedy caught in a private moment of thought that stirred up controversy and sparked a major story in *Look Magazine*. Another work, *Portrait of Shorty*,

PORTRAIT OF
JOHN F. KENNEDY
JAMIE WYETH
1967
OIL ON CANVAS
PARTIAL GIFT OF PHYLLIS
AND JAMIE WYETH AND
PARTIAL PURCHASE.
© JAMIE WYETH.
COURTESY, MUSEUM OF
FINE ARTS, BOSTON

BY TERRY CONWAY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM GRAHAM



PROFILE WITH BLACK WASH
(STUDY #23)
JAMIE WYETH (b. 1946)
1977
PENCIL, GOUACHE, AND
WATERCOLOR ON
TONED RAG BOARD
COLLECTION OF PHILIP
DeNORMANDIE.
© JAMIE WYETH.
COURTESY, MUSEUM OF
FINE ARTS, BOSTON

is a vivid oil painted at the remarkable age of 17. Other highlights are portraits of the legendary Russian dancer Rudolf Nureyev, pop culture icon Andy Warhol, Jamie's wife Phyllis' carriage driving pictures, their yellow Labrador, Kleberg, and a massive pig named Den-Den.

Combined mediums is Wyeth's term for the distinctive technique he brings to many of his compositions. It includes watercolor, wash, varnish, charcoal, ink, pastel, tempera, and even day glow paint. The works favor the richness and exuberance of oil over his father Andrew's sober tempera painting.

"I use everything—dirt, sticks, use my fingers more than a paintbrush," Wyeth explains. "I work with [my father's] paint maker who adds honey to the paint. The honey is clear and remains pliable forever. You shouldn't be restricted by anything."

Jamie is the third generation of the "first family of American art." Patriarch N.C. Wyeth won acclaim for his stirring, dramatic visions that have captured the imaginations of storybook readers for more than a century. Andrew Wyeth was America's most famous painter at the time of his death in 2009. Jamie's aunt Carolyn was a well-known painter as were aunts Henriette and Ann, and their husbands

Peter Heard and John McCoy.

At the *Jamie Wyeth* press opening at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Wyeth turned up nattily attired in a waistcoat and knickers. With his square jaw and a shock of thick brown hair swept off his forehead, Jamie carries the mantle of the Wyeth legacy in an easy-going way.

"We were seen as the Flying Wallendas of paint," the youthful-looking Wyeth, now 68, says of the family business.

Leaving school at age 11, Wyeth was home-schooled by a tutor in the mornings. His afternoons were spent drawing in the bucolic landscape while searching out a menagerie of animals that were seemingly everywhere. His only art instruction came from his sharp-eyed Aunt Carolyn, and later from his father.

Jamie and two young pals regularly visited N.C.'s studio where N.C. had created illustrations for the books *Treasure Island* and *Last of the Mohicans*. The kids dressed up in N.C.'s costume collection of pirates, knights, and Robin Hood's merry archers and let their imaginations run wild.

All of 17, Wyeth received his first formal commission to paint pediatric cardiologist Helen Taussig. Three years later he staged a one-man show at the Knoedler Gallery, perhaps the most distinguished New York gallery. It was 1966. In the exhibition catalogue the esteemed art critic and ballet devotee Lincoln Kirstein proclaimed Wyeth the "finest American portrait painter since the





death of John Singer Sargent.”

The early 1970s saw Wyeth drawing cadavers in the New York City morgue and concurrently working at Andy Warhol’s New York studio, The Factory. The two artists famously exchanged portraits. Wyeth’s was an unflattering one of Warhol with a pimply face, clutching a small dog. Warhol loved it.

The show also features five paintings and sketches of the great ballet star Rudolf

Nureyev from an extended portrait series in New York in the mid-1970s.

“Hell, working with him was very difficult,” Wyeth recalls. “The world was his village. He micro-managed everything. He was so serious about his toes. Ten years after his death I went back and created some of my most interesting works.”

Wyeth’s curiosity for the art, fashion and celebrities of New York was short-lived. He chose to return to the Wyeth family

BERG
JAMIE WYETH (B. 1946)
2012
WATERCOLOR, GESSO,
AND ENAMEL ON
JOINED RAG BOARDS
PRIVATE COLLECTION.
© JAMIE WYETH.
COURTESY, MUSEUM OF
FINE ARTS, BOSTON

LEFT TO RIGHT:
 PORTRAIT OF JAMIE WYETH
 ANDY WARHOL
 (AMERICAN, 1928–1987)
 1976
 OIL ON CANVAS
 PHYLLIS AND
 JAMIE WYETH COLLECTION
 © 2014 THE ANDY WARHOL
 FOUNDATION FOR THE
 VISUAL ARTS, INC. /
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 (ARS), NEW YORK
 COURTESY, MUSEUM OF
 FINE ARTS, BOSTON

PORTRAIT OF ANDY WARHOL
 JAMIE WYETH (B. 1946)
 1976
 OIL ON GESSOED PANEL
 ON LOAN FROM THE
 PERMANENT COLLECTION OF
 CHEEKWOOD BOTANICAL
 GARDEN AND MUSEUM OF
 AMERICAN ART.
 © JAMIE WYETH.
 COURTESY, MUSEUM OF
 FINE ARTS, BOSTON

stomping grounds of the Brandywine Valley and coastal Maine to paint. His subjects there are more typical of the Wyeth tradition—animals, farm objects, Maine island life, and intriguing people and structures. He's been there ever since.

Wyeth is clearly delighted telling the stories behind his paintings, many of which evoke an eerie, unsettling quality. "I think I've always had the macabre element, like the leering head of a jack-o-lantern," Wyeth says. "I value it. Things that are disturbing are very much appealing to me. My hope is the viewer gets it too."

His paintings of Maine are primarily inspired by life on Monhegan Island where both his father and grandfather lived and worked. Fifteen miles from Monhegan lies Southern Island—a vivid splash of green in the granite gray blue waters. A bank of wild roses leads the way to another Wyeth cottage set in the shadow of a lighthouse. As visitors approach from the mainland, a

playful Wyeth often fires off a blast from one of the antique cannons on the lawn.

"When the wind is blowing toward Tenants Harbor, I'm sure those folks are yelling, 'there goes that crazy artist again,'" says Wyeth with a laugh.

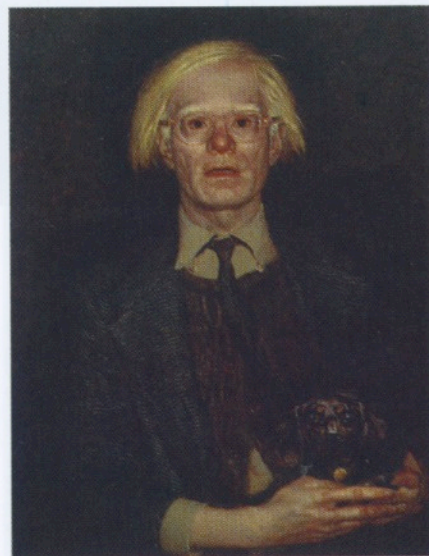
He prefers the winters, not the height of summer, when the island is full of palette-toting painters who mostly want to capture nature scenes. It's the layers beneath the surface and the island's dark moods that

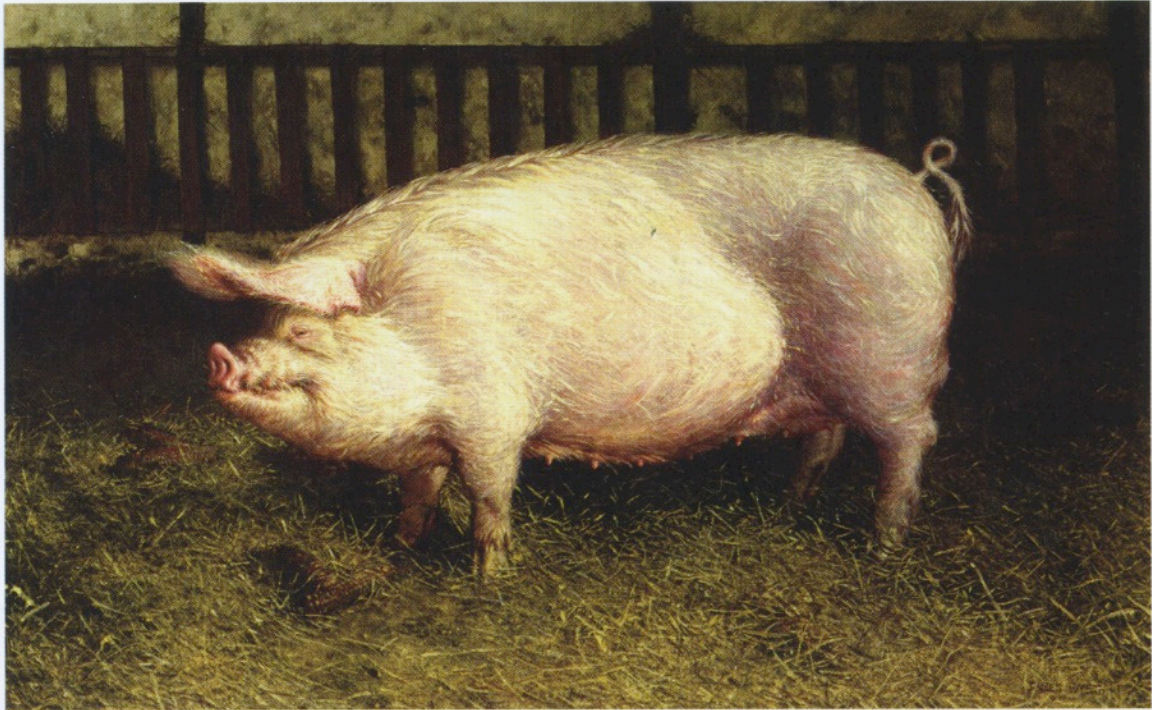
"They can be moody, so I play slow dance music when I'm sketching or painting a pig."

intrigue the artist.

"The ocean is so enormous, such a force," Wyeth observes. "It changes every day. I'm up here in the winter, and honestly, I almost prefer those times. It's so stark and the storms roll through and the seas and winds. It's fantastic."

Wyeth evokes those battles of nature in the series, *The Seven Deadly Sins*. "One





night I awoke from a dream and did these drawings, almost hieroglyphics,” Wyeth remembers. “In the morning my bed was scattered with them. The drawings kept me on the right trail. I just needed to piece it all together.

One of the artist’s pet peeves over the years is that seagulls have been portrayed in Maine art to look like white doves.

“Seagulls are nasty birds, filled with their own jealousies and rivalries,” Wyeth notes. “Most of these behaviors I’ve seen these gulls act out, so it wasn’t a stretch for me at all. I love their independence, that’s what makes them nasty. I love nasty things, and evil sides. So gulls are right up my alley.”

Those untamed qualities of Maine come across vividly in *Orca Bates* (1990), a boy who lived on Manana, an island just off Monhegan. Wyeth posed the boy nude with wet hair and sitting at attention on the hard edge of a massive seaman’s chest.

“He was a wild child, his teacher told me he would jump out of the schoolhouse

window,” Wyeth says. “He just fascinated me, so I befriended him and did this series of paintings charting his journey from childhood through adolescence. He was sort of androgynous—boy, girl, and animal.”

Wyeth’s other residence is Point Lookout in the Brandywine Valley. He moved into the cozy farmhouse (circa 1680) in the late 1960s after his marriage to du Pont heiress Phyllis Mills. The farm’s menagerie of animals has grown over the years to include chickens, geese, goats, pigs, cattle, horses, and wild birds. Phyllis’ Union Rags, the 2012 Belmont Stakes winner, galloped in a pasture just outside Jamie’s studio as a very young colt.

“I stay away from the cuteness, the Farmer in the Dell thing,” Wyeth explains. “There is a definite life span on a farm. It’s reality. I try to capture the animal on the move, not getting the animal frozen. I really do get a sense of who the animal is.”

Wyeth first took a shine to pigs when a neighbor’s pig ransacked his outdoor

PORTRAIT OF PIG

1970

OIL ON CANVAS

© JAMIE WYETH (B. 1946)

COLLECTION BRANDYWINE
RIVER MUSEUM OF ART.

GIFT OF MRS. ANDREW
WYETH, 1984

84-18

CONTINUED ON PAGE 62



KLEBERG
 JAMIE WYETH (B. 1946)
 1984
 OIL ON CANVAS
 TERRA FOUNDATION FOR
 AMERICAN ART
 DANIEL J. TERRA
 COLLECTION, 1992-184.
 © JAMIE WYETH.
 COURTESY, MUSEUM OF
 FINE ARTS, BOSTON

painting station. Snorting wildly, Den-Den appeared at a corner of the barn, her snout plastered with cerulean blue, cadmium orange and lemon yellow. She had swallowed 22 tubes of oil paint.

"The next morning when I arrived I was expecting to find a corpse," recalls Wyeth, laughing heartily. "She was perfectly fine, snorting away, and of course, all these rainbow-color droppings were everywhere. The farmer was intent on sending her to the butcher. I thought, I can't have that. By consuming and surviving all those tubes of my paint, she had endeared herself to me. So I took her to our farm at Point Lookout." Den-Den became the subject of his life-size *Portrait of Pig*.

"They are the most misunderstood creatures," the artist insists. "Pigs are much maligned. The problem is, what do you do with a pig? You can't ride it. You get something that massive looking at you, making eye contact. They can be moody, so I play slow dance music when I'm sketching or painting a pig."

One of Wyeth's most prized paintings is *Kleberg, Partly Cloudy*. Jamie and Phyllis' late yellow Labrador dog is portrayed with one of the beehives that for a period were scattered all over Point Lookout. One day in the 1980s Kleberg wandered too close to the Wyeth easel. Jamie painted a black circle around the dog's left eye at age two—a la Pete the Pup of the old television comedy *Our Gang*.

"I discovered that moustache dye was a better medium than paint since it lasted about a month, so every month we would have to touch up his circle for the rest of his life," Wyeth notes.

Kleberg is buried in a cemetery on a hill at Point Lookout.

"The animals have to be painted by me to get in there," Wyeth says with a devilish grin. "I think there are around 20 now. It's getting pretty crowded." □



**BRANDYWINE
 CONSERVANCY**

**The Brandywine River
 Museum of Art**

Presents the First Major
**RETROSPECTIVE OF THE
 ART OF JAMIE WYETH**

*January 17, 2014 –
 April 5, 2015*

Featuring 109 works, *Jamie Wyeth* examines six decades of the artist's career and charts the evolution of his creative process from his earliest childhood drawings through recurring themes inspired by the people, places and objects that populate his world.

**Sommerville
 Manning Gallery**

JAMIE WYETH EXHIBIT

*January 16, 2014 –
 March 7, 2015*

Somerville Manning Gallery will host a solo exhibition of works by Jamie Wyeth concurrent with the artist's retrospective on view at the Brandywine River Museum. Somerville Manning's exhibition of original paintings by Wyeth, available for acquisition, will give collectors the opportunity to bring a part of the retrospective into their own collections. The gallery's exhibition, offering classic examples of the artist's work, will feature works spanning Wyeth's career, from the 1970s through today.