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STRANGER THINGS

A new exhibition at Brandywine Museum of Art shows Jamie Wyeth to be a master of the unsettled mood.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JIM GRAHAM

Photos of the artist taken by Graham at Wyeth's Point Lookout farm near Chadds Ford.



“I constantly see Jamie’s paintings as pivotal scenes of film—the moment the suspect is revealed, the moment of most danger, establishing shots where you’re about to walk into this house.”

—Brandywine Museum of Art’s Amanda Burdan





Highlights from the new exhibit *Unsettled* (from left): "Bones of a Whale," "Sheep Eyes," "A Midsummer Night's Dusk" and "Berg."



ARTWORK COURTESY OF BRANDYWINE MUSEUM OF ART

Somehow just below the surface of the natural world lies the supernatural—Amanda Burdan sees it in the work of Jamie Wyeth. The senior curator at Brandywine Museum of Art, Burdan is heading up Wyeth's potent new show, *Unsettled*, which opens March 16 and runs through June 9 at the museum. The exhibition traces the persistent string of intriguing, often disconcerting imagery over Wyeth's career.

"The show's name was mine," says Burdan. "It wasn't as if he had a weird phase in the early '60s or '70s, and that's where it all is. His work has been a little bit strange throughout his career. There's a short drive between obsession and unsettling—when you realize something has become obsessive. There's maybe some psychology to that." It's what compelled Burdan to ponder some darker backstory to the celebrated artist's work. "To me, it parallels things that go on in American popular culture—like Stephen King novels, the popularity of *Stranger Things*, horror movies, police procedurals and forensic shows—that strangeness that looking at a Jamie Wyeth painting can give you," she says. "The feeling that you're being surveilled."

Without a doubt, Wyeth's work is quite different from that of his father, Andrew, and grandfather, N.C. "His masterful use of combined media, the vigorous gestures of his brush textures, and an almost acidic color palette clearly distinguish his work from that of his notable forebearers," says Thomas Padon, the Brandywine Museum of Art's James H. Duff director.

Wyeth prefers to paint in solitude at his studios in Maine and Chadds Ford. His parents purchased Southern Island, at the mouth of Tenants Harbor, in 1978, and Wyeth also owns Rockwell Kent's former cottage on Monhegan Island. His Brandywine Valley property is tucked away on its own sort of island—an isolated farm at the end of a long driveway. "When I was young, I always wanted to live on a boat—and an island is sort of a boat," Wyeth says. "Islands intrigue me. You can see the perimeters of your world. It's a microcosm."

Greenville's Somerville Manning Gallery is mounting its own the exhibition on the painter. *Jamie Wyeth: Mysterious Familiar* runs April 5 to June 1. "Jamie spends a lot of time out on Monhegan," says gallery owner Vickie Manning. "He can paint. He's alone. It's wild. It's crazy."



He loves the drama of weathering the many storms out on those islands.”

Wyeth himself adds, “There’s nothing there except the winds and the seas.”

All that time alone allows Wyeth to focus on things we might not see. “Jamie’s penetrating gaze sees into the electricity of life vibrating through his subjects, whether animate or inanimate,” Manning says.

Wyeth credits his Aunt Carolyn, daughter of N.C., as an early inspiration. “People see the name Wyeth, and they expect open fields and old barns,” he says. “But her work is intensely personal—very strong stuff. She really was a very peculiar person. When her father died, she sort of assumed him—she started wearing his clothes. That’s when I first knew her.”

Wyeth also talks of his affinity for his grandfather’s studio, describing it as a wonderland filled with uniforms, cutlasses, spyglasses and other things that appeared in N.C.’s illustrations for books like *Treasure Island*. “I’d walk up the hill to his studio and trudge down the hill to Daddy’s studio. He was working on ... grass and dead birds,” Wyeth

When asked about his painting “Carolyn Wyeth’s Irises” and the reappearance of these flowers in his other works, Wyeth is bluntly honest. “I steal a lot, and I’ve stolen from her a lot,” he says. “That’s why I’ve stayed with Carolyn’s irises — and I love her spruce trees.”

recalls. “Well, that didn’t interest me. As an 8-year-old kid, I wanted knights in armor.”

For her part, Burdan describes Carolyn Wyeth’s paintings as “off-kilter.” “Things tend to slide and slope; they aren’t quite the realism you’ve come to expect from a Wyeth family member,” she says. “When Jamie embraces that aspect, he always looks more like Carolyn.”

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The way Burdan sees it, that dimension is just under the surface of the natural world. “I constantly see Jamie’s paintings as pivotal scenes of film—the moment the suspect is revealed, the moment of most danger, establishing shots where you are about to walk into this house. By controlling our emotions, putting us on pins and needles, maintaining high tension, drama and trepidation in the paintings, Jamie maintains his hold upon you.”

To that end, Wyeth recalls something Stephen King told him after purchasing one of his paintings: “Jamie, you’re one of the scariest painters I know.”

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