Noah Becker's
WHITEHOT MAGAZINE
of contemporary art

MARCH 2020 - "THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

The Residue of History: Andrew Wyeth's Nostalgia for the Great Tradition by Donald Kuspit

Installation view, Andrew Wyeth, Five Decades, Forum Gallery, New York, NY

Andrew Wyeth
Five Decades
Forum Gallery (https://www.forumgallery.com), New York, NY

By DONALD KUSPIT March, 2020

We must reserve a little back-shop, all our own, entirely free, wherein to establish our true liberty and principle retreat and solitude.

- Montaigne

I did live my life forward, but sometimes I couldn't help thinking about the past, and it was rewarding. Nostalgia made me feel that my life had roots and continuity. It made me feel good about myself and my relationships. It provided a texture to my life and gave me strength to move forward.

- Dr. Constantine Sedikidis, Developer of the Southhampton Nostalgia Scale

The past is not dead. In fact, it's not even past.

- William Faulkner

Again and again we see solitary, isolated figures in Andrew Wyeth's works: the clothed and crippled Christina Olsen famously in *Christina's World*, 1948, the often infamously naked and sturdy Helga Testorf in many of the 247 works devoted to her Wyeth made between 1971-1985. A caregiver with nursing experience, Wyeth met her when she was caring for his terminally ill close friend Karl Kuerner. And solitary, isolated houses, among them those pictured in *Firewood (Study for Groundhog Day)*, 1959, *Lamplight*, 1975, *House On Stone's Point*, 1977, and *East Point Lighthouse*, 1991. A house is a symbol of the body, Freud tells us, and Olsen and Testorf are first and foremost bodies, whatever their social situations. The human being, alone yet holding her own, sick almost unto death like Christina yet determined to survive, sometimes seemingly invulnerable like Helga and Wyeth's stone houses yet marked by time, is the basic subject matter of Wyeth's work.

For Wyeth the house—the house on the hill towards which Christina crawls as though towards a heavenly home, a visionary mirage with the miraculous power to heal her body and save her soul—epitomizes the fundamental aloneness, helplessness, and hopefulness of human beings. And heroism in the face of adversity, for she holds her own in the empty space, in barren nature—endures despite her mortification. Wyeth admires her will to live despite her despair. Wyeth's figures epitomize the existential paradox: determined to be independent—to stand or fall alone—they are nonetheless dependent on others—a few friends--for survival. I think Wyeth paints them—they're all personal friends and neighbors, not anonymous studio models--to help them survive. It is a supportive act of lasting friendship, even an act of love--perhaps an overstatement of Wyeth's unconscious motivation for painting his insular figures, but his love of art becomes his love for them.

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Clearly he loves—desires--Helga, embraces her naked body by passionately painting it. Like Pygmalion, he has fallen in love with her image. Art, as is often the case, is substitute gratification for frustrated desire, even as the act of crafting a work of art indicates ego control of instinctive desire. Wyeth pursues Helga relentlessly the way Apollo pursued Daphne, and like Daphne she becomes a force of nature, as Wyeth's numerous images of her at home in nature suggest. I am arguing, perhaps absurdly, that Wyeth's analytic attention to his all too human subject matter was motivated by therapeutic concern, which is a form of love. Obsessed with Helga, he immortalizes her by depicting her repeatedly, as though to hold her fast so that she can never leave him, and to care for her as she cares for others. Representing her, he internalizes her, so that she becomes his muse, an inseparable and indispensable part of him, a reliably good object, to use psychoanalytic language, and as such has healing power, as good art has—

particularly a good representation of an object, whether human or non-human, a person or an aspect of nature or something man-made and useful, like a house or a boat.

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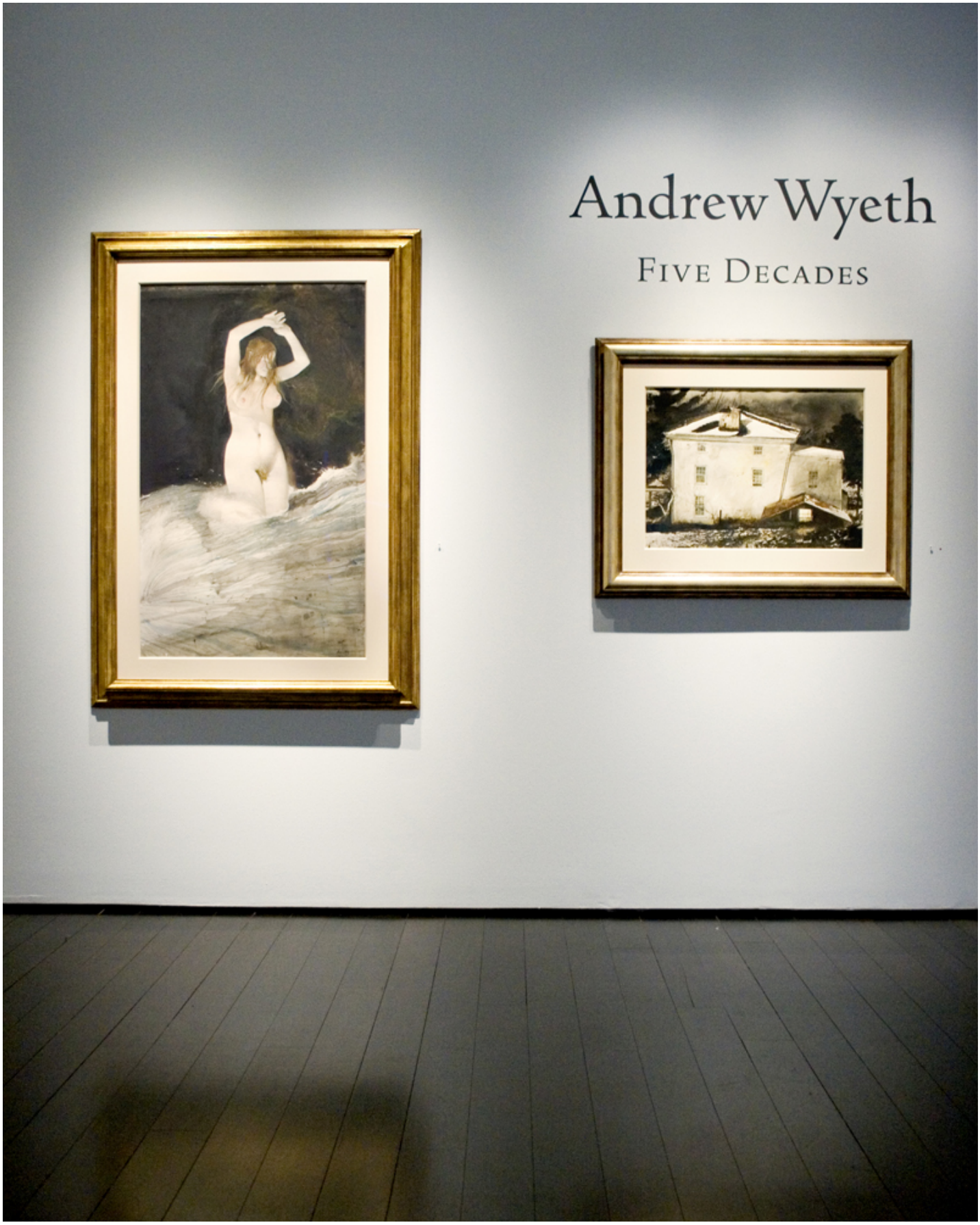
Marked by time yet holding their own as though timeless, Wyeth's aged yet sturdy houses, many of stone, like the lighthouse—what could be more isolated and helpful than a lighthouse, holding its own against the sea and guiding ships to safety—epitomize and symbolize Wyeth's confident, stoic, caring outlook. His is an existential art: an art about the human condition at its must fundamental--the difference between the life force which is Helga, a force of nature, as *In The Orchard*, 1974, one of a series of works depicting Helga at various seasons throughout the year, here as a naked wood nymph in Spring, as the spontaneous flourishing of green leaves on a seemingly dead black tree trunk suggests; and the death force evident in *Teel's Landing*, 1953, a bleak painting with an empty rowboat, a homage acknowledging the death of Rufus Teel, for whom the Maine island was

named. Teel died in 1935, and *Island Funeral*, 1939, a painting by N. C. Wyeth, Andrew Wyeth's father and only teacher, bears witness to the flotilla of ships that rounded the island in homage to Teel. Andrew's mournful painting is a homage to his father, who died in 1945, and Teel, as well as a memento mori to a place in the ocean near Cushing, Maine where the Wyeth family summered. The rowboat in Andrew's painting—in effect an open coffin--and the island in his father's painting —in effect a burial mound--are as isolated as Andrew's figures.

Nostalgia informs *Teel's Landing*—not only for the past when his father was alive, but for Old Master painting. Wyeth is a New Old Master, not mechanically modelling his art on that of the Old Masters, emulating their skill and technique, but rather, like them, "taking pleasure in slow, disinterested close-up communion with an object," to quote Paul Valéry, "drawing therefrom a degree of self-knowledge and a sense of collaboration between his intellect, his motive, his vision, and his hand, in relation to a *given* thing."(1) This attention to intimate detail, realizing it has a life of its own however much part of the life of the picture—an aspect of an organic whole that has an organic life of its own—is the core of traditional descriptive art. Wyeth is a traditionalist in more ways than one, for he idealizes in the act of memorializing a scene or figure, that is, finds the esthetic core in the commonplace thing, including the human figure.



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He is also a traditionalist in that he is attuned to nature. His early watercolors, for example *Cook's Wharf*, 1940, were strongly influenced by Winslow Homer's Maine watercolors. Like Homer, Wyeth preferred nature to the city, exiled himself in nature to escape the city, eschewed the urban environment not only because it was "unnatural" but because it was peculiarly inhumane, because people lost their individuality and subjectivity—their uniqueness, their particularity and identity and autonomy--in its crowds, the individuality and subjectivity that Wyeth's human beings clearly have. Their isolation—separateness--becomes a sign of their integrity and independence, a point made decisively in Wyeth's *Winter*, 1946. Like an isolated tree the singular figure holds its own in the dead of winter—and in the vast empty space in which it stands. The youth's shadow is as black and as old as death, but its eccentric expressive shape suggests that it is uncannily alive, as though with the coming of Spring it will fertilize the barren earth on which it falls, spontaneously turn green as grass, showing that Mother Nature is still alive, fresh with life—like Helga, another catalyst of creativity, another mothering figure.

Wyeth's traditionalist art prophesizes the end of modernist art at the moment of its American triumph. It was a rejection of modernism at its height—as noted, *Christina's World*, Wyeth's most famous work, was painted in 1948, when the so-called New York School of abstract expressionism was gaining prominence, coming into its seemingly revolutionary own, and crucially, when its advocate Clement Greenberg declared that painting the figure was passé, for all too human content was beside the point of pure art, concerned above all with the material medium, as Greenberg emphasized. He made the point transparently clear when he insisted that Rembrandt's masterful handling of material paint gave his pictures more meaning and value than their biblical subject matter—it is what made them important visual art rather than literature in visual disguise. For Greenberg, their spiritual purpose was beside the point of their aesthetic purposiveness, which is to sell the meaning of the aesthetic short. As Harold Rosenberg noted, the School of New York elaborated the original ideas of the School of Paris without fundamentally changing them, implying that the American modernists were the epigone of the French modernists, more broadly, European modernists—Kandinsky's abstract expressionism as well as

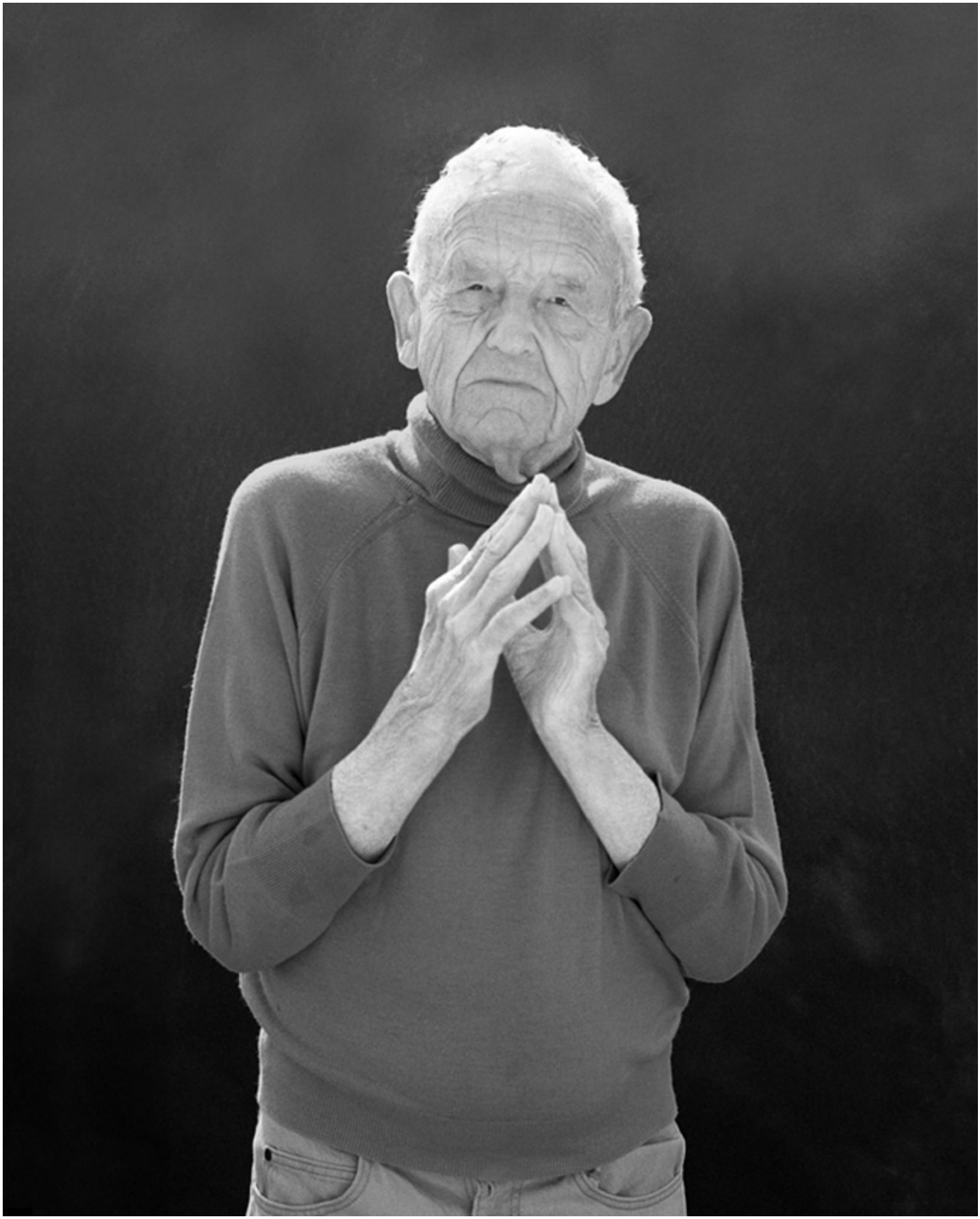
Picasso's Cubism. The epigone exaggerates his master's voice, as the saying goes, suggesting American modernism is a sort of exaggerated European modernism, and with that a peculiarly anti-climactic climax--a dead-end. What else are Pollock's all-over abstract paintings but the dead-end—reification—of Kandinsky's all-over abstract paintings?

Andrew Wyeth

Wyeth's works have their modernist aspects—spontaneous gestures, sometimes sweeping, always intimate, appear again and again, standing out of the subject matter they signify, and abstract forms make a visionary appearance, as they do in the snow on the roof of the house in *Lamplight*, 1975, the house itself a construction of geometrical forms, a square mounted by a triangle and flanked by a rectangle topped with a smaller rectangle—but Wyeth eschews pure art, especially at its formalist (formulaic?) extreme. As much as and more than many modernist painters, he is the master of his medium—he plays paint with the virtuoso brilliance of a Paganini. But he is also a modern humanist, painting figures in settings that make the fundamental aloneness of human beings in a world without God, as Nietzsche famously said, noting that modern science disillusioned us about traditional religion, and thus a world fraught with anxiety about death—the core

anxiety of our Age of Anxiety, as W. H. Auden calls it. In a Godless world—more pointedly, in a nature that has lost spiritual meaning, Wyeth's often raw and desolate nature, always peculiarly alien, even when it comes alive in Spring, and barely inhabitable, as the few houses in it suggest; they are as rugged as it is, hold their own in it, but they seem as much a part of it as any hill, seem to grow out of it, become an inseparable part of it—man is alone with his own death, for there is no God to remove its "sting," as the Bible says God could do. The promise of immortality has become absurd in the modern world, and self-deceptive because there is no soul to be saved, only a body to survive as best it can.

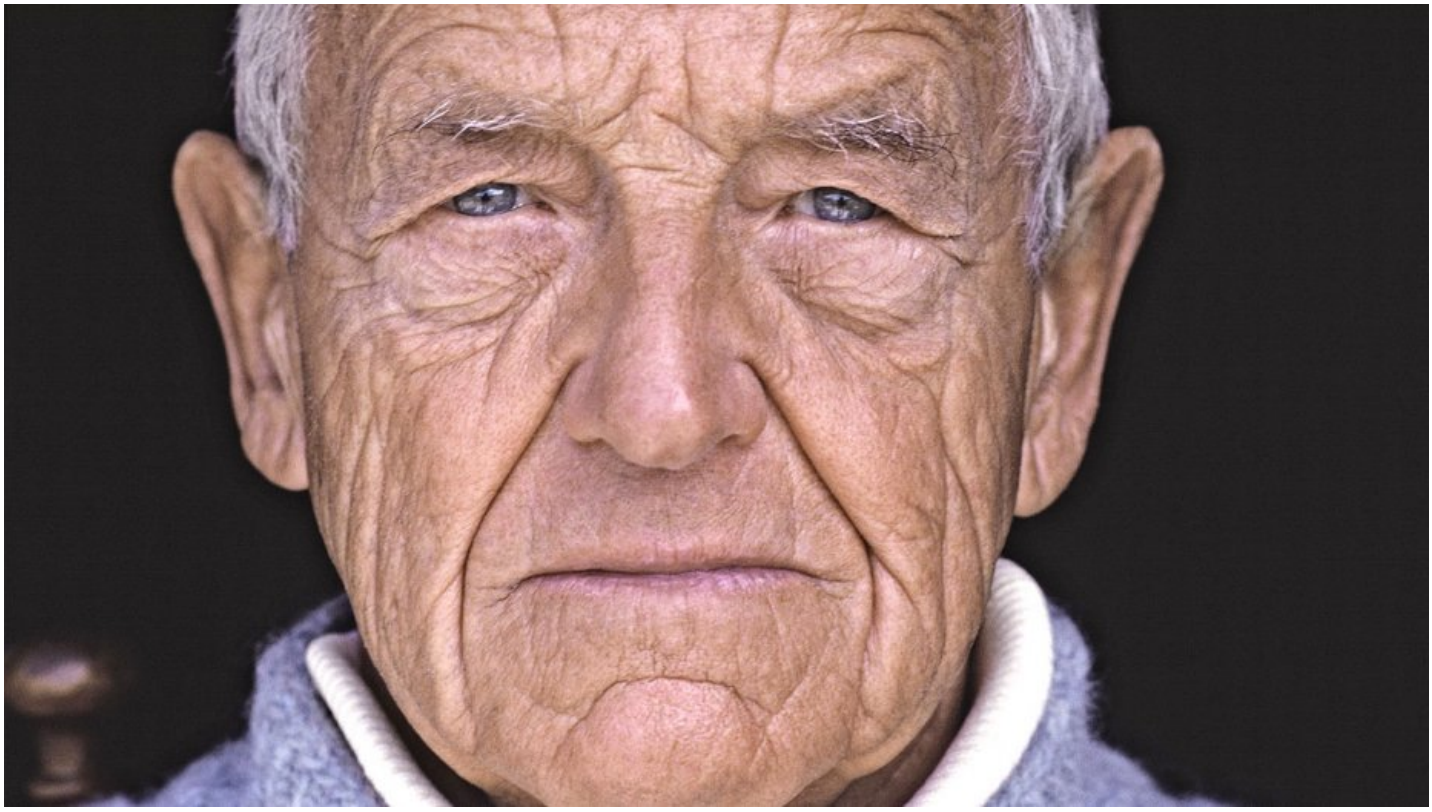
Wyeth is preoccupied with the body, as noted earlier—the body of the house, the body of a person, the body of the earth. In *Surf* Helga's naked body rises from the sea like Aphrodite's, but behind it a wall black and impenetrable and unavoidable as death seems about to crash down on her, and the sea that surrounds her churns wildly as though about to swallow her up (its whiteness rises above her navel): birth and death are inseparable, strangely simultaneous. The love goddess Helga balances them, holds her own between them, a glorious form of life born from the force of nature. The work is a brilliant modern rendering—modern because of its abstract austerity, the dramatic, sharp, abrupt contrast of black and white, symbolizing the unresolvable dialectic and uncanny connection of death and life, and the discreet use of the nude's brown hair and red nipples to relieve the tension of the contrast while marking it—of an age-old classical theme. Wyeth breathes fresh life into it by giving it profound existential import. He shows that the old myths and the old methods of art making have staying power.



Andrew Wyeth

Also, spontaneous gestures and geometrical forms are not so modern, for one can find them in Old Master art, where they served a descriptive as well as aesthetic purpose. They leavened representation since the time art was made in caves, informed images of animal and human figures, giving them expressive resonance and aesthetic presence, and as such not simply matter-of-fact. Pure art—non-objective art--began when Kandinsky denied art's descriptive purpose and with that dispensed with the figure—a human object. The result was what Jose Ortega y Gasset famously called the dehumanization of art. It gave painting what has been called presentational immediacy—seemingly pure aesthetic purpose as distinct from instrumental representational purpose. Kandinsky separated the subject from the object, dispensing with the latter—observed fact--to elevate the former—personal feeling—as the be-all and end-all of art. As he wrote, the color of Monet's *Haystack* was "necessary" not the haystack—the color was impressive, not Monet's "impression" of the haystack. For Wyeth, this is a betrayal and contraction of art, an inhibition and failure of the imagination, a dubious not to say disastrous Solomonic wisdom, for with the loss of the object—foregoing referencing the object to become self-referential—art became an insular exercise in self-congratulation, not to say grandiosely narcissistic, as so-called all-over abstract painting is.

"What could painting do once it abandoned the traditional language of representation, or moved sufficiently far from its conventional idiom to make it incomprehensible?," the British historian Eric Hobsbawm asks. "This uncertainty gives the history of the avant-gardes an air of particular desperation. They were constantly torn between the conviction that there could be no future to the art of the past—even to yesterday's past, or even to any kind of art in the old definition—and the conviction that what they were doing in the old social role of 'artists' and 'geniuses' was important, and rooted in the great tradition of the past. The Cubists very naturally, but to Marinetti's great displeasure, 'adore the traditionalism of Poussin, Ingres and Corot.' More absurdly, the late Yves Klein, who colored all his canvases and other objects a uniform blue in the manner of a housepainter, may be regarded as the reductio ad absurdum of the artist's activity, but he justified this by saying that the intention of Giotto and Cimabue had been 'monochromatic'."(2)



Andrew Wyeth

Wyeth carries that great tradition of the past into modern times, shows that it can be used to convey the existential truth about human life in the modern world—a world in which "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity," as the poet William Butler Yeats said. There is an existential bleakness to Wyeth's paintings, a poignant emptiness, a fatalistic blackness—the abysmal blackness of the *Maine Door*, 1970, the stark blackness that surrounds the naked Helga *Letting Her Hair Down*, 1972, the blackness that seems to consume her breasts and face in *Winfields*, 1977, the blackness that seems about to engulf her naked luminous body in *Surf*, 1978. Black and white—harsh black shadow and blinding radiant light—are irreconcilably at odds in many of Wyeth's works, obviously in *Surf,* subtly in *Lamplight*, grimly in *Firewood*, 1959, insidiously in *Frozen Race*, 1969, where the small white dog cast a giant black shadow. Fixed in space, he seems petrified by the emptiness he points to—the death that awaits him even as it stalks him from behind. Dare one say that the white has a spiritual intensity, that the black fatal is as death?

Wyeth's paintings are fraught with unresolved conflict, be it the conflict between the sheltering home and raw nature, more broadly man and nature, as *Winter* suggests. But woman is invariably one with nature, as she is in the seasonal portraits of Helga, and more subtly in the portrait of Christina. Crawling on the earth, she is close to nature, ironically one with it, a paradoxical nature goddess, for she is of the earth but sterile. Wyeth's nature is often barren and cold, as the icy pond in *The Blonde Study*, 1985 and the snow in *Pickup Sticks*, 1994 suggest, if now and then fertile with life as Helga is in a state of nature. Sometimes nature's life-giving light and death-dealing darkness seem to seamlessly mix, as in the sand on the beach in *Teel's Landing*, at other times they are in turbulent intercourse, as in the sea in *Cook's Wharf*, 1940. The shadowy lobsterman that stands on the wharf seems to have emerged from the depths of the sea, a symbol of death, for he catches lobsters to kill and eat them, in contrast to the luminous Aphrodite in *Surf*, a symbol of life.

Andrew Wyeth

Wyeth reminds us that traditional representational art is a resource and sanctuary in troubled modern times, all the more so because modern art has begun to imitate itself, which is to mummify itself, and with that has become decadent. It has become "Alexandrian," to use Greenberg's term. "Alexandrianism stands still," while "the avant-garde moves,"(3) but it no longer moves. Stopped in its tracks, it marches in place. It has lost creative momentum, relying on what Greenberg calls "the varieties of novelty art," among them "Assemblage, Pop, Environment, Op, Kinetic, Erotic art"—more pointedly "merely odd, incongruous, and socially shocking art"(4)—to convince us that it remains innovative. But such pseudo-avant-garde art does not fundamentally change art and our understanding of it the way genuine avant-garde art does—the way Cubism, Expressionism, Non-Objective Art, and Surrealism have. They are fundamentally creative, unlike novelty art, which is superficially creative, if it is worthy of the word "creative." Wyeth's art shows that traditional representational art continues to have genuine creative life in it, which is why it is a necessary inspiration in postmodern times, when much art has become a conceptual wasteland or serves an ideological rather than aesthetic let alone spiritual purpose, and when abstraction is spinning in its grave, a ghostly shadow of the grandeur that it had when it was avant-garde.

Perhaps avant-gardism is a bankrupt idea, an idea that has seen better days, an idea that has become stale, an idea that rings hollow. Avant-garde art increasingly seems like an arrested creative development—Baudelaire's and Kandinsky's adulation of children's art suggests as much (Kandinsky thought that it was better than adult art and Baudelaire thought children's toys were great works of art)—and pathological, as its appropriation of the art of the insane suggests. Which is why Wyeth's traditional representational art seems fresh and healthy however subliminally tragic —it shows that tragic apartness can be sublimated into intimate beauty. Restoring continuity with traditional art, and with that repairing the traumatic break with the past that is avant-garde art—once a necessary revolution, acknowledging modernity, but now, in the 21st century, as standardized, institutionalized, and academic as classical representational art became in the 19th century (no more a dynamic movement but a static school, it has become another staple of art)--Wyeth makes it

clear that the past is the necessary future of art. “Ripeness is all” is the ambitious motto of the mature art of the Great Tradition, as Baudelaire called it, and more difficult to achieve than novelty, and more shocking because more rare. It is why Wyeth’s traditionalist art holds its own against the tide of modern, neo-modern, and postmodern art, becomes a refuge among the ruins of avant-garde art. **WM**

Notes

(1)Paul Valéry, “Degas, Manet, Morisot,” *Degas, Manet, Morisot* (New York: Pantheon, 1960), 59

(2)Eric Hobsbawm, *Behind the Times: The Decline and Fall of the Twentieth Century Avant-Gardes* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 24, 25

(3)Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Art and Culture*, *Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 8

(4)Clement Greenberg, “Recentness of Sculpture,” *Art International*, 11 (April 1967):19

DONALD KUSPIT

Donald Kuspit is one of America’s most distinguished art critics. In 1983 he received the prestigious Frank Jewett Mather Award for Distinction in Art Criticism, given by the College Art Association. In 1993 he received an honorary doctorate in fine arts from Davidson College, in 1996 from the San Francisco Art Institute, and in 2007 from the New York Academy of Art. In 1997 the National Association of the Schools of Art and Design presented him with a Citation for Distinguished Service to the Visual Arts. In 1998 he received an honorary doctorate of humane letters from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In 2000 he delivered the Getty Lectures at the University of Southern California. In 2005 he was the Robertson Fellow at the University of Glasgow. In 2008 he received the Tenth Annual Award for Excellence in the Arts from the Newington-Cropsey Foundation. In 2013 he received the First Annual Award for Excellence in Art Criticism from the Gabarron Foundation. He has received fellowships from the Ford Foundation, Fulbright Commission, National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, Guggenheim Foundation, and Asian Cultural Council, among other organizations.

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