

January 14, 2015

Philipp Kaiser: How did everything start with Andrew Wyeth?

JW: I first saw Wyeth's work at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford. They own three early egg tempera paintings: *Northern Point*, *April Mood* and *Her Room*. I was especially drawn to *Northern Point*, an absolutely astonishing work. I used to go up to the second floor of the museum after drawing classes and stare at it. In the painting it appears as if Wyeth is hovering near a lightning rod at the peak of a weathered roof with the foggy sea beyond. It was the first painting that I got to know well. Because of my intuitive interest in Wyeth in 1966 my parents gave me "Andrew Wyeth: Dry Brush and Pencil Drawings" by Agnes Mongan. I looked at the plates carefully and read every caption entry over and over. There's a beautiful pencil study for *Northern Point* in it with the back story to this painting. To my mind, Mongan is still the best interpreter of Wyeth's work.

PK: What exactly was it about *Northern Point* that struck you? What was it that interested you, his hovering, disembodied views of the landscape or his realism?

JW: I think it was Wyeth's precise realism at first. Like many adolescents I was excited by Wyeth's skill and visual acuity. *Northern Point* makes literal this point about skill: the lightning rod gets sharper and sharper. So for a couple of years in high school I painted watercolors very much in the style of Wyeth. The fields behind our house in suburban West Simsbury became my Kuerner Hill and the Connecticut shore became my Maine.

PK: Who were the other artists that influenced you when you were a teenager?

JW: I loved Edward Hopper's work when I was young. Burchfield was another strong influence. In doing research on Wyeth I realized that Burchfield and Hopper knew Wyeth and they were all working in a regional style. Burchfield was probably more important to me than Hopper --- I felt that his work more emotional depth.

PK: It's interesting that there is this overlap in both Burchfield's and Wyeth's. It is mostly striking when you look at their depictions of trees. Trees are also important to your work --- think of your most recent *Oak Tree* project.

JW: In West Simsbury we lived on the edge of an "open space" that the town had set aside as a landscape preserve. From my bedroom window I could see a small sugar maple tree, and that tree became something of an obsession for me. I painted it over and over for a couple of years, both from my window and up close. On the other side of this "open space," about a half a mile away, was a very large white oak tree that I also painted on and off. In 2012 while working on my Wyeth project I started photographing that same oak tree over the course of a

year. *Oak Tree* overlaps with my Wyeth project, and it, too, began because I wanted to return the physical places of my adolescence.

PK: It seems to me you use your adolescence as a creative quarry for buried ideas. Wyeth and this oak tree were important to you and you've returned to both subjects.

JW: When I was finishing my survey show for the Wexner Center in 1999, I decided to explore subjects and places that were important to me and that I hadn't yet photographed. In *Connecticut Landscape* (1999-2007) I returned to places in Connecticut that I knew well to make photographs. The idea of revisiting, of using my past as a resource or quarry, is a great observation. In my *Railroad Photographs* I returned to my early fascination with trains and railroads. And *Diary/Landscape*, was an effort to recapture some very early memories.

PK: On one hand there is an inherent logic in your work that is more cyclical than linear. On the other hand your work has always been organized in series; a genuinely photographic principle that suggests a linear work mode. These two divergent movements don't let us forget that your work has often dealt with the past and the personal. When we spoke last week you described the influence of your grandfather on your work

JW: My father's father, William C. Welling, was a Sunday painter. He knew some of the American Impressionist painters in Old Lyme, CT, and his cousin, also a painter, studied with Robert Henri. I never met my grandfather. He died of a massive heart attack before I was born. This was a huge trauma in my family and my grandmother never got over his death. She coped with her loss by telling me stories about him and by encouraging me as an artist. When I read about Wyeth's loss of his father I was struck by the resonance to a similar loss in my family. One of the buried sources of my work and my interest in Wyeth was this family trauma and its aftermath.

PK: In *Diary Landscape* there's a photograph of one of your grandfather's paintings.

JW: Yes, in *Diary/Landscape*, (<<<COULD BE A FOOTNOTE>>>) just published by the University of Chicago Press and the Art Institute of Chicago) there's photograph of one of his seascapes over a fireplace. At the end of my studies at Cal Arts I wanted to make work about my family, but it took me a few years for to get going. In *Diary/Landscape*, I photographed my great grandmother's diary from 1840 and landscapes near my parents house in Connecticut. In one way or another, much of my work that uses Connecticut as subject matter with my family history.

PK: Let's return to Andrew Wyeth. Your photographs can be considered an homage to the artist. It feels it's a very selfless immersion with his work. At some

point you acknowledged that his work also serves as a pretext for you. I think you said “it’s a vehicle or platform” for your own work. How did this project come together?

JW: In 2005, at a photography conference at UCLA, one of the speakers, Joel Sternfeld, mentioned how important Robert Frank was to him when he was a young photographer. For me Wyeth was that artist and I decided to look at his work again. I started without a project in mind; I was just doing research. I discovered that there was quite a lot I had learned from Wyeth. After Wyeth died in 2009, I realized that I wanted to do a project about the places he had painted. So in September of 2010 I went up to Cushing and photographed the Olson House.

PK: In the past you’ve described yourself as a ventriloquist, in terms associated with the strategies of appropriation that became so popular in the late 1970s.

JW: My first experience using a 4x5 view camera was that I could work in the style of Paul Strand or Walker Evans. I think ventriloquism is built into photography. The camera has a 400 year history and challenge for the photographer is to allow the camera to speak this history and to articulate your own voice on top of these operations. NEEDS WORK

PK: I feel like you’re doubling his own strategy: Some of his most iconic and complex works were realized at the Olson House and the Kuerner House. He nested himself in these houses and had an almost familial relationship with the Olson siblings and with Karl Kuerner, an old German soldier. He was watching them, he wanted to be part of them. Was it a conscious decision to double Wyeth’s strategy?

JW: I want to make work alongside Wyeth’s paintings. When I was photographing near the Brandywine River last Fall I came across a tree parasite growing on the trunk of a beech tree. I thought, this is related to what I’m doing. The tree parasite doesn’t kill the host; they both survive and prosper.

PK: I read that Wyeth was interested in vampires and in ghosts. *Revenant*, one of your photographs that mimics Wyeth’s self portrait in a mirror from 1946, is a striking example of this symbiotic relationship. You left out the protagonist, the artist, and printed the file backwards. Your work can be seen as a ghostly reproduction or doubling of Andrew Wyeth’s work, as an artistic echo to his work. Could *Revenant* be the theme or the leitmotif for the entire series?

JW: I made my photograph in the Olson House in the same room Wyeth saw himself reflected in a mirror. I flopped the picture in Photoshop to approximate the view Wyeth saw in the mirror. Then I lightened up the file until the image floated on the surface. I’ve always been interested in white photographs. A white photograph is a piece of barely exposed or printed photographic paper. White can’t exist in photography in the same way that it does in painting. In *Revenant*

the ink from the inkjet printer is barely registering on the paper. In my Wyeth project there are a number of white photographs, *Glass House*, *Olson House in Fog*, *Cellar Door*, *Finn Church*. In my *Revenant* the ghost takes a sideways turn into a white, faint, barely present photograph.

PK: But the white photograph is obviously about disappearance. How much is this series about loss and mourning and the absence of Andrew Wyeth?

JW: Decades ago the French writer Roland Barthes started a conversation about the interconnection of photography and loss. Certainly my project has an Wyeth at its center. But I hope the viewer will be present in my photographs, as I have, not just re-workings of Wyeth.

PK: When I look at your bodies of work, many of them deal explicitly with photography with a capital P. Your work has addressed, for example, with the trains, the 19th century, but also the notions of light, representation, abstraction, materiality etc. I feel there's a highly analytical approach towards photography in your work, a holistic attempt to permanently address photography as such. In the case of Wyeth, I am interested in your conception of realism. Realism can be considered as quintessential photographic. Does Wyeth's realism correspond with a specific photographic interest in representation for you or was your interest about something else?

JW: Wyeth's precision is something that is built into photography. It is already a medium of detail. In terms of realism I think one of the big things I inherited from Wyeth was a sense of composition. Putting the Kuerner farmhouse dramatically off to the side in *Brown Swiss* or placing of a figure in relation to a dropped or raised the horizon line, those are things I gained by looking at Wyeth.

PK: Wyeth's magical realism could also be seen as a subversive argument to undermine medium specificity because it pretends to be realist but it's not.

JW: Exactly. When you read interviews with Wyeth, he talks about thinking about expending months of mental activity to get the painting right. That's beyond observational realism. For me Wyeth's thought process is equal to his painting process. He's always striving to reduce the work to its bare bones.

PK: The artists you mentioned in the beginning, Burchfield and Wyeth, are rather vernacular and regionalist artists. Both artists are very appreciated in a specific community, are hugely popular, but are hardly known abroad. Do you consider revisiting Wyeth as a risk for a post-conceptual artist like yourself?

JW: At the beginning it took nerve to work on Wyeth. I realized it would be difficult to admit that I was influenced by Wyeth but then I like the idea of introducing people an artist that they had overlooked. It was then very surprising

to mention my interest in Wyeth to friends my age who would almost always respond, "Yes, he was very important to me too."

PK: Can his influence be seen as a generational influence?

JW: Certainly someone my age would have read about Wyeth in mainstream media in the 1960's. When I show the work to younger artists who are unfamiliar with Wyeth they are often pleasantly surprised by the work.

PK: It is interesting that there are other artists whose work you would not obviously associate with Wyeth who have realized compelling series about his work and influence. Collier Schorr has been restaging the portraits of Helga with a man, Jens F. You also mentioned to me that Jeff Wall told you that Wyeth was an influence on his pictorial thinking.

JW: Jeff and I are nearly the same age and he would have been aware of Wyeth's work in reproduction as I was. I always thought that Jeff's early photograph of his son with a backpack was somehow related to Wyeth's painting *Faraway* with Jamie Wyeth wearing a raccoon cap.

PK: In your Wyeth series there are several photographs of the artist's studio--- the site where artworks are created, hidden from the public, hidden from the world. At Cal Arts you were trained to become a post-studio artist someone whose practice no longer involves the outdated production site of a studio. It seems interesting to me that the Wyeth studio photographs were preceded by your photographs of Jack Goldstein's studio from 1977-78. What does it mean to you to romantically emphasize an outmoded production site?

JW: At Cal Arts I never thought the idea was to get rid of the studio, just work differently in it. The post-studio idea simply meant that you could do various things in your studio. You didn't have to have a painting studio or a darkroom exclusively, you would work with different media. When Jack Goldstein and I both had offices in the Pacific Building in Santa Monica in 1977 I liked the way he pinned things to the wall of his studio. I photographed the walls and it was one of my first bodies of photographs.

I like looking at workspaces, seeing how artists organize their tools. The Wyeth studio came as a complete surprise. The room he painted in was never one of his subjects as far as I know. To see how small it was, to see the type of light he worked under, the layout of his materials, all that was interesting to me.

One of things I discovered working on the Wyeth project was that his studio was wherever he worked. He painted in his truck, he set up an easel at the Kuerner farm, he worked in the Sipala's house. Wyeth had his primary studio in the schoolhouse but then had secondary studios where ever he chose to work.

PK: I would like to talk about the use of watercolor. The family resemblance of watercolors and photography seems to be obvious. Jeff Wall coined the term 'liquid intelligence' to describe an inherent quality of photography. 'Liquid intelligence' also seems to be an appropriate term to incorporate your watercolors. How would you describe your use of watercolor? What is its relationship to your photographic work?

JW: I am most comfortable with water-based media. I loved the smell of Arches paper and the paint on my palette. At art school I always preferred working with acrylics on paper to oil on canvas. I think my interest in working with watercolor or acrylic on paper led me to photography, another aqueous medium on paper. Even after I started making photographs in 1976 I always had my watercolor palette to make studies for photographs. In the late 1970's after moving to New York I couldn't figure out what to photograph so I made a number of small gouaches paintings.

In 2009 I made a series of camera-less photograms using water. These became the starting point for a body of work titled *Fluid Dynamics*. These very gestural, watery photograms connected directly to the idea of the fluid nature of watercolor and to the "liquid intelligence" of Wyeth.

PK: Landscapes have been important for your work from the very beginning. In 1983 you wrote that "*art as landscape as abstraction serves as an armature for an emotional dimension in a work of art*".

JW: This idea comes out of reading Wyeth interviews. For Wyeth, and for Burchfield I should add, landscape is a surrogate for an emotional state.

PK: This sounds expressionistic.

JW: Yes, it does.

PK: There's obviously a painterly quality to both watercolor and many of your Wyeth inkjet prints. Do you see yourself as a painter?

JW: Do I think of myself as a painter? Sometimes I play the part of a painter in my abstract photographs. But with the introduction of Photoshop and inkjet printing I feel more like an offset printer than a painter. My father worked in the printing business and I love looking at reproductions of photographs and paintings, sometimes more than the original.

PK: Many of your Wyeth photographs are digitally manipulated. Did you adjust the compositions in order to get closer to the original Wyeth paintings.

JW: At times.

PK: You removed trees, and moved grasses around the Olson House in *Christina's World*.

JW: In the spring of 2012 I was preparing to go up to Maine to take more photographs. But I broke my foot just before I left and was unable to travel. I realized that I didn't need to go to Maine to make more photographs. I took digital files from the first visit and worked on them. I created my own version of *Christina's World* by manipulating elements from existing photographs to mimic Wyeth's iconic painting. Then I made *Olson House in Snow* by added snow from one of my Glass House photographs to an existing photograph of the Olson House.

PK: How would you describe the different categories of the works in the series? There are some works that mimic specific compositions without the protagonist, *Young Bull*, for example. There are some works featuring important places for Wyeth, and there are works that just echo a certain atmosphere, an odor.

JW: I have many photographs that resemble Wyeth paintings. In some I stand exactly where he stood. *Young Bull* is a good example. I knew this painting from the Mongan book, and I was curious to see it from precisely the place Wyeth painted it. I did nothing to the image. Then there were works that involve various degrees of Photoshop manipulation to approximate Wyeth's painting. In *Olson House in Fog*, *Christina's World*, *Evening at Kuerner's* I shuffled elements of the picture in Photoshop. Some were slight moves; others were changed significantly. And then there were the pictures that depart from Wyeth altogether, that have nothing to do with Wyeth. I looked in another direction from the Wyeth painting and found something I liked. Like *Mullen* or *Mussels*. Finally there are a few pictures that are composed mainly in the computer as in *River Cove*.

PK: Why don't you describe *River Cove*.

JW: *River Cove* is one of my favorite Wyeth tempera paintings. It depicts a small cove as the tide rises on a sand bar. After I visited the Olson House I went down to the edge of the St. George River and photographed it at low tide. I wasn't happy with the photograph. After I broke my foot, I realized that I could make a photo composite using this bit of the St George River, reflections of pine trees from a rest stop on the way up to Cushing and water from the Long Island Sound in Connecticut.

PK: Why did you insert fragments from Connecticut? Does this have a conceptual meaning or was it just based on a pragmatic decision?

JW: I wanted to put the sun in that photograph. In almost every body of work I have at least one image of the sun and *River Cove* gave me the opportunity to introduce the sun into the Wyeth project. I originally made the source photograph

for project I did with Susan Howe. I didn't use it but I loved the image of the sun reflecting on the bubbly, salt water.

PK: Your *Glass House*, the wildly colorful photographs of Philip Johnson's compound in New Canaan, preceded the Wyeth series. When I look at Wyeth's works, most of them are broadly monochromatic. How are you thinking about color in your Wyeth photographs?

JW: My process in making inkjet prints involves tweaking and distorting the color of the original file to some degree. Sometimes there's a great deal of color work. In *Wind from the Sea*, I'm on the third floor of the Olson House looking at a dormer window. I made my exposure and in working on the file I noticed that a Photoshop error had produced a network of yellow splotches on the image. The blotchiness reminds me of sunspots and it has nothing to do with anything in that room.

PK: Maybe we are talking about a less explicit use of color or we are talking about contrasts? When Andrew Wyeth talked about the Kuerner House he would say the house stands like an ice block in a green landscape.

JW: For many years I've been interested in the color green. And when I first went to the Farnsworth Museum in Rockland, ME in 2010 I saw an incredible Wyeth drawing of an eagle feather made with brilliant green ink. Then I began to see this intense thalo green in Wyeth's later watercolors. In my photograph *Waterfall* I replaced some of the greens from my camera file with something that approximated that intense Wyeth green. One of the remarkable things about Wyeth's monochrome palette is that it allows him to use flashes of color to very powerful effect.

PK: There are various versions of the Olson House, one with a full moon, one from behind the house.

JW: I took *Olson House with Moon* at six in the morning as dawn was breaking. The moon had just moved behind some clouds but I thought it was important that it be in the picture. So I scanned a moon from a photograph I had made in New York City in 1999 and spliced it into the picture.

There's another picture of the Olson House, *Olson House, River View*, where I'm standing behind the house and looking toward the Saint George River, which is now obscured by trees. In my studio I removed the stand of trees and stitched in a view of the Saint George River taken from another vantage point. And I added clouds from Connecticut. Interestingly when Edward Hopper painted a watercolor he often left the sky blank. Later, sometimes years later, he would add in the sky.

Finally the base picture of *Olson House in Fog* was made in September of 2010. And then in 2011 I added fog digitally.

PK: What about Wyeth's watercolor *Glass House*.

JW: When I visited Chadds Ford in 2010, I contacted Helen and George Sipala, who live in the house where Wyeth painted this watercolor. *Glass House* depicts Helen Sipala sitting in a white cupola with a snow squall outside. I'd just completed a project titled *Glass House* on Philip Johnson's Glass House compound. I went up to the cupola and found it covered with abstract patterns of frost. I de-saturated my picture to intensify the whiteness and feeling of isolation in the room.

PK: It's a really great picture, it's kind of a pre-modern version of the Johnson House, his Glass House.

JW: Wyeth made a companion picture called *Renfield*, painted in the same space as *Glass House* by moonlight. I visited the Sipalas house again in 2011 and photographed it in sunlight to create a day-for-night photograph that resembled Wyeth's painting.

PK: What does the absence of the protagonist mean to you? It is obvious that you can't replace Wyeth with Wyeth. Are you interested in the traces in the place or the site?

JW: I'm interested in the traces Wyeth left in the spaces he worked in. As I mentioned, Wyeth would set up studios in different places. In *Banister*, at the Sipalas, I photographed Wyeth's paint splatters on the spindles of the banister. In the third floor of the Kuerner Farm you can also find paint splatters on the floor.

PK: But you didn't photograph the Sipalas?

JW: I've met some of Wyeth's subjects but have chosen not to photograph them. My investigation into Wyeth was really about space he worked in. The actuality of the space is so significant, the *being there*.

PK: What about *Black Ice*.

JW: On my first visit to the Kuerner Farm the ambient temperature in the barn was about ten degrees Fahrenheit. So when I saw the stone sink depicted in Wyeth's *Spring Fed* the water had frozen into hexagonal crystals. Simply making the image, printing it straight, wasn't enough. After much experimentation I added a dark purplish color. Wyeth had spoken of *Spring Fed* as being a picture of a dying Robin Hood with blood dripping out of a wound. So I reworked this picture to have a bloody pool. I also was thinking about the brutality of farm life, and a pool of blood wouldn't be out of place in a barn.

PK: It's just a detail of *Spring Fed*. Are there other compositions that are based on an explicit detail?

JW: My version of *Groundhog Day* is a detail. I loved the shadow and the reflection of the table setting when I visited. The reflection and the shadow were tonally matched. I was so excited that I forgot to set my camera correctly and I ended up with a tiny jpeg camera file. If you look closely at my picture you can see square pixels surrounding the plate.

PK: You mentioned in an earlier conversation that your drapery photographs from the early 1980s are linked to Wyeth. Were you aware of this when created them or was this your reading in retrospect?

JW: Wyeth often painted patterns of melting snow. Look the snow in *Spring Fed*. In my 1981 abstract photographs of white shards of phyllo dough on dark fabric I may have been unconsciously recalling Wyeth. I find the resemblance uncanny but I wasn't aware of this connection until I began my Wyeth project.

PK: There are a couple of photographs that have an explicit desaturation.

In *Winter Corn* I wanted to make a companion image to Wyeth's drybrush painting of the same name. In 2012 I came across a field of abandoned corn and thought of Wyeth's painting. I set up my photograph against a stark blue sky but when I printed the image the blue was too intense so I desaturated it. This is something I got from Wyeth; he almost never painted blue skies. I did the same thing in *Finn Church*.

PK: *Fleece* is an absolutely compelling photograph. I love how Wyeth's fleece jacket is squeezed in a rectangle and literally framed. The piece is about how you reframe his work. It think this photograph marks the theme of the entire series.

JW: I found this fleece jacket hanging on a large mirror in Wyeth's studio. It's as close a portrait of Wyeth as I can ever make. After I photographed it, I noticed an unfortunate lens flare, a white haze, across the picture. But as I continued looking, I accepted the flare because it gives the photograph a ghostly feeling.

PK: When I hear you talk about *Fleece* it reminds me that you once said that the *Wyeth* series has a lot to do with aging.

JW: Yes. When I went up behind Wyeth's studio to photograph a house that was the subject of a late Wyeth painting, *End of the Road*, I came across a Dodge minivan. It had been left open to the elements for a couple of years and the interior was covered with moss. It brought home the reality of aging.

PK: Decay.

JW: Yes, everything decays. Right after making *End of the Road* I photographed *Lestat* and *Gemini*, inside the Wyeth studio. I found a copy of *The Vampire Lestat* in Wyeth's studio, next to his reading glasses. And I photographed it on a watercolor block, just as I found it. The cover of the book was bright red and that bothered me, so I changed red to gold to emphasize the blue streaks on the glasses case. Wyeth's use of blue is something I've noticed recently. His paintings may have monochrome elements but there is always an element of blue. In *Gemini* I photographed an old watercolor block of Strathmore Gemini paper on a table in the studio. I loved the intensity of the blue cover. Finally in *Studio Wall*, a section of the wall in Wyeth's painting room, there are astonishing blue and purple slashes which look like an abstract expressionist painting.

PK: And links to your 2012 photographs *Fluid Dynamics*.

JW: It's related to *Foam Core*. I came across the foam core back of a watercolor block with the most amazing set of splotches and drips. And it sums up or epitomizes all of the kind of energy and sloppiness in the watercolor process that I was channeling in *Fluid Dynamics*.

PK Any final thoughts?

Recently I've been listening to Ferruccio Busoni's transcriptions of Bach. Busoni made so many versions of Bach's work that he was known as *Bach-Busoni*. And in the 1970's I was deeply impressed with Robert Lowell's translations of Horace and Dante in *Near the Ocean*. I felt that Lowell was making his own work in the activity of translating. The idea of using another artist's production as the spring board for one's own work is more often found in music and poetry and less often in visual art. I think this is what I'm doing in *Wyeth*. I'm making a new work in the act of "translating" the work of another artist.