

ANDREW WYETH

JACKLIGHT

Schoelkopf

Andrew Wyeth

Jacklight

Patricia Junker

"There was a deer hanging around our property eating windfall apples, and it was almost a pet," Wyeth explained to Thomas Hoving about *Jacklight*.¹ He had been able to make a detailed up-close study of the sweet-tempered doe's head in pencil (fig. 1).

Wyeth's painting depicts the deer in life, but his conception of the animal actually derived in large part from Wyeth's final encounter with the deer in death. Wyeth knew well the fate of the unafraid deer in his father's apple orchard. He sets us up for it in the painting. In an almost Surrealist way he paints a premonition. The slender deer's body is strangely without anatomy; at first glance it appears to be almost a mere skin draped across the crotch of the tree. The animal is beyond our reach, helpless behind the sinister bramble of bare tree branches that keep us away. The apples so near her mouth are blood red, a visual analog of the blood that spews from the mouth of a kill, a "hanging deer." "I knew that local hunters were out trying to catch deer with their headlights," Wyeth told Hoving. "It's called deer jacking—totally illegal," he explained—hence the title of the painting, that term of murderous lawlessness, "jacklighting."²

Chadds Ford farmers necessarily killed for meat, but few stopped at that, Wyeth knew. That bloodlust could penetrate a man's psyche unnerved Wyeth. But it had coursed through the tranquil Brandywine Valley for generations—in soldiers that fought in one of the bloodiest battles of the Revolutionary War and in subsistence farmers like his neighbor Karl Kuerner, deerslayer and hog butcher. They all colored Wyeth's dark outlook on the place, even in the bucolic retreat that was his father's apple orchard. We hardly need Wyeth's full account to know how this particular episode unfolds, but he provided it: "The next day I went up to Karl Kuerner's barn and found the deer there. It was strung up, gutted, with its nose almost touching the floor, and the apples I'd seen the deer eating the night before seemed to have mixed with the blood."³ This is the deer Wyeth shows us but with life restored to it by his meticulous recreation, in fine strokes of tempera, of the soft fur coat, delicate whiskers, and soulful eyes that should have been.



Andrew Wyeth, *Jacklight*,
1980. Egg tempera on panel,
43 1/2 x 49 3/4 inches
(110.5 x 126.4 cm)



Jacklight is one of an extraordinary group of ambitious temperas that Wyeth painted in the years around 1979 to 1981, a time that has come to be defined all too easily by the artist's better known Helga pictures.⁴ His output increased dramatically after he set himself up in his father's old painting studio in 1979 to continue there his secret work with the married model Helga Testorf. He worked out of two studios now, his and his father's. A sizeable number of temperas came in quick succession, most of them of subjects other than Helga. Wyeth liked to say that his productivity in these years was due to his desire to quell any suspicions that might be aroused in his wife, Betsy, by a drop-off in his usual painting activity. But there is nothing safe, predictable, or easy in the paintings that Wyeth produced in tandem with the Helga pictures—*Jacklight* being a case in point; at nearly four feet square, it is one of Wyeth's largest panels. Art historian E.P. Richardson has aptly and eloquently said of Wyeth's subjects that a painting made at any given moment "contains the meaning of a day, a place, a season of the year, a phase of America."⁵ We have to ask of this and the other Helga-adjacent paintings of this time, how much of the artist's subterfuge with Helga might be present in them? In fact, *Jacklight* developed alongside studies of Helga that Wyeth made in the apple orchard that same autumn of 1980 (see figs. 2 and 3). He painted watercolors of Helga cradled in the fork of an

Fig. 1
Andrew Wyeth, *Jacklight Study*, 1980. Pencil on paper, 13½ x 11 inches (34.3 x 27.9 cm). Greenville County Museum of Art



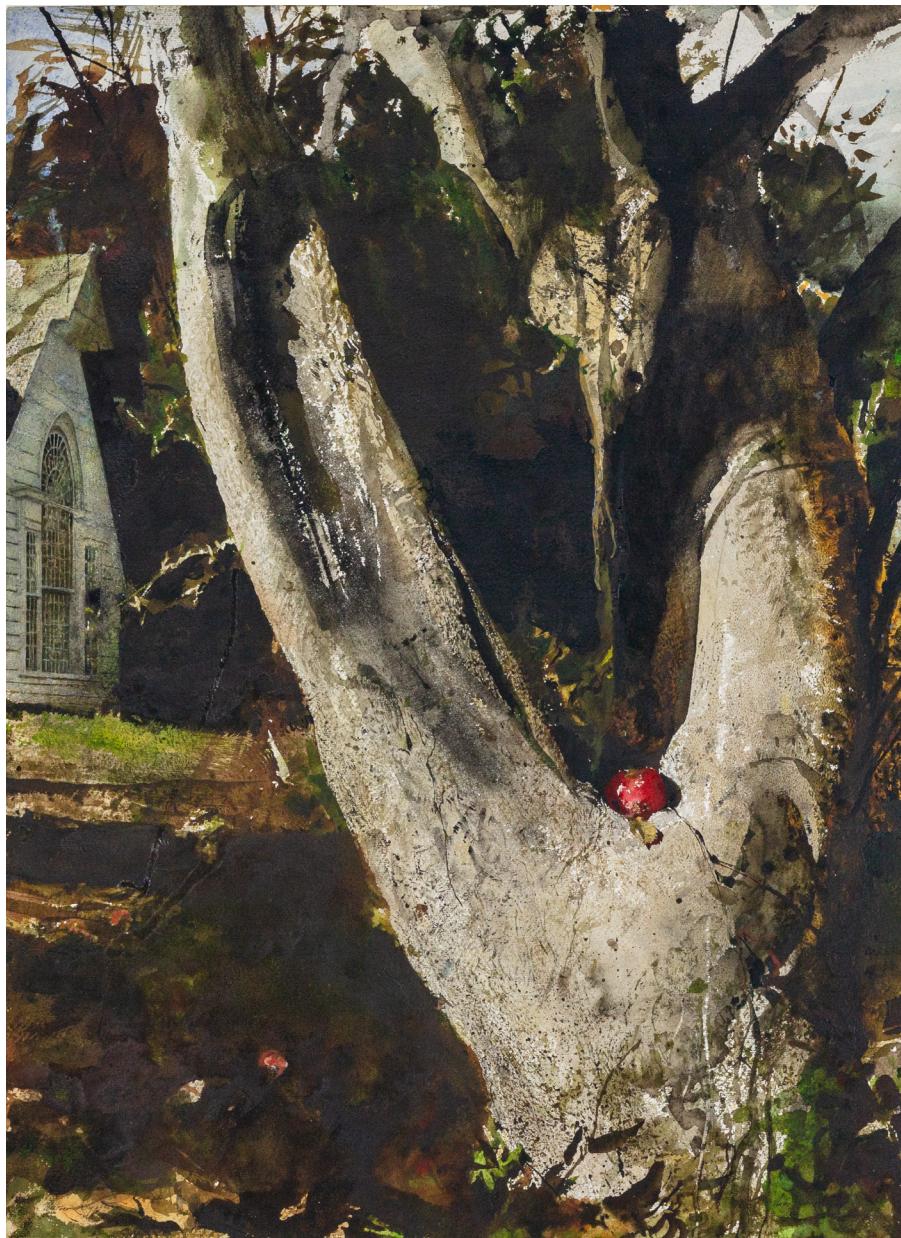
Fig. 2
Andrew Wyeth, *Untitled*,
1980. Pencil on paper,
13 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 11 inches
(34.9 x 27.9 cm)

Fig. 3
Andrew Wyeth, *Untitled*,
1980. Pencil on paper,
11 x 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches
(27.9 x 34.9 cm)



Fig. 4
Andrew Wyeth, *In the Orchard*, 1980. Watercolor on paper, $16\frac{1}{8} \times 20\frac{1}{8}$ inches (42.9 x 53 cm). Private collection

Fig. 5
Andrew Wyeth, *Autumn*, 1985. Watercolor on paper, 21 x 30 inches (53.3 x 76.2 cm)



apple tree, a windfall apple or two nearby (fig. 4)—and he would continue to do so in subsequent years (fig. 5). Modeling for Wyeth had made Helga increasingly wary, she said. She told Wyeth's biographer, Richard Meryman, something she likely said to Wyeth as well on occasion as she posed in the orchard: "I didn't want to be disturbed. I was like a deer. I was like a hunted animal."⁶ Their state of innocence, Helga's and Wyeth's, was fated to be short lived. In the aftershock of the controversial unveiling of the Helga pictures, Wyeth in 1987 returned to the subject of the windfall apples of temptation as a final note, in the watercolor *Forbidden Fruit* (fig. 6).

Fig. 6
Andrew Wyeth, *Forbidden Fruit*, 1987. Watercolor on paper, 28 1/8 x 20 7/8 inches (71.4 x 53 cm)



PATRICIA JUNKER Ann M. Barwick Curator of American Art Emerita, Seattle Art Museum

Patricia Junker established the American art department at the Seattle Art Museum in 2004, serving as the endowed curator for fourteen years. Previously she was Curator of Paintings and Sculpture at the Amon Carter Museum and Associate Curator of American Paintings at the Fine Arts

Museums of San Francisco. She has authored award-winning publications: "Childe Hassam, Marsden Hartley and the Spirit of 1916," received the Smithsonian's Frost Prize; *Winslow Homer in the 1890s: Prout's Neck Observed* won the Henry Allan Moe Prize for scholarship. Her most recent scholarship has centered on Andrew Wyeth: in 2018 she organized *Andrew Wyeth: In Retrospect*; and she earlier published "Andrew Wyeth: Rebel" in the anthology, *Rethinking Andrew Wyeth*. Other major publications are: *Modernism in the Pacific Northwest*; *Edward Hopper's Women*; *Albert Bierstadt's "Puget Sound on the Pacific Coast"*; *Winslow Homer, Artist and Angler*. She has co-authored American art collection catalogues for the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; the Amon Carter Museum; and the Smith College Museum of Art. Junker frequently collaborates with Schoelkopf Gallery, notably in championing the work of the Wyeth family, a partnership that has proven invaluable in advancing scholarship and exhibitions in American art. Most recent exhibitions include *Enter Andrew Wyeth* in 2024 and *Jamie Wyeth: Portraits of Andy Warhol and Rudolph Nureyev* in 2025.

Endnotes

1. Wyeth to Thomas Hoving in *Andrew Wyeth: Autobiography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company for the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 1995), p. 121.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Richard Meryman makes this point inventorying Wyeth's output in this years; see Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth: A Secret Life* (New York: Harper-Perennial, 1996), pp. 349–350. In 1980 alone he painted four temperas, sixteen watercolors, and two highly finished drybrush works.
5. E.P. Richardson, *Andrew Wyeth: Temperas—Watercolors—Dry Brush—Drawings—1938–1966* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1966), p. 9.
6. Helga to Meryman, p. 336.

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