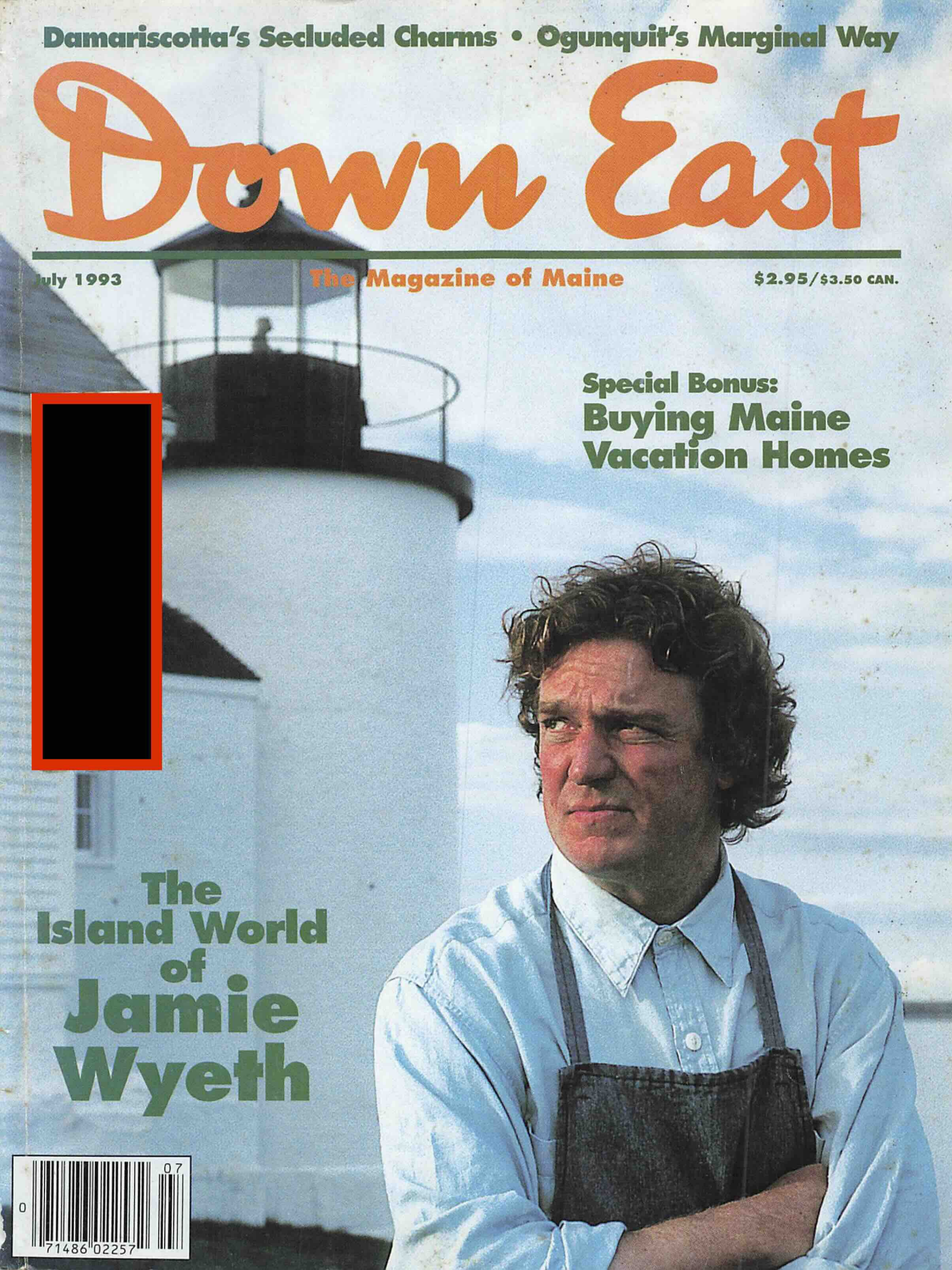
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The Island World of Jamie Wyeth

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The Island World of Jamie Wyeth

Scion of America's first family of artists, James Browning Wyeth finds big inspiration in small Maine islands.
By Beth Crichlow.

NO man is an island, but Jamie Wyeth does a pretty good impression of one. Wyeth — the son of a son of a painter and himself one of America's best-known realist artists — has been drawn to the islands of Maine, like the tide towards the shore, for most of his forty-six years.

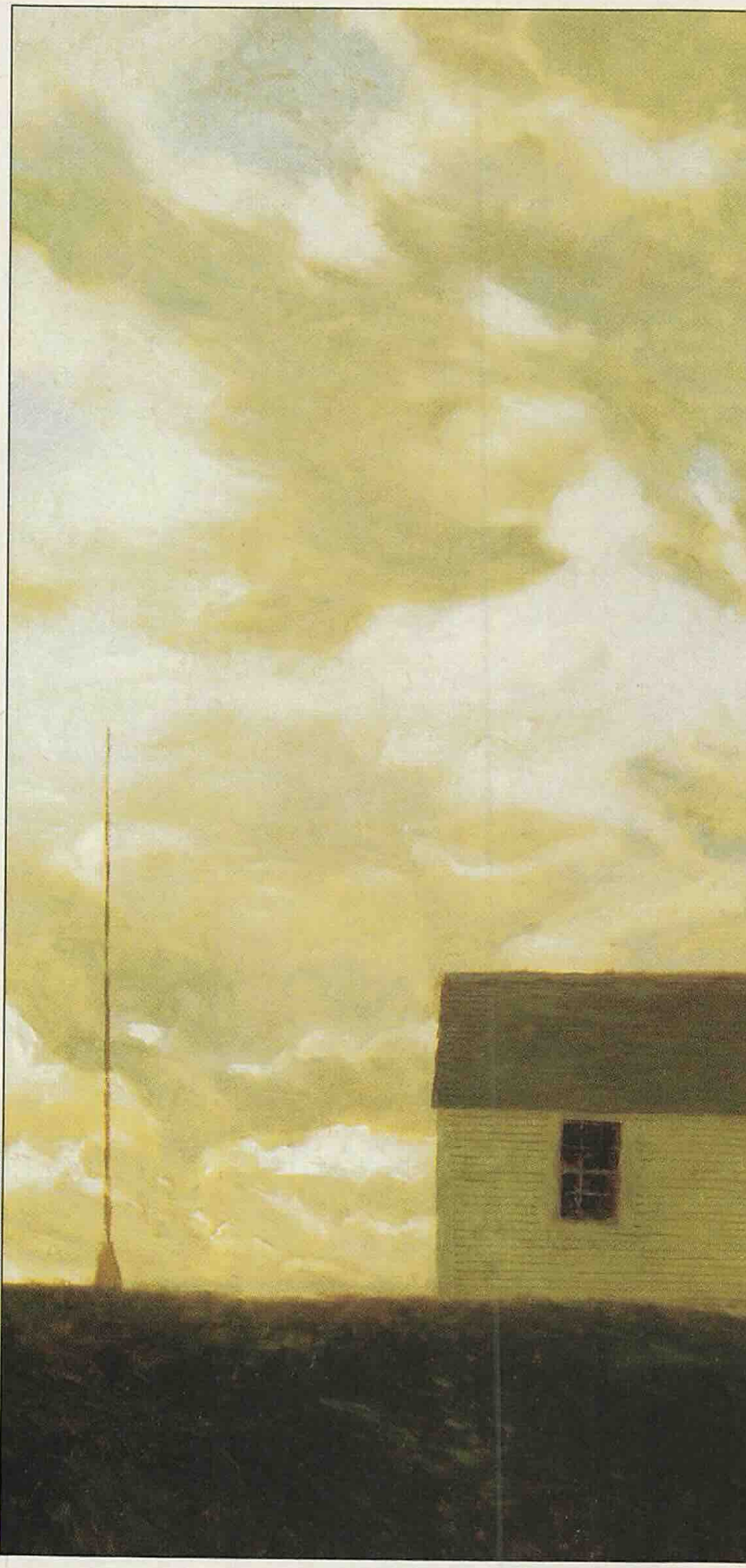
When he was all of sixteen, Wyeth left his parents' home in Cushing and moved six miles out to sea, settling on Monhegan Island, long a magnet for those who make their living on or near the ocean, be they lobstermen or landscape artists. Later he bought a house there, on the southernmost tip of the island, that was built by another artist, Rockwell Kent. Before he was thirty, flush with his early success, he bought his own island, 300 acres' worth of pine trees and granite cliffs that lies between Monhegan and the mainland. Then, several years ago, to round out his collection, he purchased a second, smaller island that has since become his home. A ten-minute row from shore, this island came complete with a decommissioned lighthouse, a trim and tidy keeper's home, and front-row seats on the Atlantic Ocean.



PETER RALSTON

"Like any child," Wyeth says, standing on the catwalk of his lighthouse, squinting in the direction of Portugal, "I wanted to live on a boat. I love the water, I love being on the sea. And living on an island," he adds, "is a lot like living on a boat."

Having an ocean for a front yard is just one of the things Wyeth treasures about his island home. Islands aren't for everyone, he is quick to point out: one man's refuge is another's exile. But as an artist and as a man, Wyeth appears to thrive on the splendid isolation, on the solitude and self-scrutiny that is the blessing and the curse of island life. For him, few things compare to "standing on the top of the island and seeing the perimeters of my world. Every morning I



PRIVATE COLLECTION/PHOTOGRAPH BY MELVILLE D. MCLEAN



COLLECTION OF ANDREW AND BETSY WYETH/PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER RALSTON

go out and walk around the island, just to see what's changed, what's washed ashore. When I bought the island, people told me I'd run out of things to paint. I think I could spend two lifetimes here and not run out of subjects."

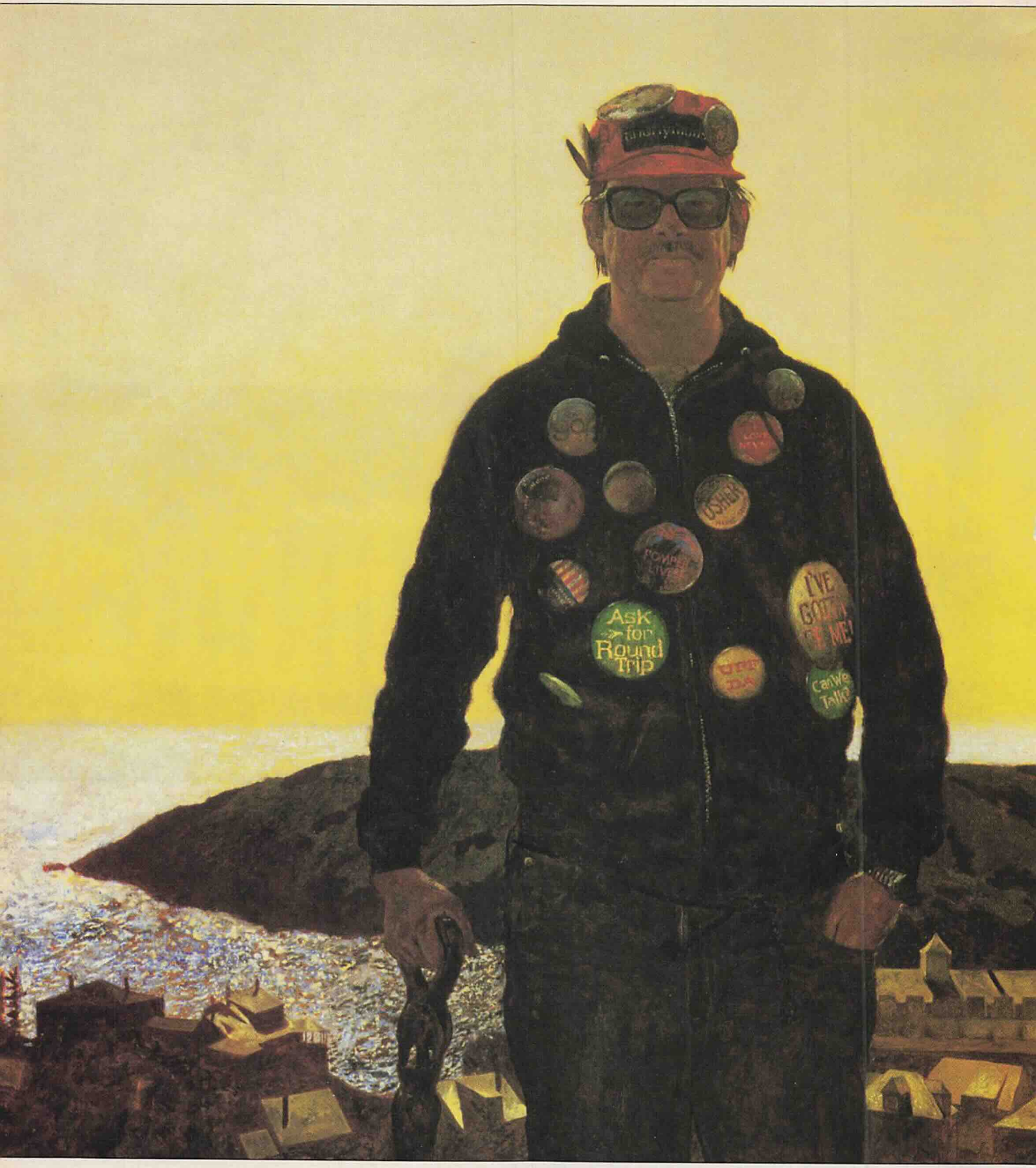
This trio of islands has provided Wyeth with more than enough material for a show opening June 27 at the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, and running through August 22. Wyeth regards exhibitions the way most people feel about trips to the dentist: something to be postponed until absolutely necessary. As a result, *Jamie Wyeth: Islands* marks his first one-man museum show in nearly a decade, as well as the first exhibition to focus exclusively on his Maine work. Included in the show are forty oil paintings and watercolors: portraits of island people, island houses, island animals, and island icons — a large bronze bell gazing out to sea, a straw hat resting on a straight-backed chair, a fir tree bedecked with brightly colored lobster buoys. Whether it's an ornery-looking seagull or a couple sharing a lonely breakfast in the hard morning light, each of Wyeth's luxuriantly painted images is an island unto itself: remote, solitary, a thing apart.

"Jamie explores the world on Monhegan as Thoreau explored the world on the shores of Walden Pond: intimately and intensively," former museum director and writer Richard McLanathan observed in a special issue of the *Island Journal* (the annual publication of the Island Institute) devoted to Wyeth's work. "The result is an intensity of realization and expression that gives an almost archetypal quality to his images." Adds Christopher Crosman, director of the Farnsworth Museum: "Jamie has been labeled a romantic realist, but I think his work is a lot edgier than people give him credit for. He's doing some wonderful things that haven't been seen widely. So this is a good show for us to do."

ALTHOUGH he owns a farm in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, along the Brandywine River, Wyeth now spends the better part of the year at his island home, and weather is no object. In fact, this past March, as the much-dreaded "storm of the century" was bearing down on the East Coast, Wyeth and his wife, Phyllis, left the relative security of their farm, hopped a plane, and made their way up to Maine, the better to witness the epochal storm in all its fury. While everyone else in Maine was hunkered down in front of their woodstoves, surrounded by canned goods and flashlights, Jamie Wyeth was up in his lighthouse, watching the ocean trying to swallow his island. "It was fantastic," he says, almost gleefully. "It really blew a gale. There are vents in the lighthouse tower, and when the wind came screaming through it sounded like fifty Metroliners." The wind blew, the snow fell, the waves crashed, and for six days the Wyeths were stranded on the island, all of which suited Jamie just fine. "I love being cut off," he says.



"I think I could spend two lifetimes here and not run out of subjects," says painter Jamie Wyeth of the twenty-acre Maine island he calls home. The island's decommissioned lighthouse and adjoining keeper's home figure large in The Lighthouse, *a wildly romantic new work that is featured in* Jamie Wyeth: Islands, *an exhibition of the artist's Maine paintings that opens June 27 at the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland and runs through August 22.*



Like his famous father, Jamie Wyeth is regularly taken to task for painting like a nineteenth-century realist at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Wyeth counters that he isn't painting nostalgia: "This world exists," he says. "Maine exists. If you told the residents of Monhegan that they were anachronisms, they'd punch you in the nose." Newt of Monhegan *(above) portrays one such islander, and also boasts a view of the island village that echoes the work of another Monhegan artist, Rockwell Kent.*

There, as writer and ballet impresario Lincoln Kirstein put it, "in the mute company of 300 corpses, he cut and studied in silence." From the first, he was a fastidious worker, spending as long as 200 hours on a single portrait, observing, drawing, and painting.

"A man can only paint that which he knows even more than intimately," N.C Wyeth once wrote. "He has got to know it spiritually. And to do that, he has got to live around it, in it and be part of it." Jamie has made a career out of his grandfather's precept. "I find it impossible to work in a place I've never seen before, or have only visited," he told the *Island Journal*. "There all I see are externals. What does interest me is a tree or a rock that I've known since childhood."

An island, twenty acres on the edge of the Atlantic, offers Jamie Wyeth world enough, and time. "The amount of work I can produce here is phenomenal," he says. "Here I can really tune in." He works every day, all day, in the bedroom, in the bathroom, but most often in the airy, L-shaped studio he had built just up from the keeper's house. "I'm certainly not inspired all the time," he says. "The times when it does click — that's the opiate that keeps you going. And you have to keep at it constantly, keep your tools honed. When I painted Nureyev, he rehearsed and rehearsed and rehearsed. There's always that fear of losing it, the only thing you know how to do." Jamie has inherited some of the same doubts that plagued his grandfather. "That doesn't change with time," he says. "In fact, it gets worse, because your standards get higher."

Whether it's those high standards or the high insurance rates, there are no Wyeth paintings adorning the white walls of his home or studio, no hint as to the owner's line of work or to his renown. There are American quilts and antique furniture, bookcases filled with novels and stacks of magazines, a few choice shells lining the windowsills. There are also traces of the house's former occupants, including a sign which Wyeth hung in his stairwell listing all the keepers who maintained the light between 1857 and 1933. Wyeth points out one T.H. Bibber, who served watch during the 1880s. "He only lasted three weeks."

Jamie Wyeth's tenure seems likely to last considerably longer. Unless, of course, he finds another island. Gazing out across the water to the horizon's edge, he points out a distant island, and two square specks that may or may not be houses. He smiles. "Wouldn't it be great to live there?" □

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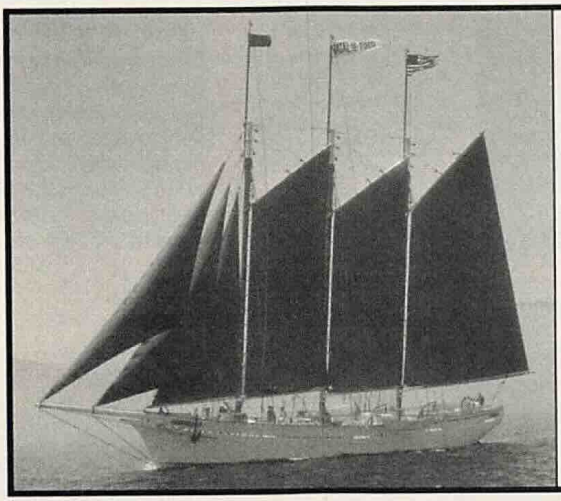


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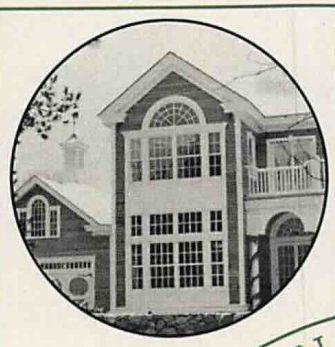
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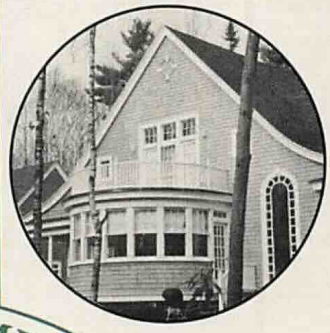
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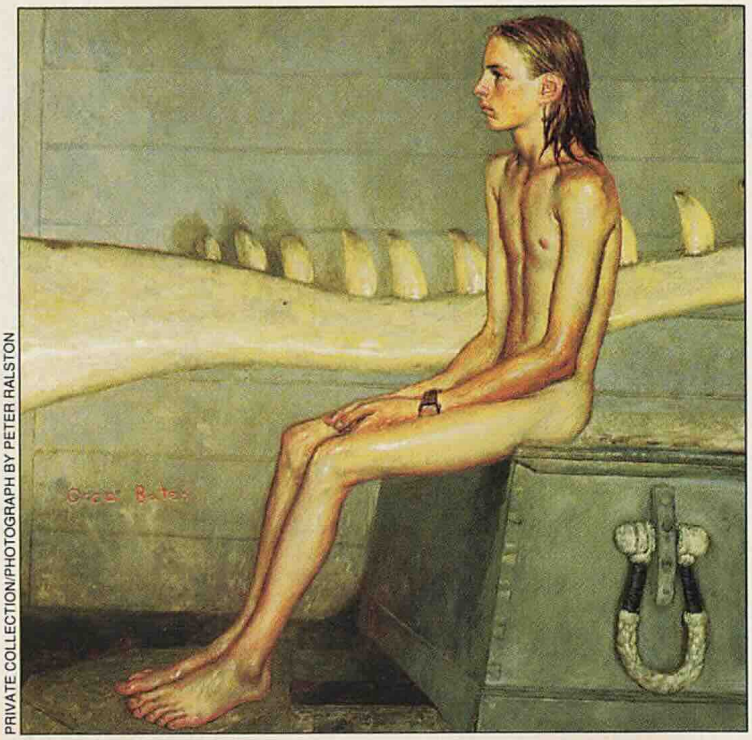
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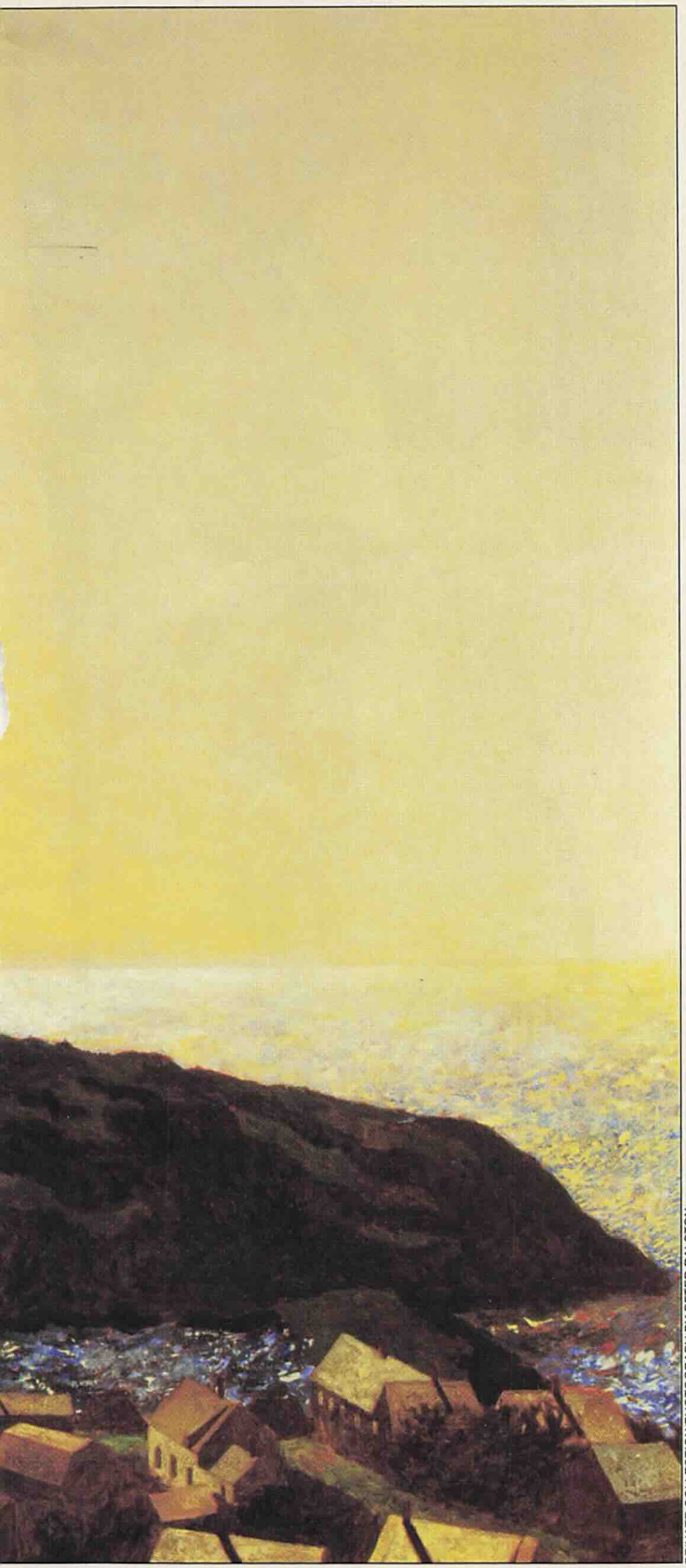


PRIVATE COLLECTION/PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER RALSTON



PRIVATE COLLECTION/PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER RALSTON

Ever since he burst upon the American art scene at age twenty, Jamie Wyeth has been acclaimed for his incisive portraits, be they of presidents or farm animals, as in The Islander *(opposite page), an aristocratic Monhegan ram painted with all the dignity of a Shakespearean hero. Monhegan, and the isolation of island living, also inspired* Breakfast at Sea *(above), and a series of portraits of Orca Bates (left), whom Wyeth has described as "a true island child... he belongs to it; he is part of that place."*



PRIVATE COLLECTION/PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER RALSTON

FOR all his reclusive ways, Jamie Wyeth is as affable a hermit as you could hope to meet. Although he keeps a large, deep moat around the sources or meaning of his art — "I don't like to analyze my work," he says, "it freezes me" — on most other subjects he is open and down-to-earth, even chatty. He readily offers to row across the cove to ferry a visitor out to his island. "Usually, there's a pair of seals who follow my boat," he says as he rows, pulling the oars easily through the blue water. Wyeth himself is dressed entirely in blue: blue workshirt, close-fitting blue vest, blue corduroy pants. Blue paint lines the cuticles of his fingernails. He retains the boyish good looks — the strong profile, the tousled hair, the easy, warm smile — that made him something of a pop star in his youth.

Fame found Jamie Wyeth early. At age twenty, when most painters are still toiling in art school, Wyeth burst upon the New York art scene an almost fully formed talent, his portraits graced with technical skills and emotional insights well beyond his years. At age twenty-one, he was commissioned to paint a posthumous portrait of President Kennedy, and produced a brooding study of the man and the office. Another well-known early work is *Draft Age*, which shows a tough-looking young man whose black leather jacket and wraparound shades almost disguise his vulnerability — and that of a generation coming of age in the shadow of the Vietnam War. (Wyeth himself served four years with the Air Corps Reserve.) In 1968, he married one of his models, Phyllis Mills, whose blonde hair and long slender frame still figure in many of his works.

Wyeth went on to paint dancer Rudolf Nureyev and artist Andy Warhol, who reciprocated with one of his trademark silk-screen images of Wyeth. Under the enlightened patronage of NASA, Wyeth painted space launches at Cape Canaveral. On assignment from *Harper's* magazine, he did courtroom sketches during the Watergate trials, "as did the defendants, Gordon Liddy and John Ehrlichman," Wyeth recalls. "We would compare our work." Back home in Pennsylvania, he painted farm animals, a great hairy sow, a pair of elegant chickens. "I get as involved with a sheep as I do with the President of the United States," Wyeth has remarked. "These paintings aren't meant to be cute. Animals have loves and hates and snits just like people."

But the most famous thing about Jamie Wyeth isn't his portraits of presidents or pigs; it's his surname, a name that is to American art what Kennedy is to American politics. Jamie is grandson of N.C. Wyeth, a giant of a man and a hugely gifted illustrator of such works as *Treasure Island* and *Robin Hood.* Jamie Wyeth was born ten months after his grandfather died, killed when a train struck his car. N.C. Wyeth, who had loomed large in the lives of his five children, exhorting them to explore and to create, continued to influence his extended family even after his death. "He had a large studio, which was left exactly the way it was the day he walked out, filled with costumes and swords," Jamie recalls. "I grew up on the books he illustrated. It all seemed perfectly normal to me: I thought everyone's grandfather painted." Today the younger Wyeth continues to be influenced by his grandfather's work, by its size, scale, and exuberance. He also shares his fascination with costumes: coat racks at Jamie's island home are hung with crisply cut military jackets spanning a couple of centuries and continents.

While Wyeth sees parallels between his own work and that of his grandfather, the world at large is more likely to compare him to his father. Andrew Wyeth, now seventy-five, is perhaps the most popular American artist of this century, and one of the most imitated. His understated, emotionally complex temperas — of his summer home and neighbors in Cushing, and of the Pennsyl-

(Continued on page 74)

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Jamie Wyeth

(Continued from page 49)

vania countryside where he spends his winters — have become an indelible, if, as some contend, anachronistic, part of the American imagination. (A selection of Andrew Wyeth's controversial paintings of his longtime model Helga Testorf will be on view this summer at the Portland Museum of Art. See page 29.)

Jamie Wyeth is the first to champion his father's work, calling it "weird and strange" — and not nearly as accessible as his critics maintain. But he also sees clear distinctions between their art. "People hear the name Wyeth and they stop looking at the painting in front of them," he says. "They automatically see fields and weatherbeaten barns. I've done paintings of rocket launches, and people still look at my work and see barns." Another key difference between father and son is that while Andrew favors temperas, with their spare, dry surfaces, Jamie has always been smitten with oil paint, which he applies in increasingly loose, luscious strokes. What all three generations of Wyeth do share, as critic James H. Duff observes, isn't so much style or subject matter, but a certain "legacy of melancholy."

Jamie Wyeth does his best to shrug off the comparisons, as well as the complaints that all the Wyeths' work is irrelevant to the world as we know it in 1993. "You could go crazy worrying about public perceptions," he says. "At an early age I realized that all this other stuff, all this luggage, pales next to the work itself. It's outside my studio, scratching to get in, but it has no relation to what I'm working on. Painting's too difficult to worry about that stuff. You do whatever it takes just to get it down."

FATHER and son do have this in common: an almost unswerving need to paint, and a single-minded determination to carve out the physical and psychic space — an island, if you will — in which to do it. After just six years in public school, Jamie persuaded his parents to let him study at home with a private tutor so that he would have more time to paint.

This most technically accomplished of draftsmen never attended art school, and got what formal training he had from studying with his aunt, painter Carolyn Wyeth. She drilled her nephew in the fundamentals of drawing, setting up still lifes for him to sketch in N.C. Wyeth's old studio. "She was very restrictive," Wyeth has remarked. "It wasn't interesting, but it was important." Later, he spent six months studying anatomy the old-fashioned way: at a morgue in New York City.