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"Braids," part of "Andrew Wyeth: The Helga Pictures" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Face to face with Helga

Despite the hype, Wyeth pictures are worth seeing

"What the Helga???"

Title of an opinion essay in *The New Republic*.

If you're not among the nearly 70,000 people who have ordered tickets for "Andrew Wyeth: The Helga Pictures," which opened April 28 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, you've got a few options.

You can send in your \$4.50 now (\$2 for children) for the right to shuffle through next month. Or plan to use a vacation day to avoid the weekend crowds.

Or you can decide that most of what you've heard about the exhibition has less to do with art than with sex and money, and that there are better places to look for these than at an art show, and skip it.

I don't recommend the last course of action. While Wyeth is certainly not a major force in contemporary art, there are some remarkable art experiences awaiting anyone

On Art

Charles Desmarais



who wades through the hyperbole to get to the pictures. Besides, if these are going to end up among the best-known paintings and drawings of our time, shouldn't you see the original works for yourself?

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"The three of us congratulated each other and, sipping champagne with our excitement, gave a toast on April Fool's Day to the art world. . . ." — Leonard E.B. Andrews recounting his purchase of the

Helga pictures from Andrew and Betsy Wyeth.

Few people with even a peripheral interest in the daily news, much less in art, can have missed the titillating 1986 story of Wyeth's "secret" cache of soft-core nudes and brooding portraits. The newspapers at midsummer buzzed with it, and the Aug. 18 covers of both *Time* and *Newsweek* sported tawdry headlines and the model's staring visage.

For 15 years, Wyeth had worked with the same blond, blue-eyed woman, producing some 240 drawings and paintings — many (giggle) of her unclothed body. Now, the collection had been purchased *en masse*, "including copyrights," for a reported \$10 million.

The whole story was cloaked in mystery: Wyeth's wife, Betsy, claimed she had known nothing about the existence of

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Helga . . .

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the pictures until just before their sale. Even the name of the model was unknown at first.

And then, of course, there was the biggest mystery of all: Were America's aging favorite artist and his young model lovers?

As one might have expected, as the story unfolded it proved less exciting than the questions that had been raised. The model, Helga Testorf, was a neighbor who worked as a cleaning woman for Wyeth's sister.

If the existence of the Helga Pictures, as they quickly became known, was a secret it was a very open one: Three paintings had been sold over the years, others had been exhibited and reproduced. Even Betsy Wyeth owned three, gifts from the artist.

As for speculation about an affair, Betsy Wyeth — who is also Wyeth's business manager — soon reneged on her original one-word explanation ("Love") for her husband's fascination. Meanwhile, his sister told Newsweek, "Andy's an artist, he paints subjects, he does not go to bed with them."

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"Her name is Helga. Helga Testorf. She is Andrew Wyeth's neighbor. And for 15 years she was the only other woman in his life." — *Advertisement for the exhibition, "Andrew Wyeth: The Helga Pictures," at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.*

I'm the kind of person who cries at movies — even, on occasion, at sentimental TV commercials. So if I approach the current exhibition of "The Helga Pictures" with prejudice, it is a bias toward nostalgia, tenderness and a good, sad story.

Nostalgia certainly abounds in this show. There are pictures, for example, that will make a fifth-generation Californian long to return back East. "In the Orchard," a series of environmental portraits done between 1973 and 1985, traces a thoroughly Eastern landscape through all four seasons, while "Sunshield" and "Campfire," 1982, touch on the melancholy aspects of that most Atlantic of seasons, autumn.

And there's sadness. In the 238 pictures reproduced in the catalog (only about 85 are actually in the LACMA show), Helga is always alone. Her eyes are averted. The closest she comes to smile is a tight-lipped quarter crescent.

So why ain't I crying?

This series is so unrelenting, so manipulative that we are left



National Gallery of Art

"In the Orchard," 1974 watercolor.

no room for feelings of our own. These aren't pictures that hint, for example, of a tender moment or a melancholy afternoon — they are generic emotions. Might as well rubber-stamp them "TENDER."

It is this failed attempt at real emotional content that has gotten Wyeth into such trouble with critics and curators. Hilton Kramer calls him "just an illustrator," and the Metropolitan Museum of Art reportedly made a special point of its refusal to exhibit the Helga show in New York.

There are exceptions to the sameness of approach and blandness of ideas. "Barracoon," 1976, and a 1973 "Nude" (catalog number 71) leave greatly enriching traces of ambiguity behind their technical virtuosity, though they ultimately raise questions about Wyeth's true feelings toward women, or at least this woman.

In "Barracoon," a thin wire and massive hooks, clearly visible along a scribbled ceiling, heighten the sense of vulnerability suggested by Helga's prostrate pose. The other nude has been forcefully, perhaps violently, defaced with a green gash across her bared neck, a dark "X" at her chest.

But it is Wyeth's phenomenal mastery of watercolor and tempera technique that are the most rewarding aspects of a visit to this exhibition. As silly as "Black Velvet," 1972, may be, with its gratuitous reference to Manet's "Olympia" and its obvious sexual pandering, it is a very pretty picture.

And the richness of color and startling detail of "Sheepskin," 1973, and "Braids," 1979, give new life to the idea of realist painting in our cynical era.

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"No photography. All images c 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews." — *Sign at the entrance to "The Helga Pictures" exhibition.*

There was a time when our cultural institutions could be counted on to maintain a distinction between public information, advertising, and old fashioned, P.T. Barnum-style hype. When, in the hallowed halls of the museum at least, what a work of art had to say was more important than tabloid gossip about its maker or model.

It appears that day has passed. "Marketing" is the catchword for the museum of today, and if it can't market ideas or art, there's apparently at least one major museum that will sell rumor and innuendo instead.

"To the world she has become a sensation," bellowed the headline of a Museum of Fine Arts advertisement last summer in the Boston Globe. "To Wyeth, she was just a girl next door."

If Wyeth minds this facile, coming-attractions-blurb interpretation of his work, I haven't seen any report of his objection. But it's not likely he had anything to do with the ad, or that he could have controlled it if he wanted to. In the one area where he would

ordinarily have control, though, Wyeth has surprisingly relinquished it.

By selling not only his paintings to Leonard Andrews, but the copyrights, too, he leaves the work open to a different, more permanent kind of misinterpretation.

It's an arrangement not uncommon in the advertising game, but rarely heard of in the fine arts. It takes creative, scholarly and business decisions regarding reproduction and publication away from the artist, with his psychic investment, and puts them in the hands of someone with an entirely different kind of investment to protect.

Wyeth, of course, can sell what rights he wants to whomever he wants. But it is clear that the terms of discussion and interpretation are controlled by he who holds the right to reproduce.

If Andrew Wyeth ever complains that he's a misunderstood artist, someone should tell him it's his own darned fault.

"Andrew Wyeth: The Helga Pictures" is on display through July 10 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles. Exhibit hours are 9:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 9:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Adults, \$4.50; seniors 62 and older and students, \$3.50; children 6-12, \$2; 5 and younger, free. (714) 634-1300 or (213) 410-1062.