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ART

They're fowl

In his 'Seven Deadly Sins' series, artist Jamie Wyeth uses a familiar setting to depict bad behavior from a bird's-eye view

By Jessica Bloch
BDN Staff



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PHOTOS COURTESY FARNSWORTH ART MUSEUM Among the works in Jamie Wyeth's Seven Deadly Sins series are 2005's "Anger." It combines mediums of hand-wove, toned paper mounted on archival board and is 34½-by-24¼ inches. The paintings are in private collections and are courtesy Adelson Galleries in New York.

ROCKLAND, Maine — Tour the new exhibit of Jamie Wyeth's paintings in the Wyeth Center at Farnsworth Art Museum, and you might think the artist has a vendetta against sea gulls.

"They can be evil," he says.

But Wyeth, scion of the revered art family and a resident of both Maine and Delaware, is just trying to make a point, and the hapless gulls are a means to an end.

In a frenzy of feathers, beaks and flapping wings, the world of the sea gulls serves as the setting for Wyeth's "Seven Deadly Sins" series of paintings, and the exhibition has been drawing crowds the way schools of

minnows can bring flocks of scavenging birds.

The works, created between 2005 and 2008, are a combination of mediums on hand-wove toned paper mounted on archival board.

Each of the seven deadly sins of Christian theology — anger, envy, gluttony, greed, sloth, pride and lust — is illustrated with a painting of one or more gulls acting out the wrongdoing. Wyeth, son of legendary Maine and Pennsylvania painter Andrew Wyeth, who died earlier this year, and grandson of painter and illustrator N.C. Wyeth, had for many years observed sea gulls in places such as Monhegan Island.

What he saw in real life, he wrote in a statement in the "Seven Deadly Sins" catalog, didn't quite match with the sea gulls of artists' imaginations.

"It always bothered me the way gulls have been depicted through the years and particularly in Maine art they're made to look like white doves and in fact gulls are scavengers," Wyeth said. "They can be evil."

Wyeth gets to the heart of evil through his gulls. In "Anger," two gulls are painted from above, their beaks open as if squawking at some slight or

intrusion on the part of the viewer. “Gluttony” depicts a gull devouring a fish, still clinging to life in the bird’s beak. The gull is surrounded by fish — in fact, it’s hard to tell where the bird ends and the fish begin.

“Lust,” one of the most disturbing of the seven paintings, seems to depict a rape, full of squawking surprise, fear and anguish.

Although the gulls are painted in shades of white, gray and yellow, the color that permeates the exhibition is red. The names of the sins are printed in red lettering along the bottom of the frames. The board on which the painted paper is mounted is a fiery mix of red, orange and yellow.

The tips of the gulls’ beaks are red-tipped, as if dripping with blood.

The gulls’ eyes, too, are lined in red, as they stare unblinkingly and accusingly from the paintings. And what eyes they are — sinister, evil, fearful and hurt, as if they’re truly the mirrors to the gulls’ sinful souls.

The sea gulls’ eyes are powerful even when closed. In “Envy,” an image of two gulls amorously touching beaks, a third gull in the foreground steps away from the scene, its back to the “lovebirds,” with one eye squinted shut in distaste. A human might read the squint as an attempt to fight back tears.

The seven paintings were shown in New York in 2008. The Farnsworth exhibition is different, interim director and chief curator Michael Komanecky said recently, because of the displays that accompany the paintings.

“This is a very different presentation because of the focus on placing Jamie’s work within a centuries-old tradition on this theme,” Komanecky said, “which was a tradition in the visual arts but also in literature. This is what I would call a very richly contextual presentation of Jamie’s work and it’s a tradition he was familiar with.”

The Farnsworth includes an image of Hieronymus Bosch’s 15th-century painting “Tabletop of the Seven Deadly Sins and Four Last Things,” images of engravings of the sins made by Pieter Bruegel the Elder in the mid-16th century and Jacques Callot in the early 17th century, and Paul Cadmus’ depiction of the seven deadly sins painted in the mid-20th century.

There are also several of Wyeth’s earlier paintings of sea gulls as well as the larger “Inferno, Monhegan” from 2006, which depicts a boy shoveling garbage into a tank, where the garbage is burning. Sea gulls fill the ground and sky, seemingly committing all seven deadly sins in one scene.

For all the sinfulness depicted, however, it’s easy to forget the sea gulls should be held blameless for their actions. They’re doing only what comes naturally, whether it’s gorging on fish, barking at an intruder, or mating without a dinner date first. After all, it’s not as if sea gulls feel remorse or guilt, or know right from wrong.

The point of the paintings, Wyeth said, isn’t to judge the sea gulls’ behavior.

“My thing,” he said, “is just how these kinds of behavior rise up in that

world, too.”

“Seven Deadly Sins” runs through Aug. 30. The museum will host “A Conversation with Jamie Wyeth” at 6 p.m. Aug. 5 at the Farnsworth Art Museum’s auditorium, and a signing at the Wyeth Center 5-7 p.m. Aug. 19. For more information, go to www.farnsworthmuseum.org.