

# **KARL J. KUERNER: THE CONTINUITY OF CREATIVITY**

The year 2024 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the gift of the Kuerner Farm to the Brandywine Conservancy & Museum of Art. The early nineteenth-century farmhouse, adjacent barn, and thirty-three acres of land, revered as sites of artistic inspiration for Andrew Wyeth, are designated as a National Historic Landmark. Since the Museum opened the Farm to the public in 1999, visitors can experience a place of remarkable inspiration for Wyeth over decades. This exhibition examines the Farm in relation to

another artist—one who grew up on the property: Karl J. Kuerner.

Kuerner's work reflects the centrality of the Farm to his artistic practice. His first depictions of it proved pivotal for Kuerner, who considered Wyeth's work there of singular, and perhaps overwhelming, importance. At age eighteen, Kuerner conferred with Wyeth, who encouraged him to explore the Farm in his painting and emphasized the artistic potential of the property. Advice and lessons also came from Carolyn Wyeth, Andrew's older sister, who provided inspiration to Kuerner as she critiqued his work. The Kuerner Farm has

been a muse to multiple generations of artists, from the Wyeths to Kuerner, and also to the students who continue to work there today.

*Below Zero*, 1998

Watercolor on paper

On loan from Martin and Harvey Rice-  
O'Rourke



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This early morning view of the Kuerner  
Farm captures the full moon in January. As

Kuerner went about his chores in the barn, he was suddenly struck by the intensity of the moonlight, casting sharp shadows on the fresh snow cover. Only those up before the sun might have the privilege to enjoy this powerful, silent moment. Kuerner paused briefly to make a sketch of the scene and worked it into a watercolor composition over the next few months, savoring the view he discovered.

*Breeze, 1997*

Acrylic on panel

Private collection



Perhaps surprisingly, Kuerner calls Breeze “the ultimate portrait of my mom,”

Margaret Kuerner, who shied away from her son’s artistic gaze. The African violet on the windowsill, her favorite flower, stands in for the traditional sitter, who struggled with illness for several years.

Andrew Wyeth also painted Margaret Kuerner—though she was reluctant to pose for him as well, only agreeing on the condition that her son would do a portrait too. For Kuerner, the gentleness of this image speaks more to his mother’s nature than any carefully rendered portrait could.

*Buttonwood Tree, 1979*

Oil on canvas

Collection of the artist





In his early studies with Carolyn Wyeth, Kuerner worked almost exclusively in oil painting, which was also her chosen medium. The influence of Wyeth's personal style is readily evident in Buttonwood Tree in its relatively simple landscape executed in earthy tones. Kuerner captures the awkwardly stiff trees—known to many as sycamores—which are ubiquitous in the Brandywine Valley landscape. In the painting, the street where the Kuerner Farm is located, Ring Road, curves around the truncated tree, leading the eye into the distant landscape of interlocking forms.

*Caught In Between, 2001*

Watercolor on paper

On loan from Martin and Harvey Rice-  
O'Rourke



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This monochromatic composition shows off the unusual interior spaces of the Kuerner farmhouse, with two mismatched fireplace mantels in close proximity and a curiously

narrow cabinet between them. On one mantel, a shot glass represents, for Kuerner, a memory of his grandfather Karl Sr. The care in rendering the precise details of the architectural ornaments reflects Kuerner's reverence for the place and its quirky features, which provide him with a seemingly limitless source of inspiration.

*First Cutting*, 1992

Acrylic on panel

Collection of Dr. Raymond Puzio



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Kuerner painted *First Cutting* on-site in the fields behind the Kuerner barn and still has a strong recollection of the sounds of the baler off in the distance as he worked, as well as the songs of a flock of indigo

buntings in the trees to the right of the canvas. The first cutting of the year takes place in late May or early June and not only involves cutting and baling the hay but also carefully avoiding any young fawns, pheasants, or other wildlife that take shelter in the tall grasses.

*Have You Any Wool, 2007*

Acrylic on panel

On loan from the collection of Brod and  
Barbara Erb



*Have You Any Wool* centers on the chores of everyday farm life—in this case, tending to the sheep. Two of the Kuerner sheep, Bruce and Seamus, engage the viewer, questioning our presence in their barn. Despite the frigid nature of the day, the sheep, including Rambo in the distance, seem content in the snow. In the background, the simple slope of Kuerner Hill is recognizable, blocking the view of much beyond the world of the farm. This is a key example of Kuerner's constant quest to paint his life and his experiences, many of them tied closely to the Farm and within view of that hill.

*In the Blink of an Eye*, 1999

Watercolor on paper

Private collection



In this painting set against the facade of the Kuerner farmhouse, the porch becomes a stage upon which a supernatural tale unfolds. The day after his grandmother



Anna Kuerner passed away in 1997, Kuerner's wife, Louise, caught a glimpse of Anna's spectral form in the barn. A year later, another sighting of the ghostly woman prompted Kuerner to begin a composition that suggests the haunted nature of the Farm. His grandmother's shadowy form continues the mundane task of sweeping, a chore she completed daily in her lifetime.

*The Long Walk, 2017*

Acrylic on panel

Collection of the artist



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Even in his frail condition in his late eighties and early nineties, near the end of his life Karl Jr. would take long walks. This painting depicts father and son walking together up Kuerner Hill, their figures diminutive against the sweeping landscape.

In the valley below, the house and barn fade into the ethereal lightness of the fog as do the distant fields and trees. Karl Jr. never saw the final version of this painting and passed away the year after his son completed it.

*Miss Thomas, 1991*

Acrylic on panel

Collection of the artist



Not long after graduating from high school, Kuerner met Joanne Thomas, a retired schoolteacher from Wilmington, Delaware. At that time, Kuerner was deciding between attending art school or entering the military. Thomas encouraged him to take advantage of the opportunities before him in the art world, especially training with Carolyn Wyeth. In this caring portrait, Kuerner captures a lifelong friend who had a lasting impact on his artistic career.

*Miss Wyeth, 1981*

Acrylic on illustration board

Brandywine Museum of Art

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Wyeth, 1985



Kuerner set out to honor his mentor Carolyn Wyeth and her life of solitude in *Miss Wyeth*. Attempting to encompass and interpret her chosen nature—silent, lonely, and immersed in her own world—Kuerner’s portrait reflects Wyeth’s uncompromising spirit. The clean lines and simplified geometries of the painting are as much a tribute to Wyeth as is the portrait, in which she stands on the balcony of her family home. Greatly impressed by the work, Andrew Wyeth acquired the painting and donated it to Brandywine during his sister’s lifetime.

*Orange Handled Axe, 1997*

Acrylic on panel

On loan from Kim Famularo





This painting, which appears at first to be another reflection on farm life, is much more specifically about Kuerner's father, Karl Kuerner Jr., the owner of the axe. Depicted at rest, the axe's handle has been painted orange for easy visibility but also to signal ownership. The neatly stacked logs in the background and the personalized tool both represent Karl Jr.'s presence on the Farm. In making paintings based on the homestead, Kuerner frequently seeks to represent the very personal meanings in everyday objects.

*Out in the Cold*, 2014

Acrylic on panel

Private collection



*Out in the Cold* is the quintessential picture-perfect view of the Kuerner Farm. The unassuming house, though large, is set back from the road and tucked behind a pine tree, presenting the primary view visitors or passersby encounter

today. Entering from Ring Road, two stone pillars flank the driveway, one of which is visible in the painting. In a family photograph from around 1945, Karl Sr. and Karl Jr. each pose next to one of the pillars, inserting themselves as fixtures in the landscape. During World War II, German prisoners of war based in West Chester worked on the Kuerner Farm and constructed the stone pillars.

*Over the Shoulder, 1993*

Acrylic on panel

Collection of the artist



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In this loving double portrait of Kuerner's wife, Louise, and her first cat at the Farm—Kiki—he examines the special relationship between the two. Louise's face is half hidden behind the feline, and her eyes sparkle like the diamond on her finger.

Kiki, like many pets, appears to control her owner, perched regally on Louise's shoulder. The limited palette of the composition adds to an overall calming effect, aided by the ample use of empty space surrounding the two. Many of Kuerner's paintings focus on the nonhuman inhabitants of the Kuerner Farm—pets, working animals, and wildlife.

*Pennsylvania Farmer, 1996*

Acrylic on panel

Collection of the artist



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In this monumental portrait of his father, Kuerner places Karl Jr. atop Kuerner Hill, posed so that he blocks the view of the farmhouse in the distance. In this way, the farmer embodies the farm—with the

invisible house centered in his chest and the horizon line crossing his shoulders. He holds an antler, a symbol Kuerner often associates with his father, an avid hunter. Kuerner struggled with rendering the right hand, seeking the advice of Andrew Wyeth, who counseled him to abandon perfectionism and make the hand rough, as the hands of a farmer would be.

*The Sneaking Fox, 2021*

Acrylic on panel

Alan and Kathleen Majewski



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The view from Kuerner Hill to the tiny farm below, a composition used in many of Kuerner's paintings, is based on the vista



from his studio. Living above the Farm in this way gives Kuerner endless hours to examine the property at all times of the year. One of Kuerner's greatest influences, the artist Robert Henri, described painting one's own life and daily experiences as the only original work. "Preserve your originality," Henri wrote, "by painting what is before you as you see it, for things have a special look to you."

*Stay Warm, Sleep Tight, 2022*

Acrylic on panel

Collection of the artist



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The beauty of a simple composition such as *Stay Warm, Sleep Tight* reveals Carolyn

Wyeth's lasting influence on Kuerner's painting. She taught him that artists can paint their immediate surrounds and never run out of inspiration. The rigid structure of a stately Windsor chair in Kuerner's dining room is complemented by the soft, furry form of his sleeping cat named Mars. The division between the outside world, of frost, snow, and wild nature, and the interior world of comfort, warmth, and order is keenly felt in this work, a perfectly balanced combination.

*Surge*, 2013

Acrylic on panel

Private collection



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This is the only work in the exhibition that does not focus on the quarters around

Chadds Ford inhabited and worked by the Kuerner family. Surge captures a powerful coastal storm in North Carolina as seen from a pier. The awe-inspiring natural event sweeps away viewers, who are given no firm ground on which to plant their feet or get their bearings. The monumental scale of the painting further draws us into the chaotic sea. The composition, even fiercer by comparison with the surrounding works, reminds viewers that Kuerner's talents are not confined to the landscape of the Kuerner Farm.

*Unloading Straw*, 1995

Acrylic on panel

Private collection



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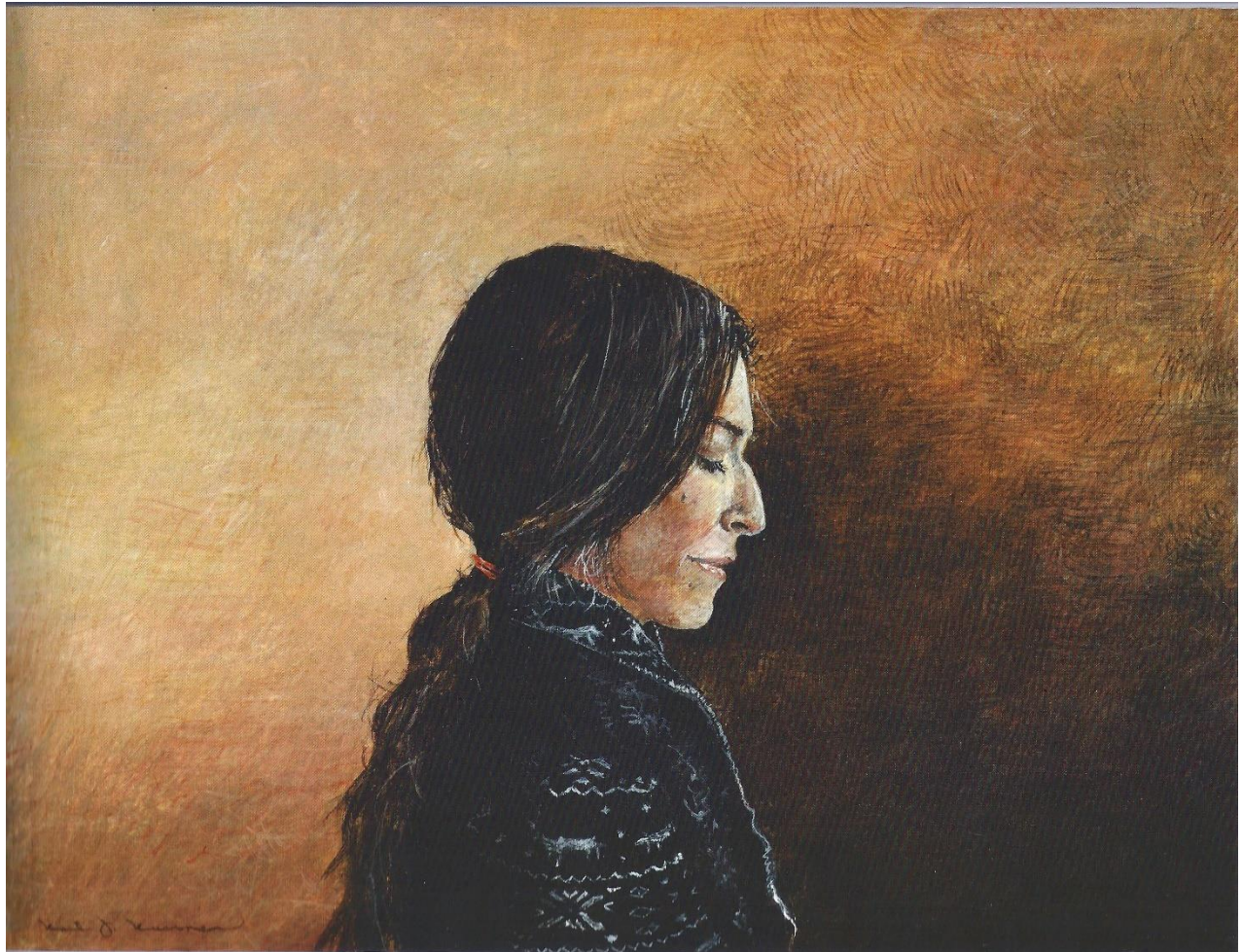
Inside the third floor of the Kuerner barn, the soaring space opens like a cathedral, an apt visual metaphor for what Kuerner refers to as his father's church. The time

and energy dedicated to the many aspects of farming are not unlike the devotions of religious orders. As in several of Kuerner's paintings, his father is busy at work, sharply disciplined in keeping the farm running no matter the time of day or season of the year. Like the systematic architecture surrounding him, Karl Jr. maintains the neatly stacked straw, transforming it from fields of grasses to the compact bales stored meticulously in the barn.

*Winter Sweater*, 2016

Acrylic on panel

Collection of the artist



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In this portrait of the artist Shay Allen,  
Kuerner draws attention with the title to



the woolen sweater the sitter wears.

Although set against a tonal background—similar to *Over the Shoulder*, which hangs nearby—close comparison reveals subtle technical differences. The design of the sweater appears to have escaped its knitted confines and influenced the brushwork of the painting's background. Applying rhythmic staccato brush marks, Kuerner weaves a pattern of warmth around the sitter, encompassing her in a manner akin to the stitching of the cozy cardigan.

# **LABELS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE GALLERY**

## **The Kuerners in Germany**

Karl J. Kuerner's grandparents married in Germany in 1921, but arrived in the United States separately, Karl Kuerner Sr. in 1923 and Anna Faulhaber Kuerner in 1925. In his native Neuffen, Germany, Karl Sr. was a sheepherder after World War I, when he was a machine gunner for the Germany army.

## **Generations on the Farm**

Karl Sr. came to the Philadelphia area, where his uncle John Kuerner already lived,

after landing at Ellis Island. Once Anna arrived, the two sought to leave the city, and began renting Ring Farm in Chadds Ford from Richard Atwater in 1926. The Kuerners had already planted deep roots in the area by the time they purchased the farm from the Atwater family in 1943.

Kuerner Farm, as it eventually came to be known, was the home of three generations of the Kuerner family.

### **Karl Kuerner Jr.**

The only son of his generation, Karl Kuerner Jr. (1927-2018) continued the family tradition of farming. He coordinated the effort to donate the property to the

Brandywine Conservancy and Museum of Art by purchasing the majority of the property from his four sisters. Brandywine purchased the remaining interest and Karl Jr. donated his holdings in order to preserve the farm. "All my life this land has been good to me," he said in 1999. "Now it's time to give something back."

### **Karl J. Kuerner**

Part of the third generation of the family on the Farm, Karl J. Kuerner (b. 1957) grew up in a family committed to farming but was drawn to the artistic legacy of the property as well. As a teenager he began studying with Carolyn Wyeth and was

encouraged by Andrew Wyeth to take the Farm as a subject. Kuerner attended the Art Institute of Philadelphia and continues to teach art classes on the Kuerner Farm.

## **History of the House**

For nearly 300 years, the Kuerner Farm was known as "Ring Farm," named for its original Quaker owners. The farmland saw action during the Revolutionary War – in September 1777, the Battle of Brandywine took place all around with troops moving along Ring Road and American cannons positioned nearby. The present farmhouse was probably constructed about 1800 and is a wonderful example of regional

architecture, incorporating elements of both Federal and Greek Revival styles.

## **Working the Farm**

The property's original barn burned in the 1870s when embers from a passing locomotive set it on fire. The railroad company shipped a prefabricated barn, much smaller than the original, as a replacement. For decades the Kuerner family operated a dairy farm much like others in the area. Later beef cattle and hay fields supported the farm.

## **Wyeths at Kuerners**

The Farm's seventy-year connection with Andrew Wyeth brought it international fame and insured its future. Wyeth discovered the farm on a boyhood walk, and soon became absorbed in the Kuerner's German traditions. His first depiction of the farm dates to 1932 when he was 15. Hundreds of drawings, watercolors, and tempera paintings followed. In 1976, Betsy James Wyeth published *Wyeth at Kuerners*, a record of 376 works Wyeth made on the Farm. In the same year, the Metropolitan Museum of Art presented the exhibition *Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth: Kuerners and Olsons*.

## **Conserving the Kuerner Farm**

The Brandywine's primary goal when acquiring the property in 1999 was to protect the Farm's existing natural and cultural resources, including its many acres of open space and historic buildings. The property is used for haying and goats still roam the farmyard today. The Farm is open for tours centered on Wyeth's work on the property.