



Laurie Haskell. JOSÉPHINE DOUET AT THE WYETH MILL, 2015  
Courtesy of Joséphine Douet

## THE PHOTOGRAPH, LIGHT, AND SUBJECT, A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE PHOTOGRAPHER AND THE CURATOR

**LV:** How did your plans evolve for the Wyeth project?

**JD:** I was already thinking about Wyeth—researching, because you have to be sure to have something to tell and so you have to dig into his life. I knew that what I wanted to talk about was intimacy because intimacy is everything. And, generally I like challenges. I thought, why don't I go to Wyeth's place in Chadds Ford. I chose Chadds Ford, not Wyeth's summer home in Cushing Maine because I find the sea way too distracting and easy eye candy. Wyeth's hometown was the perfect place for me to stay focused. Knowing nobody there, I could try to build relationships to make a new body of work, as I found out what I wanted to say.

I wanted to build everything from the beginning, that is a relationship with the people and with the place. The area is very spread out, so it was not easy. I started to do research on Google to find real things in this place. I didn't want to just go to the Kuerner Farm that Wyeth painted so much. I wanted to get my own cows. My own rural, "ruralia"—I'd say. I really had to get my own world in Andrew Wyeth's territory. For example, I didn't shoot Andrew Wyeth's studio, and at the Kuerner Farm I didn't shoot the house. I wanted to get my own sensation of it all. At the farm what I shot was the spring house or inside the barn. When I finished, I had everything from some of Wyeth's former models, Helga, of course, and people I met, faces I found. I wanted the series that I photographed to hold by itself.



Julie Dixon. JOSÉPHINE DOUET AND MODEL  
HELGA TESTORF, 2015. Courtesy of Joséphine Douet



Joséphine Douet. PUMPKINS IN THE FIELDS, 2015  
Preliminary photograph study. Courtesy of the artist

**LV:** When you arrived in Chadds Ford, what did you do first?

**JD:** I used Andrew Wyeth's work method to get my own work done, which included very long walks around Chadds Ford—walking and seeing its fields, fields, fields. I walked 8 to 15 miles a day to get the feel of the place. You can't get it if you're in a car. I wanted the details, the certain light of a certain place. You know it's going to be better the day after with other light at another time, so you just come back, and back, and back. You are actually in a kind of trance because you are on your own walking, looking around with your thoughts, and so you start shooting things that lead you to something else.

The process worked for me a little like a vortex. I started way outside and, then, I came closer and closer to what I wanted. It was all about focusing on the right things. They were there but you had to focus to see them or else you pass by and not see any of it at all.

**LV:** You certainly got down to the details, as in a photograph of Mother Archie's.

**JD:** The story of the branch lying on the ground at Mother Archie's is the key to a bigger story. Mother Archie's was the place where the Black community gathered in Chadds Ford back in the 40s and 50s but then [lost] the land. The expansion of Philadelphia and Wilmington made the land prices rise. This once very important community was also an important place in Andrew Wyeth's world. He had a lot of models there. All of his early painting is full of people from the neighborhood near Mother Archie's. Now there's nothing left but those falling walls and that white branch coming out of the ground.

**LV:** Light is so important in Andrew Wyeth's work. How did you think about the subject of light, with a camera as your tool, instead of an artist's brushes and paint?

**JD:** Painters create from scratch. That I envy deeply. Well, photographers can do that, too, with Photoshop, but for this work I said there's not going to be any Photoshop. I worked in digital but I didn't retouch anything because that photograph was the story. You know I used to be out every morning at about 5:30 or 6. I wanted to get the dawn light because that is when the light is most interesting.

**LV:** How did you make a connection with Wyeth's model Helga?

**JD:** When I was there I met Mary Landa. She manages the Wyeth Collection. We got along very well and I told her I would really like to shoot Helga. She said, "You've got a problem. Helga is in Maine and I'm not sure she's going to be back." So, I said, "Well, if it's not going to happen, it's not going to happen. Let's focus on something else." Three days before I left, I held a little party at the village tavern for all the people that I had met. Suddenly who opens the door and shows up—Helga! She came straight to me and started to talk. After half an hour we were best friends, and I went to see her the next day. I visited her a couple of times, 6 or 7 hours every time. We talked a lot. As I was leaving Chadds Ford, I said, "Helga, I have to ask you something. Would you pose for me?" She said, "Of course. Come and bring your camera tomorrow morning." I've never been a thief. There are many photographers that will trick you into something but I've never done that. I prefer to have a "no," than to take a picture without permission.

**LV:** You mentioned Wyeth isn't a familiar artist in Europe. How did museum visitors in Madrid react to your photographs?

**JD:** A lot of people have told me at the Thyssen that they understood Wyeth's painting a lot better after seeing my photographs. One journalist came out of the exhibition crying. She told me, "You've captured what living in the countryside is." That's why I wanted to use Wyeth's methods of walking and to really focus on details because when people live in a place, especially the countryside, in nature, they see those details day after day but don't pay them much attention. The details, though, are in their minds. It's kind of subliminal in the end.

**LV:** Do the portraits in your Wyeth series have something in common with your fashion and bullfighting portraits?

**JD:** The whole story of my work is to create an intimacy, a closeness, with somebody. The most important thing is to create that strange kind of link—that of almost falling in love with your subject and your subject falls in love with you. You abandon yourself and the subjects abandon themselves. It's very fascinating and it's very inflammable, like burning alcohol. Because it's very strong, it makes a lot of light, but, then, it's gone—in a second, it's gone.