

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, JANUARY 15, 1995

ART

Painting the Wilderness From the Inside Out

By SCOTT SUTHERLAND

PORTLAND, Me. NEIL WELLIVER IS BURNED out, and says so. He has just finished an all-consuming painting marathon, three months of 18-hour days preparing for his current one-man show at the Marlborough Gallery in New York, and the effort has left him exhausted. Even his famously exuberant feistiness seems muted, softened by something like the high cloud cover that hangs above his family's sprawling Maine farmhouse.

"I've never felt this tired before," he says amid the clutter of his large, rustic studio, a former barn that adjoins his house. Mr. Welliver — at 65, stocky, white-haired, his mustache streaked with gray — waves toward an 8-foot-square canvas, uncompleted, propped against a wall. "I haven't been able to paint at all," he says. "Not enough energy for it. But that's all behind me. Been working on watercolor prints. Lots of tramping in the woods."

Not painting does not come naturally to Mr. Welliver. Through fires that destroyed his house and work and deaths of a wife and two children, one by murder, he has painted the upland Maine landscape obsessively for nearly 30 years. His large oils of unspoiled wilderness, with their quiet emotional power and technical complexity, have won him widespread critical praise. "No one has painted nature from the inside out as well as he has," says the poet and critic Mark Strand, a friend of Mr. Welliver's. "I think Neil is simply the finest landscape painter America has produced." The art critic Robert Hughes concurs. "Welliver's huge paint-

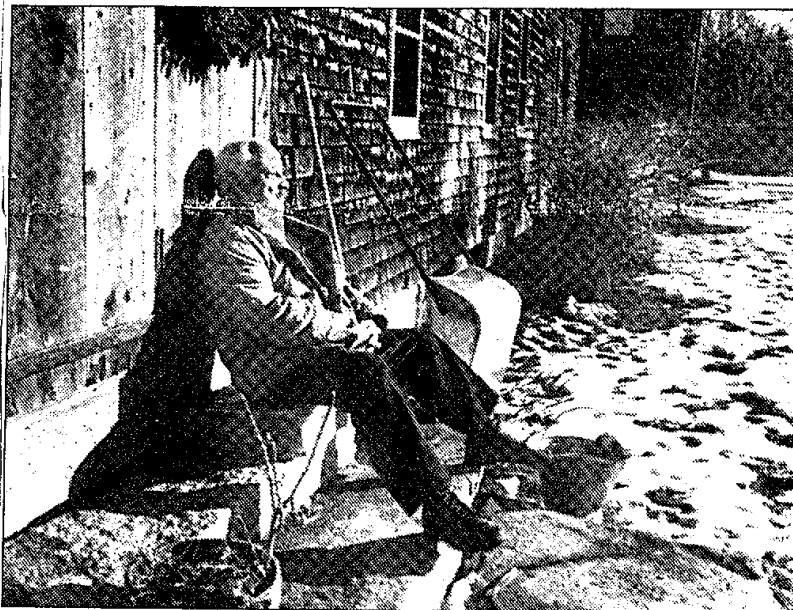
**Against a backdrop
of personal calamity,
Neil Welliver tramps
on, bent on exploring
the Maine landscape.**

ings of the Maine woods are among the strongest images in modern American art," he wrote of Mr. Welliver's 1982 retrospective in Philadelphia. "For guts and fastidiousness, they are hard to beat."

Mr. Welliver's concentration on the Maine landscape has precedents in the work of modernists like Masden Hartley, John Marin and Rockwell Kent. But his dogged devotion to realism makes him a traditionalist in today's art world, closer perhaps to Wyeth than to Bill Jensen. While his style is rooted in the tradition of American landscape art it is filtered through the color theory ideas of his teacher and mentor, Joseph Albers,

and the surface sensibilities of Jackson Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists. "Close up, all you can see are blobs of unmixed paint," says Ray Farrell of O'Farrell Gallery in Brunswick, where Mr. Welliver exhibits locally. "Take two steps back, and it's remarkable how it all snaps back together."

Mr. Welliver's technique is painstaking and uncompromising. He makes a small painted sketch of a scene, which becomes a small finished oil. He then makes a large charcoal sketch on paper, transfers the sketch to a large canvas, and begins to paint. He works from the top down, left to



Gary Guisinger for The New York Times

Neil Welliver outside his barn in Lincolnville, Me.—Painting "places of power."...

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

ALEXANDRE GALLERY ALEXANDRE FINE ART INC. ESTABLISHED 1996

ALEXANDRE

right; when he finishes the lower right corner, he signs his name and walks away. "When the painting's finished, I'm finished with it," he says. "I hate painting. Every day I go into the studio and try to repair my own inadequacies and just crawl out of there."

Rarely panoramic, Mr. Welliver's works focus instead on intimate, otherwise unremarkable scenes of the deep woods. His new show, his sixth at the Marlborough, is filled with familiar Welliver scenes — a boulder-strewn stream in "Snow in Hope Brook," a massive chunk of river ice in "Last Ice, St. John's" — that Mr. Strand says "claim a certain stately privacy." Viewers used to the immediate hook of postcard-style landscapes may feel put off by Mr. Welliver's work, which tends to reveal itself much in the way nature does — slowly, and on its own terms.

The new show also represents, in part, a re-emergence of sorts by Mr. Welliver, who has lived in virtual seclusion for three years following the murder of a son in Thailand. "The world sometimes seems set against him," Mr. Strand says, "but in his paintings a different set of rules apply. His work becomes a haven, a place where the artist is in control. Painting is his life."

Painting and the woods have always been central to Mr. Welliver's life. He grew up roaming the countryside of eastern Pennsylvania, graduated at the bottom of his high school class of 21, then earned a bachelor's degree from the Philadelphia Museum College of Art in 1953. He dabbled in advertising, taught public school ("until the loyalty-oath came along; I couldn't sign it, so I left"), then headed to Yale to study with Mr. Albers.

Mr. Albers was a forceful, demanding presence, and Mr. Welliver's representational style gradually dissolved into abstraction before finally tipping into reductive color-field paintings — Mr. Albers's forte. Mr. Albers, whose artistic credo was "to follow me, follow yourself," was furious with Mr. Welliver's stylistic malleability but invited him to stay on and teach when he completed his master's degree. Mr. Welliver stayed for 10 years, thoroughly absorbed Mr. Albers's tough-love credo, then moved on to teach painting at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Fine Art.

As a teacher, Mr. Welliver could inadvertently crush lesser souls, says Dozier Bell, a

Maine artist and student of Mr. Welliver's at Penn. "But his teaching was about what an artist is, what they do, about the totality of the artist's life," Ms. Bell says. "He sees your work as an extension of every other part of your life."

In 1962, the painter Alex Katz invited Mr. Welliver to visit Maine. His attraction was immediate. He bought an old farmhouse — without heating, plumbing or electricity — on 106 acres for \$2,500, on a fire road outside the hamlet of Lincolnville Center. He moved to Maine permanently in 1970, commuting to Philadelphia to teach until his retirement in 1989.

The north woods didn't find their way into Mr. Welliver's paintings overnight, however. Through the 1960's, his style was described by one critic as "domestic realism," mostly whimsical watercolors of family gatherings, marching bands and nudes. As the art world turned from Abstract Expressionism to embrace Pop, Mr. Welliver turned to small oil studies of nudes, which are notable mostly for their settings — the woods. The nudes gradually disappeared from his work, and by the mid-70's Mr. Welliver was engaged in his enduring passion, the large oils of the Maine wilderness.

In January 1975, Mr. Welliver's farmhouse — along with his studio and many of his paintings — was destroyed by fire. ("Most of those paintings I should have burned myself," he says, with characteristic gruffness.) Mr. Welliver, his wife, Polly, and their four sons escaped unharmed. That same year, the Wellivers' 3-month-old daughter died of crib death, and shortly thereafter Polly died of a strep infection at the age of 37.

Mr. Welliver kept on as best he could. He continued to roam the woods, and he continued to paint. He found another farmhouse, nearly identical to the one that burned, and had it moved, plank by plank, to the site of the original. He later remarried, and he and his wife, Sheila, had a son, John, now 13.

Mr. Welliver's life seemed to knit itself back together. As his children grew, so did his stature as an artist. Then, in 1991, Mr. Welliver received a telephone call from Thailand, where his son Eli, 21, was traveling. The night before he was to return home, a thief had laced Eli's beer with heroin. "enough to kill three elephants," the caller

Continued on Page 35

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

ALEXANDRE GALLERY ALEXANDRE FINE ART INC. ESTABLISHED 1996

Painting Wilderness From the Inside Out

Continued From Page 31

said. Eli died almost instantly.

His death left Mr. Welliver overwhelmed by grief and anger. He stopped seeing friends. He hired investigators to look into Eli's death; arrests were made, followed by another call from Thailand, this time threatening Mr. Welliver and his family. He attended his last Marlborough opening two years ago with a bodyguard. "I think his son's death was the last straw," a friend of Mr. Welliver's has said. "I think the various tragedies in his life make Job look like a piker on a picnic."

"Eli's death messed me up," says Welliver matter-of-factly. "Grief lifts, but I will never live long enough to assuage my anger. You get to a certain point where you just have to eat it. But I had to keep working."

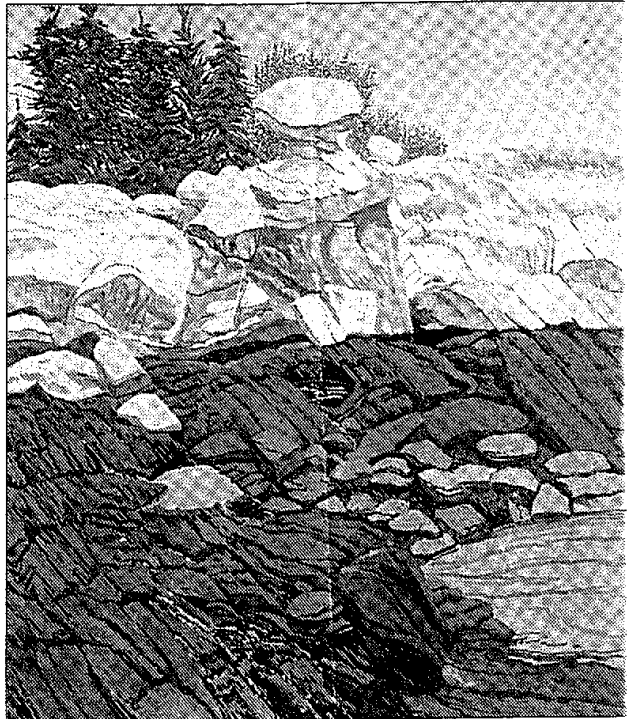
As his son's body was brought home and buried, a vast wildfire tore through thousands of acres of Maine's Allagash region, a remote expanse of forest, rivers, black flies and bears. Mr. Welliver ventured out daily to paint the charred trunks. The six large works from this period, exhibited at the Marlborough in 1993, are filled with a kind of terrible beauty. Burnt tree limbs angle in all directions; from out of the scorched earth emerge bits of new growth, probably green. "Nature seems in

mourning for itself in those paintings," Mr. Strand says. "I think they're some of the most powerful paintings Neil has ever done."

Respect for the land is a hallmark of his paintings, which begin in as uncalculated a manner as Mr. Welliver can muster. "I never go out looking for a place to paint," he says. "I let myself stumble on it. The spot I was painting today I first saw 10 years ago." He paints what he calls "places of power, places where you think, *here*. The purpose of painting is to extract all the power you can out of the place."

SOME OF THAT POWER HE keeps for himself. It is those places, coupled with his drive to paint, that draw him inexorably back to the woods. Tramping around his property, an easel and paints jammed into a battered backpack, Mr. Welliver seems his most elemental, less weighted by burn-out, by the pressures of a high-profile artistic career, by death and grief.

"All you can do is go out there and paint what's there, what you see," he says. "I have no idea how it comes about. That's the mystery. It's a lifelong war with myself. That sounds Puritanical and Christian, but I'm neither." He grins, his eyes glittering. "When I die I'm going to rot." □



"Last Ice, St. John's" (1994), by Neil Welliver—"All you can do is go out there and paint what's there, what you see."

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

ALEXANDRE GALLERY ALEXANDRE FINE ART INC. ESTABLISHED 1996