

# ALEXANDRE



Wednesday, March 19, 2014

## "Snow on Alden Brook" by Neil Welliver

**Picturing Maine -**

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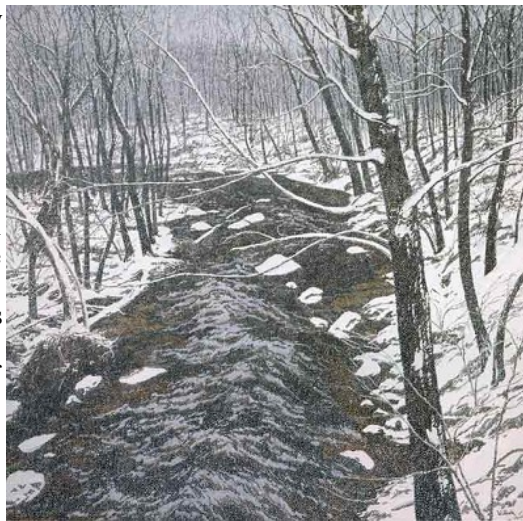
Neil G. Welliver's (1929-2005) methodical, nearly mechanical method of painting produced some of the most lyrical and compelling landscapes in contemporary art. "Snow on Alden Brook" is surely among these.

Welliver's artistic training under Josef Albers, the German émigré and champion of color abstraction - his iconic and endlessly variable "Homage to the Square" series - with whom the landscape painter later taught at Yale, provided many critical lessons that he carried with him to the end of his life. Not the least of these was a thorough understanding of the shifting, amorphous degrees of abstraction as modernism's way of introducing new, non-narrative forms of reality.

Welliver worked up his wall-sized landscape paintings - too large to be painted outdoors - from smaller drawings and oil sketches made directly from nature.

The outdoor drawings and sketches were made in all conditions and seasons. One imagines the artist cursing the prickly bushes and branches, foul weather and blackflies that were his frequent companions in the field. Resolute and undeterred by difficult physical conditions, Welliver then transferred these studies, often with substantial changes, to large rolls of brown paper that he pricked full of holes with a tailor's wheel, sprinkling charcoal dust through the brown paper onto the primed canvas. Finally, he laid in the paint on top of the charcoal pattern, beginning at the upper left corner and moving down and across the canvas to the lower right.

Welliver's laborious, highly systematic image-making technique prompted one critic to describe him as a human laser printer. The result of physically demanding effort, the paintings convey a kind of stillness and quietude - and the absence of human intervention. Even Albers would likely have approved this hard-won self-effacement, and the resulting images are truly extraordinary.



Neil G. Welliver, "Snow on Alden Brook," 1983, oil on canvas — collection of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

Editor's Note: This is one in a series of occasional articles by Chris Crosman featuring Maine artists, past and present, often concentrated on a single work of art. The articles are largely edited and excerpted from previous publications by the author during his tenure as director of the Farnsworth Museum, Rockland, and founding chief curator for Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas.

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andscape imagery notwithstanding.

Welliver's snow pictures, such as "Snow on Alden Brook," present the most compelling evidence of how the artist synthesized representation and abstraction.

The painting clearly and convincingly reads as a record of a light snowfall on an utterly still winter day. Here are the real Maine woods, complete with uprooted trees, rock-strewn creek banks, dense thickets of saplings, and a fast-moving stream. If the jabbing, barren branches in the foreground compete for attention with the vertical trees receding into the distance, the artist's honesty proscribed editing and re-working for "artistic" effect or aesthetic decorum. In any case, Welliver's vision of unkempt nature is also about making the viewer aware of the physical facts of paint and canvas. The scrim of lightly falling snow on the surface of the image underscores its identity as a flat piece of cloth covered with myriad flecks of paint. Nature's pristine white curtain laid on top of inchoate form, the tension between utter flatness and infinite depth. Moreover, the scale of such paintings literally places the viewer within the framing edge, into and inside nature and the nature of painting itself.

It is tempting to read something of the artist's tragic personal life into these cool, elegant paintings of a chaotic natural world that is nevertheless obdurate and cleansing. Welliver and his work can be said to come from places that are hard and unyielding. And, yet, the paintings have a redemptive quality, suggesting that nature in all its seeming randomness and disarray is finally about renewal and continuity. Few have endured so much loss: in 1975 nearly all of Welliver's life's work up to that time burned in a studio fire; a year later his infant child and young wife died suddenly in quick succession; and in the final decades of his life, he suffered the loss of two grown sons, one dying of natural causes and the other murdered while traveling in the Far East. He rarely spoke of such things but was honest enough to admit that it affected his work. As critic Edgar Allen Beem once noted, Welliver just could not say how.

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