

ALEXANDRE

The NEW YORK Sun

VOL. 107 NO. 141 Published at New York City THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2007 www.nysun.com © 2007 ONE S.I. LLC \$1.00

GALLERY-GOING

By JOHN GOODRICH



Neil Welliver, "Skeletons in Water" (1966).

The well-known landscapes of Neil Welliver (1929–2005) reflect his singular, probing tenacity. Six years ago, Alexandre Gallery exhibited early paintings of female nudes in streams that suggested another side of the artist: the quirky appetites lurking beneath his disciplined exterior. These playful qualities positively thrive in the gallery's current installation of figure paintings and watercolors from an even earlier period of the artist's life.

In "Amon's Orchard" (1964), a man, dressed in a jacket and tie, and a young girl rest comfortably against a cow. "Royal Head" (1958–59) depicts a face with crazily enlarged jowls, while several self-portraits show natural proportions but brilliant Fauve colors. "Couple with Leslie" (1965), though, sets the most consistent tone of the installation, with an image of a man in a sport coat and tie, casually and inexplicably ac-

companied — *à la Manet* — by a rounding washes. In "Figures Under Tree" (1964), nudes lounge in rows, like a fisherman's catch, before clothed men — and the image resonates, whether one sees it as calculated sexism or goofily misplaced desire.

In these oil paintings, Welliver's color sometimes effectively supports his subject matter. The shadowy darks of foliage evocatively set off the paler figures in "Couple with Leslie," and weighted hues lend a genuine eeriness to a small canvas from the early 1960s of a hand reaching above a row of flowers. In other oils, though, colors tend to be more forceful than eloquent, pressing relentlessly rather than shaping motifs with the give-and-take rhythms of Avery or Matisse.

The watercolors, though, are another matter. Oddly enough, their translucent hues tend to have more pictorial weight, characterizing the artist's subjects with startling vigor. In the 1964 watercolor study for "Amon's Orchard," brown washes lend the cow considerably more heft than do the colors of the far larger canvas. Skin tones in the watercolors are not simply pink; they're lasciviously buoyant against denser sur-

rounding washes. In "Figures Under Tree" (1964), nudes lounge in rows, like a fisherman's catch, before clothed men — and the image resonates, whether one sees it as calculated sexism or goofily misplaced desire.

Another watercolor from 1966 tenderly pictures a family of skeletons resting and bathing in a stream, redefining the term "skinny-dipping." But this kind of humor dwindled as the artist concentrated on landscape after the mid-1970s. He may have found solace in nature after the series of tragedies that struck in 1975: the deaths of his wife and child, and the destruction of most of his life-work in a fire. His resolve remained, undiminished, but purged of the quirkiness of these beguiling works at Alexandre.

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