Frank H. Goodyear, Jr., Welliver, New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1985.

Nowhere is Welliver more at home than in the woods of his beloved Maine; attuned to nature's ways, alert, respectful, his eyes probe deeply into its recesses. He is always struggling to see more, to unravel the mysteries, to understand the processes of nature. The landscape image is the core of Welliver's painting. Without the image his painting would lose its meaning. On the other hand, his is a serious, lifelong commitment to modernist aesthetics. He has acknowledged that the vitality of the new representational movement among contemporary American artists, such as Philip Pearlstein, Alex Katz, and William Bailey, with whom he finds kinship, comes from immediate precedents. So often he has expressed his deep admiration for the work of Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and Willem de Kooning.

As a student at the Yale School of Fine Arts in the mid-1950s, Welliver was surrounded by a cadre of "reductivists," artists like Josef Albers and Burgoyne Diller. It was at Yale that Welliver first heard so much about the concerns of abstractionists, about pictorial means: process, structure, surface, the interaction of colour, the physical fact of the canvas. These teachings have left a lasting impression on Welliver, although even as a young student he sensed their limitations for himself.

By the early 1960s, gradually, hesitantly, Welliver brought his own understanding and passion for twentieth-century aesthetics to bear on the problems of real stimuli as a basis for painting. This awareness, abetted at the time by a move to rural Lincolnville, Maine, threw Welliver's world to a completely new set of challenges. The basic challenge was to become a modern landscape painter.

Welliver's commitment to large-scale painting is consummate; he has created a large body of work expressive of his artistic persona. He prefers painting on a grand scale. From his student days in Philadelphia, mere physical size in painting has meant a lot to Welliver. First, Benjamin West's colossal Death on a Pale Horse (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts), later, the monumental Jacques Louis Davids in the Louvre in Paris greatly impressed him. Size alone, the romantic notion of "grand" painting, the appearance of moving rapidly through a form without losing it; these possibilities excited Welliver as he set his own directions.

As a student in the early 1950s at the Philadelphia Museum, College of Art, Welliver experimented with almost every kind of abstract painting: analytical and synthetic cubist works, de Stijl, and anything else in an abstract style he was able to see. His "own paintings," Cézannesque still lifes and landscapes, were tentative beginnings. He discovered the watercolours of the American John Marin (1870-1953) that he admired for their spareness and distinct personality; at the same time he discovered the delights of modern painting.

From the college of Art in Philadelphia, Welliver enrolled in the Yale School of Fine Arts, Yale University, attracted there to be able to study with Josef Albers and with many other celebrated teachers: Willem de Kooning, Burgoyne Diller, Ad Reinhardt, James Brooks, and Conrad Marcarelli, all of whom had come to Yale to be with Albers. As Welliver has said, at Yale, "the emphasis was entirely in the direction of abstract painting, International style architecture, and quantitative planning. I was there painting, as a student, abstract pictures which would fall loosely into the category of 'color field.' It was

curiously in this context that the first glimmer of a new approach to figurative painting occurred to me."

That "glimmer" would take time to mature as Welliver, eager to try his hand at anything new, worked his way through an assortment of different media, including tar, and processes including pumice, sticks and knives, not even sure then whether he wanted to paint or approach the art experience in some different way. He remembers the time in the late 1950s as confusing and desperate. The notion of the work ethic, which he had been steeped in as a boy growing up in Millville, Pennsylvania, and which he still values, was in direct confrontation with the ideas of permissiveness and spontaneity, ideas popular in the art world since the turn of the century.

Welliver was not unaware, during this time of personal uncertainty in the late 1950s, of the ongoing traditions o figurative painting in twentieth-century American art. He knew the work of the Ashcan School painters, the American scene artists, and independents like Edward Hopper. It was also patently obvious to him that figurative work was then considered reactionary, even philistine, and any deviance from the reductivist ideology, expressed in Miesian terms in the famous dictum "less is more," was considered counterrevolutionary and professionally suicidal. After all, he was surrounded at Yale by many of the leading avant-garde practitioners and critics of the days as well as by such modernist collections at The Société Anonyme formed by Katherine Dreier.

Nonetheless, Welliver, in his private search for something important, something substantive, something his own, increasingly recognized the limitations for him of the avant-garde. He saw in avant-garde painting a pronounced "look," an academy of the avant-garde, a final refinement of long-established and already assimilated pictorial forms. He also felt increasingly alienated from the routine trappings of the art world in the early 1960s. Thus, in 1962, at the age of thirty-three, he made the decision to paint the figure and the landscape from direct observation, not in any traditional sense, but not hostile to tradition either, rather as a modern painter of he 1960s.

It was at this time that Welliver moved to Maine, into a farm, and began building a life that would support that decision.

Welliver's figurative beginnings were tentative, but he had learned an important lesson during these years—to trust his own sensibility, which he still considers unlike anyone else's. Notwithstanding, he also valued greatly the mutually supportive conversations at he time with painters such as Fairfield Porter (1907-1975), Alex Katz, and Philip Pearlstein, whose painterly interests paralleled his. Early on he also greatly respected, as he still does, the paintings of Willem de Kooning for their ability to like images with materials. He has said, more recently, that it is one of his ambitions to make a "natural painting as fluid as a de Kooning."

No single event catapulted Welliver into working figuratively. More than anything, it seems inevitable now, given his childhood upbringing in rural Pennsylvania, his native sensibility—he sees everything--, his fierce, natural independence, and his respect for the past as well as the present, that he would struggle to such a decision eventually. And, a struggle it was in the context of the early 1960s in America when such a decision seemed so ill-conceived.

Welliver's own explanations for the decision seem so simple. He has remarked, "I only wanted to make a better picture," and, "it seemed like such a natural thing to do." The apparent simplicity of these remarks may seem, at first, disarming. Notwithstanding, they reinforce Welliver's fierce determination to be a great painter at the same time that they underscore his own complete dependence on his natural instincts.

Welliver's figure paintings occupy a narrow range; his greatest activity, in the 1960s and early 1970s, has been large-scale female nudes in the landscape, but he has also painted his family and a few of his close friends. He displays no specific interest in the conventions of portraiture. Rather, he has used the figure as a convenience. Never is he interested in a particular likeness, although likeness is a by-product of he way he works, saying, candidly, of the small portrait of Edwin Denby (page 46) "I painted him as I would a fish or anything else. It's the form, working through it quickly, that I'm after."

Welliver's portrait of the American poet Edwin Denby is small in scale, but possesses an extraordinarily powerful presence; it has the air of a much larger work, a condition that often is the case in Welliver's smaller works. Done toward the end of Denby's life, Welliver manages to convey the sitter's advanced age—and Denby's embattled state—yet, at the same time, his absolute resoluteness and inner strength. The intensity of the artist's vision, in being able to capture the essence of Denby, the surface's aggressive, strident mien, the dark, almost malevolent palette, combine in a tour de force in Welliver's oeuvre. One senses the power of the painter and the poet, in contradistinction to the rather haggard, tired, introspective image of Denby in the painting Edwin before the painting "Osprey Nest" (page 45). Denby is a bystander in the latter work, a curious studio juxtaposition to the central image of a large osprey nest. In the smaller portrait Denby symbolizes the energy of creative forces, in the latter the decline of the intellect's power.

Through the 1960s, into the early 1970s, Welliver painted dozens of large-scale landscapes habitated with figures; many of these paintings were lost in a studio fire. The earliest of these have a decidedly homey quality, but, more importantly, reveal Welliver's early attempts to integrate images and materials into a union of forces. In works like Red Slips, of 1964, (page 49), the presence of the figures still predominates; they are the unequivocal focus of the work, frontal, placed in the foreground, real solid figures who stare out at you rather than forms that slip in and out of the surface of the canvas. The union of forces—images and materials—was still several years away.

Welliver did eventually succeed in sublimating the figure to "an equal status" relationship with his modernist painting concerns: the inviolability of the canvases' surface, the integrity of the medium. One sees, for instance, this progression in the comparison of Silas with Double Canoe, of 1966 (page 50), and Silas in Yellow Canoe, of 1969 (page 51). In the latter painting, Welliver has managed to integrate the figure of his son sitting in a canoe into the landscape composition, using natural elements, and their reflections, to break up the solidity of real forms. In Silas in Yellow Canoe, the viewer is less inclined to read the work episodically than he is to read it formally. Welliver was working towards making his natural paintings as "fluid as a de Kooning."

Welliver realized his greatest early successes as a painter in a group of works of nude female figures posed in the landscape. The fact that he turned to this kind of subject matter is hardly surprising. Aware of the many earlier historical precedents, from Giorgione to Manet, desirous himself of updating the past, a highly sensual man himself,

an artist with a universal vision of nature, these works afforded him an ideal opportunity to act out his ambitions. As he himself has commented:

It seemed the natural thing to do. I think the nudes were part of a kind of erotic free association, free flowing, erotic impulse that was involved in those pictures; that is a guess, since I don't know. But anyway, those early paintings of the nudes in the landscape really have to do with painting nature, and, for me, the figure was part of nature.

The difficulty of integrating the nude figure into the landscape, so that the subject of the painting becomes something more than a nude, has faced generation of artists. Clearly, Welliver's ambitions encompassed much more than the issue of nudity. This is not to say that the nude female images themselves are not erotic, for they definitely are. Languid, voluptuous, young women spread before the viewer as part of nature's banquet, the figures have an alluring appeal that not even the artist himself will deny. But erotic expression is not the reason for these paintings. They have to do with painting nature, and Welliver saw the figure as part of nature.

Welliver's other principal ambitions were formal; he wanted to make modern paintings. As he observed, with or without the intrusion of nudes, his process of painting as well as his own attitude to it, did not change a wit. For him the painting was all the same; his goals were the same. He wanted to achieve a union between images and materials, to find a balance between particularities and generalities, between objectivity and non-objectivity, between focus and non-focus, all within the context of modern landscape painting. The achievement of this ambition has been the painter's life work.

In the end, Welliver took the figures out of the landscape because of the "unbelievable focus" they created. In effect, they got in the way of something that interested him more. However, during the ten or so years he worked to resolve this problem, he created a group of paintings of extraordinary power. In order to achieve what results in "the collapse of the figure," in other words, the disintegration of the figure's form into abstract, coloured patterns on the surface of the canvas, Welliver placed his figures in pools of water, under bright daylight, to heighten the reflective and refractive quality of the ambiance.

In an early figural work, like Diane with Soap, of 1967 (page 55), the sculptural solidity of the nude figure begins to break down in the forms underwater, at he same time that the figure's head remains a real, specific portrait staring directly out at the viewer. Slightly later paintings, like Vickie (page 59), and its companion, Johanna Removing Shirt, reveal increasingly statuesque models, great forces of female sensuality, heroic figures like so many of Willem de Kooning's women, aggressive in their womanhood. These works are strongly object-oriented, and erotic, their sensuality heightened by Welliver's bravado manipulation of the medium.

In others of these early figural landscapes, the phenomenon of images and materials achieves a greater equilibrium. In Nude (page 60), the specificity of the frontal female form is greatly diminished by a strong natural light that reduces shapes to flattened generalities. Nude, one of many small works done by Welliver about this time, of which many were lost in Welliver's studio fire, reveals the spontaneity of direct observation, the artist working through forms quickly, that has resulted in a more general impression of the model.

The natural elements Welliver has conjoined frequently: figures in a shallow space, in harsh natural light, in bright pools of water. A master of these situations, he has made copious drawings of water surfaces in different conditions of light in order to understand the phenomenological determinants. The interaction of light on forms with reflective surfaces, including the figure's own light-coloured skin, causes both visual distortions and disintegration of the forms themselves. In works like Reflection, Welliver has achieved the ultimate, for him, disintegration of form. An essay on abstraction, in which the surface of the canvas asserts its primacy, Reflection, among Welliver's early work, stands a the consummate achievement of his ambitions—the union between images and materials.

Why did you paint so many nude figures? Was it for the privilege of an artist to have a long, close look at a female figure?

"I've had long close looks at female figures and wasn't painting at all. So I assume that's not the reason."

Welliver's figural landscapes presented him with a challenge of immense proportions. All the more so since it came at the beginning of the cycle of his figural works in the early 1960s. To deny the figure its presence, to integrate it successfully into an outdoor setting, in the nude, so that it would neither be the sole focus nor an unnatural intruder, amounted to an heroic task. Eventually, Welliver realized the difficulty of his ambition, of making the figure "collapse," and by the early 1970s he began concentrating on pure landscapes. Nonetheless, he was able to achieve in these figural landscapes a body of works that today appears substantive and cohesive. Welliver's early figural landscapes allowed him to move on, as he always has, into new painting amphitheaters. These works are important because they forced him to focus on the facts of painting in the presence of the figure.