

A Landscape That Carries a Life's Worth of Emotion

By DEBORAH WEISGALL

BRUNSWICK, Me. **E**MILY NELLIGAN's charcoal drawings are almost all the same size: 10 inches wide by 7 inches high. Some are dark as a moonless night, some pale as fog. They all depict the same landscape: Great Cranberry Island, southwest of Mount Desert Island in Maine. Twenty-six of them, reticent and lyrical, ring a gallery at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art here. In their minimal steel frames, they hang like sudden windows: instants of light and air translated into black and white.

At first glance, they might be photographs, with their intricate interplay of lights and darks. "Untitled, Cranberry Island, 21 July, 1997" catches the delicate gradations of gray in a sunset sky, an array of clouds almost too subtle to be drawn. But these drawings also read as abstractions, the landscape — clouds, rocks and ocean — pared to emotion.

This show, "Littoral Abstractions," which continues until Sept. 3, is one of the few times Ms. Nelligan, who has been making drawings for more than 50 years, has permitted them to be shown publicly. "I remember the first time I saw one of her drawings," said Katy Kline, the director of the Bowdoin Museum. "It

was during a studio visit with another artist, Lois Dodd, and I remember looking up, and hung fairly high on the wall was a very quiet, very soft, dark drawing. I kept looking at it; it was as if I were hearing a solo cello, and I asked, 'Whose is that?'"

Ms. Nelligan's work has long been a well-kept secret. Meyer Schapiro, Hilton Kramer, Wolf Kahn and Richard Pousette-Dart are among those who have collected her drawings, but her last two solo exhibitions took place in 1991 in out-of-the-way places, one sponsored by the Connecticut Commission on the Arts, at the Legal Offices Building Library in Hartford, and the other at Maine Coast Artists, a nonprofit gallery in Rockport.



"Untitled, Cranberry Island, 25 October 94 No. 1," a charcoal-on-paper drawing by Emily Nelligan.

Bowdoin College Museum of Art

**A rare exhibition of
Emily Nelligan's
lyrical drawings, all
of them depicting an
island off Maine.**

"I used to think that exhibiting was wrong," Ms. Nelligan said recently. "That art was——" she hesitated "——sacred. The buying and selling is heartbreaking. Art has become nothing but a commodity." Ms. Nelligan, 78, is tall, with thick, cropped, graying hair and dark gold-flecked eyes. She speaks softly and slowly; and, like her drawings, she is reserved and private.

Words are the province of her husband, the artist and illustrator Marvin Bileck, whom people call Buddy. He is wiry and energetic and wears a bold pink shirt; he has white hair and a white beard and intense, eager eyes. "The drawings are Emily, and Emily is her drawings," he said. "They are like Emily Dickinson's poems."

In the gallery, surrounded by Ms. Nelligan's drawings, with their sure hand, their brevity and their breath-taking revelations, this comparison does not sound like hyperbole. It might, however, displease his wife. "I do not talk about my drawings," she stated flatly.

Theirs is a marriage of understanding opposites. Mr. Bileck, whose work is meticulous and detailed, almost Netherlandish in feeling (he illustrated Alfred Kazin's "Walker in the City" and "Rain Makes Applesauce," a 1965 children's book still in print), prefers the gentle hills and intricate ancient trees of southern New England to Cranberry Island. Ms. Nelligan cannot draw in Connecticut. "For her the woods are claustrophobic," her husband said. So they divide the year.

Ms. Nelligan agreed: "In Connecticut I force myself to try, but it's not worth it. I work out of doors, and the atmosphere becomes part of what I do." Mr. Bileck has accommodated. "He's gotten to love the rocks," Ms. Nelligan said, "and the twisted, gnarled, downed trees."

Ms. Nelligan and her husband travel from their house in northwestern Connecticut to Cranberry Island in June and remain through October. They have been going there since 1946, when, Ms. Nelligan said, "A friend wrote that it was a beautiful place, and you could find a place to rent for not very much money."

"I think our first house cost \$100. Buddy did not like it; it was too austere."

Austerity, though, is central to Ms. Nelligan's work. She was born in New York in 1924. When she was 6 her father died, soon after he had managed finally to land a job at the height of the Depression. "My father did watercolors and worked with in-laid wood," Ms. Nelligan said. "I remember him steaming wood to bend it."

She always drew, and she took a course in art at Washington Irving High School. Her teacher there told her about Cooper Union, from which she graduated in 1944, and where she met her husband. Although she studied painting, "paint was expensive," she says, so she began to use charcoal. "At first it was a restriction." But she thrives on restriction: of size, of medium, of place, of her time in that place.

Mr. Bileck said his wife did most things slowly and deliberately, but she drew extremely fast, working with a pencil in one hand and an eraser in the other. On Cranberry Island, Ms. Nelligan and Mr. Bileck work every day, in the morning and again at twilight. "The clouds are good today," Mr. Bileck said recently in a phone call from the island. "Emily's still out, but I got too cold. I came back in." The island light captivates his wife, Mr. Bileck said. "Cranberry is out to sea. The place is flooded with light."

SOME of her most beautiful drawings deal with the fading of that light, when color leaves the day. "I go until it gets dark," Ms. Nelligan said. "Then I sleep." She works in charcoal on writing paper and never seals her drawings with a fixative, as if that would stifle them. She draws favorite places along the shore: ledges, where an erased white halo of surf floods a rock abstracted to a black circle; a spit of land embracing an inlet's still water, its bands of whites and grays. Although the works in the show span nearly two decades, a drawing made in 1990 compared to one made in 1999 betrays no sense of the passing of years, no reference to the events of a lifetime. Each drawing is untitled, identified only by the date on which she made it.

Ms. Nelligan's work is a deeply private dialogue with a particular setting; it is also, in its privacy, a response to the currents of American art. Ms. Nelligan and Mr. Bileck lived in New York for years while Mr. Bileck taught at Queens College; they were in the thick of things. Cranberry Island has remained a constant far removed from the marketplace of art in postwar America and its capricious fashions. If Ms. Nelligan's subject is the moment in its infinite variability, she also draws permanence: a summer place apart from chronology, where time is measured by seasons, tides and changing light.

Deborah Weisgall's most recent article for Arts & Leisure was about an installation by Lee Mingwei at the Gardner Museum in Boston.