



Emily Nelligan Rescued From Charcoal Island

By [Hilton Kramer](#) • 08/28/00 12:00am

At the age of 76, the American artist Emily Nelligan has suddenly been “discovered.” Ms. Nelligan’s work, which is entirely devoted to charcoal drawings of Great Cranberry Island off the coast of Maine, has for many years been admired and collected by certain artists and writers on art, myself included, but it remained more or less unknown to the public. I first heard about these drawings in the 1980’s from the painter Lois Dodd and the sculptor Philip Grausman, and I bought one out of a small gallery show in Georgetown, Me., in 1987.

Now, with the exhibition called Littoral Abstractions: Drawings by Emily Nelligan that Alison Ferris has mounted this summer at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in Brunswick, Me.-the artist’s first solo show since the one I saw in 1987-Ms. Nelligan has become a much-talked-about talent. Articles about the Bowdoin show by Deborah Weisgall in The New York Times of July 30 and Amy Sutherland in the Portland Press Herald of Aug. 6 have brought many visitors to the museum and set its phones ringing, with callers from all over the country demanding to be allowed to buy drawings sight unseen.

You and I might think this a foolish way to acquire works of art, but it’s a more common practice than you might suppose; and with many allegedly intelligent people now buying paintings and other art objects on the Internet, ordering drawings over the telephone might even be considered quaint. It’s no more ridiculous, in any case, than the spectacle of all those well-heeled trend-setters who used to compete to have their names placed on Leo Castelli’s waiting lists for Pop pictures that had not yet been created. Every period adds something ridiculous to the comedy of art-world commerce. The only thing that really changes is the technology and the sums of money involved (they get bigger).

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Still, this unexpected moment in the limelight is unlikely to alter the course of Ms. Nelligan's art, which she has been creating on Great Cranberry Island in what appears to be contented obscurity for more than half a century. A child of the Depression era who grew up in New York and attended Cooper Union, she has spent every summer and sometimes the fall since 1944 working at these drawings of the island-which must set some kind of record in the annals of American art. Her winters are spent in the northern Connecticut wooded countryside, which never figures in her work. (Not enough sky, she says.) The island landscape, with its circumambient sea and mists and sky, its changing tides and shifting light and sometimes stormy weather, is her sole subject-or rather, the sole source of the many subjects that are revealed to her in this isolated offshore refuge she knows so well, yet is still in the process of discovering.

Needless to say, Great Cranberry Island is no longer as isolated as it once was, but you would never know that from Ms. Nelligan's drawings, which are devoid of figures or dwellings or other signs of a human presence-except, of course, that of her own hand and eye. She is a kind of naturalist of light and shadow, of a topography and atmosphere in which distinctions between the water's edge and terra firma or between the clouds in the sky and their reflection on the ocean's surface are not always clearly discernible. If the drawings often have the look of pure abstraction, they are nonetheless derived from specific observation bound by time and place and circumstance. Hence the title of this exhibition, *Littoral Abstractions*, with its implied pun and paradox.

Hence, too, her affinity for subjects drawn at twilight and enshrouded by fog and mist and the ocean's spray, when every contour of land and sea surrenders to its shadow and nothing is real but the movement of the dying light. It's a very poetic subject, of course, and at times a very melancholy one, too, yet it remains sternly unsentimentalized in these drawings, which impart no suggestion of a subjective reading of nature or offer anything in the way of allegory or moral reflection. There is instead a total allegiance to the artist's subject and to the medium that she has virtually reinvented for its depiction.

Her virtuosic command of the charcoal medium is indeed another of the wonders of Ms. Nelligan's art. She has somehow been able to wrest from this smudgy, powdery substance a "palette" of so many blacks, grays and off-whites, so many different densities of light and shade, so many nocturnal nuances and daylight subtleties, so much oceanic movement and celestial drama, that one is indeed made to wonder if one has ever before fully understood the power and range of charcoal as a pictorial medium. Hers is a small, perfect achievement, and whatever our feelings may be about the hoopla attendant upon her current "discovery," it is an achievement that deserves to be recognized.

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