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Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

Accomplished abstraction has become the heirloom varietal of painting, a pre-Phylloxera strain that springs forth for a few odd weeks in a tucked-away grove here or there frequented by hermits and the lonely few. So it was that last month's gallery chronicle did its best to map *la diritta via* from one such corner of the art world to the other.

It isn't easy to stay the course in the obscure thickets of art's flora. This season, representational art—painting, drawing, and print-making—is everywhere. It's dandelion and creeper vine and Japanese knotweed and your neighbor's pot plants in one. Hack down one stalk and it shoots up somewhere else. In these warm months the galleries open their windows and walls to representations of the outside world. The light shines in. The art allergies go crazy. Because just what gets represented is up for grabs in representational art. When it comes to the visible world it all has to do with how you see it. The Romans said *de gustibus non est disputandum*. To this we might add that there is also no accounting for sight. Much representational art is simply sneeze-worthy.

But here's the good news. Just as a year ago brought us Constable's breathtaking cloud studies at Salander-O'Reilly, many galleries are right now holding their best representational shows of the season. Marvin Bileck and Emily Nelligan at Alexandre is one example—a husband and wife pairing of charcoal drawings (Nelligan) and prints (Bileck) of Cranberry Island in Maine.[1]

Bileck and Nelligan began visiting Cranberry following their graduation from Cooper Union in the 1940s. Working together outdoors, they marked not only the visible world but also the passage of time and the changes of place. Constable's observations of nature were in equal measure spiritual and scientific. The two were inseparable in William Paley's *Natural Theology*, and Constable and Paley both live through Nelligan's work. As with Constable, Nelligan's titles are markers of time: *26 October 2001 (1)*; *25 July 2001 (2)*. But as with Paley there is spiritual mechanics undergirding the natural order. Nelligan's lyrical charcoals record the sea, the sky, and the woods with meditative sublimity. Working equally well with charcoal and eraser, Nelligan captures light in ways that defy the dark nature of her medium.

Bileck creates his own pencil drawings of the natural world, preparations for etchings and engravings. He is focused inland, to the close observations of rocks, stumps, and tree roots. His titles are place-specific: *Twister in the Limbs—Murch's Cove* (1991); *Craggy Trunks Along Dead Man's Point*. Nelligan captures the instants of light, whereas Bileck records the subtle changes of place over years: the differences in the ar-

1 "Marvin Bileck and Emily Nelligan: Cranberry Island: Drawings and Prints" opened at Alexandre Gallery, New York, on May 5 and remains on view through June 17, 2005.

chitecture of a tree or the facets of a rock. Both artists share the same project. They work in black on white. They record nature untouched by man, but in the most human of ways. A silent syncopation runs through the human relationship informing their work.

Marvin Bileck died at age eighty-five, a week before the opening of this show. In life he was a distinguished illustrator of children's books, including *Rain Makes Applesauce*. His death underscores the urgency of what he saw on Cranberry.

Scratchy throat, watery eyes, the sniffles, runny nose: the standard symptoms of art apoplexy. Take Tim Gardner, a representational artist indicative of the Chelsea school. At his show at 303 Gallery—let's just say the pollen count was notably high.[2] And for what? *Vide* the press release:

> Tim Gardner's new work consists of larger than life-sized pastel portraits based on photographs found in his family's archive. . . . The family group pastels are taken from similar "professional" studio shots as the school pictures. *Untitled (Family Portrait 1)* shows the father in a full beard and suit, mother in large orange-rimmed glasses, and all of the boys with late 70's hair-styles.

What could be the most disagreeable irritant in this statement? The supercilious use of the word "archive"? The knowing quotes around "professional"? The identifying of "late 70's hair-styles"? Gardner's kitschy work looks good in magazine reproduction. Indeed his work looks better in reproduction than in real life, but that's another discussion. It is rather his choice of banal subject matter that gets people going, combined with what is perceived to be painterly talent. By glossing snapshots "found in his family's archive," Gardner's passionless surfaces are more mirror than window. Knowingness, impenetrability, and the safety of saying nothing say it all. Gardner, who first came to notoriety painting frat boys and hockey players, has the technique of the thirty-two-year-old and the eyes of someone ten years younger.

In Chelsea it is all surface, all the time. Likewise Dean Byington at Leslie Tonkonow, who "creates conceptual, process-driven, photomechanical works that are also obsessively handmade." Arguably more accomplished than Gardner's photorealist pastels, Byington's illustrations are all the more pukey—Beatrix Potter on 'shrooms, or Marvin Bileck if he had Xeroxed pages out of his own books. As with Gardner, Byington uses talent not to reveal but to create a wall between sight and experience.

Whatever happened to making your mind up back in Chelsea, that when you'll go you'll go like Elsie? Let me put it another way: What good's permitting some prophet of doom to wipe every smile away? The Chelsea boys key into the culture of fashion while the uptown artists demonstrate the confidence of sight. It's a crude distinction, a generational one, but that's the way it plays out this gallery season: younger artists have vision but lack the powers to see. I am reminded of a passage from G. K. Chesterton quoted by John Julius Norwich in last year's *Christmas Cracker*. Chesterton, by way of Kander & Ebb:

> It is commonly said that hope goes with youth, and lends to youth its wings of a butterfly: but I fancy that hope is the last gift given to man, and the only gift not given to youth. Youth is pre-eminently the period in which a man can be lyric, fanatical, poetic; but youth is a period in which a man can be hopeless. The end of every episode is the End of the World. But the power of hoping through everything, the knowledge that the soul survives its adventures, this great inspiration comes to the middle-aged; God has kept this good wine until now. It is from the backs of the elderly gentlemen that the wings of the butterfly should burst. There is nothing that so much mystifies the young as the constant frivolity of the old. They have discovered their indestructibility. They are in their second and clearer childhood, and there is a meaning in the merriment of their eyes. They have seen the end of the End of the World.

Bileck and Nelligan to Gardner and Byington: whippersnappers take note.

2 "Tim Gardner" was on view at 303 Gallery, New York, from April 15 through May 28, 2005.