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Finding Fiction in the Wilderness

By MAUREEN MULLARKEY

Neil Welliver (1929–2005) will be greatly missed. Cadres of young painters emulating his panoptic blend of abstraction and reality testify to his influence on the unfolding story of American landscape painting. A memorial exhibition opening today at Alexandre Gallery presents large-scale paintings from the late 1970s and mid-1980s, plus a generous selection of plein air oil studies and recent prints — aquatints, etchings, and woodcuts — produced in collaboration with Welliver's longtime master printmaker, Shigemitsu Tsukaguchi.

NEIL WELLIVER: A MEMORIAL EXHIBITION
Alexandre Gallery

An exile from Modernism despite his attraction to its freedoms, Welliver put the conventions of Abstract Expressionism to the work of depiction. Compelled by what Henry James termed "the solidity of specification," he honored the same perceptual concerns that occupied American masters from the beginning. Unblinking, almost clinical in its detachment, his painting asserts the fecundity of the phenomenal world without sentimentality or romanticism. But his objectivity does not obscure the pictorial cunning and stamina of his combat with untamed disorder.

Landscape painting is a work of fiction: the accumulation of things chosen — colors, contrasts, shapes, masses, lines — amid the result of things discarded. Though he began his paintings outdoors, Welliver completed them in the studio; a rigorous series of manual steps (no projection shortcuts) translated a small plein air study first to a large drawing, then to the canvas, altering it along the way. As Welliver told John Ashbery in 1985: "I am not interested in 'painting from nature.' I'm not interested in that at all."

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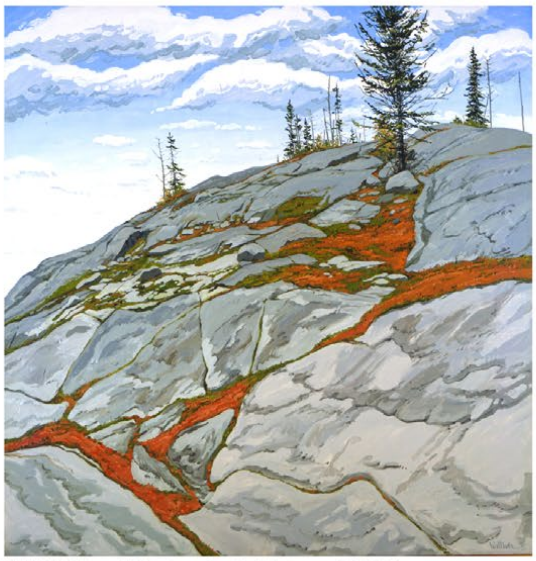
What *did* interest him? Welliver came to prominence in the 1960s as a painter seeking "a new paradigm for representation," as the gallery states. But the man was ultimately compelled by more than pressures of style. Post-expressionist models might explain the painter's choice of method, but they sidestep the living heart of his work: the passion that animates it after the stylistic moment is past.

Reading Welliver's obituary, you marvel that the sorrow of living did not kill him before this. In 1970 a studio fire destroyed much of his work. An infant daughter died in her crib, and his wife died shortly afterward. Later, one son was murdered in Thailand and another died in unspecified circumstances. To bury one child is an insupportable grief; to bury three is a descent into the abyss. What, then, made this un-Providential world worth representing?

The answer brings us closer to Herman Melville than to Clement Greenberg. The Maine woodlands were Welliver's white whale, the protean thing that makes visible the facelessness of God and the inscrutability of existence. Nothing comfortable or picturesque exists in his unconcerned wilderness. Welliver turns the concentrated labor of painting into confrontation with the terrible beauty of insensate natural forces; unblinking, he refuses to look away. Blasted trees, dense vegetation, glacial deposits, rushing streams and rivers — all are analogous to Melville's "great shroud of the sea." Nature, stark and wild, rolls now as it did thousands of years ago, amputating lives like limbs.

"Old Windfall" (1981–82), a dazzling map of a swath of second-growth forest, defies the confusions of raw nature. An intricate weave of light and shadow sets the eye bounding through a welter of growth and decay to the tight mesh of trees that obscures everything beyond middle distance. Fairfield Porter's dictum that modern painting disallows foreground and background is technically obeyed in Welliver's habit of working methodically and diagonally from one corner to another. But his drawing observes perspectival courtesies, and warm tones dominate only in the foreground. Our eyes do the rest, pushing smaller trees back to where we know they belong.



Neil Welliver, 'Blueberries in Fissures' (1983).

Pattern is the primary ordering element in "Blueberries in Fissures" (1983). A blueberry barren, yellow-green and orange shot through with magenta, runs in rivulets down the cracked face of a glacial boulder like blood from a wound. The height and curve of the rock are suggested by calligraphic pines clinging to the crest of a pitiless habitat.

Welliver's prints at Alexandre are a compelling window into his artistry. More intimate in size and serene in surface, they convey a tenderness toward his motifs that is often overwhelmed in heroic-sized paintings. The luminous, absorbent white of fine paper, softer than the cool, reflective light of his paintings, is particularly receptive to his purposes, blotting up brush strokes and further harmonizing a random variety of shapes.

"Stump" (2000), a woodcut depicting a moss- and lichen-covered tree stub rooted among ferns and bracken, is heart-stopping. This riot of forms required 27 hand-carved blocks, 30 colors, and four years to complete. Equally beautiful is the austere black and white woodcut "Islands — Allagash" (1990). Simplicity of means belies the genius of the image, bisected by the light of the moon.

What did the painter think about while he worked surrounded by wilderness? "My loved ones — the important things."

Welliver confessed to unconcern for "the rituals of immortality." Nevertheless, on what would have been his 76th birthday, a memorial service was held in Belfast, Maine, in a small Episcopal church named after Margaret of Antioch. Somehow, that seems just right: Margaret was one of the most beloved saints in the Middle Ages, and hers was one of the voices Joan of Arc believed she heard. Neil Welliver's own voice as a painter inspired generations of students and will continue to be heard when the noise of more celebrated contemporaries has stilled.

Until October 22 (41 E. 57th Street, 212-755-2828). Prices: paintings, $18,500–$120,000; prints, $1,800–$7,500).