



MARIO NAVES

No-Nonsense Portraits Of Wild, Naked Women

Arrogance isn't a trait we usually single out for commendation, but in art it has its uses. In the art of Neil Welliver, whose early figurative paintings are the subject of an exhibition at the Alexandre Gallery, arrogance is, if not the work's defining characteristic, then the engine that powers it. His paintings of beautiful young women immersing themselves in mountain streams are no-nonsense, tersely put into shape. Covering the canvas with an edge-to-edge emphasis, Mr. Welliver's brush endows every inch of his surfaces with an unyielding pressure. Concomitantly, the pictures have a stubborn physicality. This in-your-face quality accounts for the work's arrogance, as well as its "abstractness." Yet Mr. Welliver isn't an abstract painter. His pictures are representational—and sexy, too.

Ken Johnson of *The New York Times* accurately described the women posing in the pictures as having "bodies a Playmate of the Month could envy"—just don't call them "bunnies." What gives the paintings their erotic charge has something to do with nudity, but just as much—and probably more—with the cool self-possession Mr. Welliver's subjects exude. These women know their own minds, are confident in their sensuality, and aren't about to put up



Neil Welliver's *Two Nudes in a Forest Pond, 1970*.

with any guff. I doubt Mr. Welliver has much patience for theories that postulate the oppressiveness of "the male gaze." But I like how his pictures play into that nostrum, confirming it from the outside in, and subverting it from the inside out.

Not that these are feminist paintings. They're just very great ones. And if the little voice in the back of my head tells me I overrate them, I'm not going to listen to it. Neither should you. *Neil Welliver: Early*

Figurative Paintings is at Alexandre Gallery, 41 East 57th Street, until Jan. 26.

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