Essay by ROBERT M. DOTY, 1981

THE IMAGERY OF NEIL WELLIVER

"I saw a sporting extra headlined with the score of the game. The green sheet was more real than the afternoon itself - succinct, condensed and clear."

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

The subject matter of an image often dominates matters of style and means by the portrayal of a specific reality, a dramatic illustration of something tangible and material. But when considered carefully, when studied and examined, a picture reveals an extended reality, the nature of its own presence as well as the verisimilitude of its subject. The character of that subject is immediately available to the viewer because it has attributes which are common and familiar to everyone. Choices about color, scale, light, line, and form will charge the subject with a special complexity that extends far beyond the accepted norms of documentary exactitude. The picture prompts a reaction to both the subject and the work itself. Art at this level challenges basic assumptions about what constitutes reality. The quality that makes this art unique and significant is the ability of the artist to analyze "real" places, people, and objects and present them in such a manner that they become a new authority for common experience. What was previously a passing acquaintance with personal environments now becomes a compelling perception of what had previously been taken for granted. Neil Welliver's paintings function both as evocations of a direct contact with the beauty and fascination of nature and the wilderness, as well as manifestations of the intellectual, spiritual, and physical attributes of the act of painting. The significance of his work is strengthened by the unification of his respect for the wilderness and a coming to terms with the means and concepts of recent American painting.

In Welliver's painting, like most of the important work being done in contemporary realist painting, conceptions about the rendering of the subject are as important as the perception of the subject matter itself. The ideas about presentation which become the means of the artist, generally are based on the concepts which have informed ambitious American abstract painting since 1930. Especially important are the regard for the surface of the canvas as a two-dimensional picture plane, a concern for using color in a pure and expressive state, a desire to work within a large-scale image, and a delight in the tactile and physical quality of paint. These were the elements of Abstract Expressionist painting, the dominant force in American art between the years 1940 and 1960. Realist painting was eclipsed and although it did not actually die away altogether, it certainly declined in prestige and for a time, with the exception of certain major figures, was virtually ignored by curators, critics, and collectors. However, the representation of some specific references appeared in Abstract Expressionist painting from time to time, the grotesque women of Willem de

Kooning's paintings and the symbolism of the Pictographs by Adolph Gottlieb are two examples. However, it is in Abstract Expressionism that realist painting of the recent past put down its roots. John Arthur has noted: "Abstract Expressionism was the dominant force behind contemporary Realism. It is this connection that remains a major factor in separating new Realism from the earlier realism of Edward Hopper, Charles Sheeler....In fact, most of the first-generation new Realists had direct contact with the Abstract Expressionists. There were warm and close relationships between them that often went beyond an exchange of ideas. Many of the Realists began their careers as abstract painters."[1]

Welliver was one who embraced abstraction, as did William Bailey, Arthur Elias, Alfred Leslie, Sidney Tillim, and Philip Pearlstein. Obviously, to make such a radical change in attitudes and choices about the proper use of subject matter required an enormous effort. It involved a considerable risk of misunderstanding on the part of the public and scorn from the critics. The artist had to sacrifice consideration of acceptance for his work and literally remove himself from the act of painting in order to reconsider his motives and intentions. It meant a rethinking of conventional theories and histories of painting the subject, rendering perspective and atmosphere, color and light, volume and detail. Once the past had been purged, it was time to form new approaches for putting paint to canvas. As one who struggled with the problem, the painter Philip Pearlstein recalled that there were those who "dealt with representationalism as a considered bundle of exciting problem-laden, and intellectually intriguing concepts, not as a continuation of older art school exercises in rendering or the socially conscious story telling of the 1930's. These artists were not spinoffs of the then newly defined Pop-art movement with its own particular history of rejecting the previous generations' expressionism and its own working basis of recycling media-images. Neither were they extending the emotionally-oriented intuitions of the expressionism search to express form. Rather, they placed the problem of dealing with the representation of form in space on a conceptual level equal to the concepts motivating contemporary abstract art."[2] For Welliver, this course meant a search for an image which corresponded to a logical view of the real world translated by painterly terms which were still essentially his own. Many others in a similar situation turned to the plain and ordinary as a way of asserting factual perception while striving for a unique and personal approach to the problem. For some time, Welliver had been concerned with painting the figure in a rather ambiguous space. He chose to give more importance and substance to the nature of the space and selected as his setting the forests and waters of Maine. He learned to see their hues and harmonies at different seasons and under different conditions of light, recording his impressions in a realistic man-

ner by manipulating nuances of color, the texture of surface, and the dominance of size. Every artistic endeavor must accomplish the fact of making an idea completely visible and presenting it in some concrete form, and it is the measure of Welliver's success in both expressive and technical terms that he has received critical recognition as one of the best landscape painters in America.

Welliver is very careful to insist that he is not part of a school, nor is he concerned with the distinctions of abstract versus realist painting. However, he is very much aware of the techniques and ideas practiced by his teacher Josef Albers, and he reveres Piet Mondrian for establishing the importance of the picture plane by defining a painting as "an arrangement of colors on a surface." Thus, even though his subject is the myriad forms of tree and bush, the constantly changing condition of streams and ponds, all encompassed by a strong, pervading light, the direct observation of this subject is coupled to the manipulation of abstract considerations. The act of painting, the process of painting, is a constant mediation between a highly developed perception and the means at the command of the contemporary painter. In the matter of color, he does not copy or imitate the color he finds in nature. Rather, he transposes color relationships and creates his own world. He is loyal to the reality of colors in nature, but he can, and does, work with the hues and tones to establish a consistency of color which appears regularly in each picture. The overall effect is one of a heightened reality which changes and emphasizes the characteristics of land and sky. Such an immense subject would suffer by being reduced to the size of an easel picture, and it is one of Welliver's many accomplishments that he uses large scale to convey the grandeur of the landscape and thrust forward the impact of color and space. Like de Kooning, whose work he admires, his brushwork is gestural and fluid, the paint rich in texture. Welliver's paintings are triumphs of accommodation between the idyllic and the real, a situation brought about by using the literal landscape as a vehicle for the most advanced painterly means.

As Welliver's brush darts across the canvas, his mind and hand are immersed in the process of creating images of trees, rocks, streams, lakes, mountains, and sky. His pictures are laden with information about the floor of the forest, the way ice forms in winter, the habitat of deer and beaver, the texture of moss and rock, the shape and color of grass or weathered tree trunks. It is nature at its best, but Welliver does not indulge in romantic fantasies, and his portrayal of the quality that Henry David Thoreau called "wildness" is one of harmony and calm. Welliver can penetrate the texture of nature or create a panorama of land and sky which uplifts the spirit. As the critic David Bourdon has remarked: "At their best, Welliver's pictures are crowded, but not congested, enabling him to provide ample quanti-

ties of carefully scrutinized detail... he thrives on an abundance of information.''[3]

It is light that illuminates and animates the material aspects of his landscapes. It might be a very delicate kind of light, such as experienced on a spring day, casting shadows everywhere and sending out shafts which together with the shadows change the character of rock and tree forms so that a sense of abstraction appears as solid forms disintegrate. Welliver is especially adept at capturing the bright, clear light of winter and the contrasts of light and dark which occur at sunrise and sunset. In these images of snow, birch trees, and shifting light, he sets himself an incredibly difficult task and then brings forth a brilliant solution. Of all the aspects of the real world, light is the most ephemeral, the most fleeting. Welliver is not the first artist to accept the challenge of capturing the effects of light, there are precedents in American painting, but he is one of the very few who has successfully seized such a transitory moment and made it permanent and palpable on such a monumental scale. Paintings such as *Shadow* and *Back of Hatchett* are evidence of great skill, insight, and intuitive power. Welliver is an artist who values qualities quite different from those offered by the more ordinary attitudes about the role of man and the role of artist in the face of nature. Great art is created only in a state of saturated awareness where the work is permeated with an inner perception of beauty and all is united by an inner personal philosophy and brought to completion by an intense desire to create. Speaking to an audience of students, Welliver has described the feelings which lead to the perfection of his art: ''I am considerably more interested in the moment than in location. There are intervals in one's life and mind when everything is, for a second, real and clear.... They [the intervals] are not entirely visual but rather encompass one's entire psychology. The air is crystalline; its direction is absolute; light falls with astounding clarity; every object sits in its designated space or moves with incredible precision; every gesture is right; the mind functions free of distraction. To paint, for me, is to build a construct with an exact parallel to these experiences. The color reaches its ultimate pitch; the forms are utterly one; the materials are entirely dematerialized. A muteness settles over the canvas, and that moment of which I spoke is present again.''[4]

Welliver's art is based on an intimate relationship with the subject he has chosen as his principal motif. Twenty years ago, he acquired a farm in Lincolnville, Maine, and since then he has added to it as adjoining property became available. His holdings include a segment of the Duck Trap River which has become a part of his best work. However, his intentions are not speculative nor does the urge to own what he paints become a factor. He is very concerned with a sense of stewardship about the land he owns and uses. He is very

"I think that, as life is action and passion, it is required of a man that he should share the passion and action of his time at peril of being judged not to have lived."

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

much aware of what the land has done for him, and he is more than willing to put something of himself back into the land. He protects it. Lumbering is forbidden and he takes only enough wood to heat his house during the winter. The strong will that serves him so well in his art also helps him to defend and maintain his scrupulous regard for the integrity of the land. The power which provides light for his household is generated by two windmills connected to a storage battery system, much to the chagrin of the local power company. He does not allow hunters on his property and has faced repeated confrontations with snowmobile riders, an act of considerable courage in an isolated rural area. He works the land for food and keeps domestic fowl. When they are needed, the woods and streams are at hand to act as new subject matter. He can, and does, tramp for miles through the brush, disregarding the stinging insects of summer and the cold and snow of winter. Sometimes he will travel farther afield in Maine to visit and sketch favorite wilderness areas. It takes hard work to maintain such a way of life, but the reward is almost total self-sufficiency. A visitor, Andrew Morgan, found that "his farm and his woods suggest simplicity, environmental preservation, natural beauty, cultivation, awesome wilderness and painstaking management."[5] In short, the same factors which are the essential elements of his art.

Welliver would be the first to agree that he has been unusually privileged in knowing so well a wilderness area which embodies and offers him the opportunity to reflect in his art the intangible values and spiritual universe which are found only in nature. He has understood the importance of conserving the significance of those values, expressing their worth in the paintings by which he reaches out to an unknown audience, and thereby using his special gifts and expertise as an artist to clarify those values as part of human life in general. He is an artist who seeks a fundamental beauty, a deep desire for concord. His remarkable skill as a painter is fully matched by the importance of his subject. His art is a quest which he pursues with strong personal conviction about his subject and craft, searching for communion with an essence of experience which he knows and would have more widely understood. His art is the means by which he strengthens the bond between nature and those who want to comprehend the pleasures and the terrors of the wilderness. Although the salient factors of the world he respects are temporal, the fleeting light, the moving water, the clouds of the sky, it is a world which has permanence and continuity, a condition that heightens the awareness of an eternal source for spiritual renewal and sustenance. Welliver's art provides new means of perceiving our environment.

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