

ALEXANDRE

Interview with the artist by EDWIN DENBY, 1981

NEIL WELLIVER INTERVIEWED BY EDWIN DENBY

- Q.** What do you think makes your painting look American and unlike European landscape painting?
- A.** *This is a different landscape.*
- Q.** Could you talk about the difference between Courbet, Bierstadt, de Kooning and how they might relate to your painting?
- A.** *Courbet looked very hard and had a method. Bierstadt did not look very hard and had a method, and de Kooning makes it up as he goes along. I think I relate much more to de Kooning because I look very hard then I make it up as I go along.*
- Q.** You've mentioned Eilshemius and Albers.
- A.** *Eilshemius saw it completely different than anyone else and I would like to do that. In the case of Albers, I learned about color from him, in discussions that were outside painting.*
- Q.** What other modern American painters do you respect?
- A.** *Pollock.*
- Q.** Is your work mostly long and tense looking at your subject and then putting it down directly without much stalling in between?
- A.** *Yes, that's true.*
- Q.** You have a method of starting a large painting at the top and working down until the canvas is covered, without any later corrections or adjustments. Do you think this method is valid for other painters and do you teach that to your students?
- A.** *I think it's valid for anyone if it works for them, and I do not teach it to my students because I think it a peculiar way to paint.*
- Q.** Do you like teaching?
- A.** *I do, but I teach very little.*
- Q.** Since your early allegorical pictures of women in the sky, brass bands, nude figures and waterfalls, then figures in the landscape, you came to painting only landscapes. Do you plan to paint figures again, or portraits, or other subjects?
- A.** *Yes.*
- Q.** Some people prefer your small pictures painted outdoors to the large ones painted in the studio. Is this going to stop you from painting large ones?
- A.** *No. Other people like the large paintings painted in the studio, preferring them to the small pictures painted outdoors, so I will continue to do both and keep everyone happy.*
- Q.** Is there a big difference in color between those you paint outdoors and indoors? I've always wondered how much equipment you took with you out of doors because the hike seemed to be quite far from your studio.
- A.** *There is a big difference between the color used indoors and the color used outdoors. The color used indoors is often different from that in the study, which was painted on location, but I try to parallel that in the study, achieve the same intensity or meaning as the color used in the study by using another color, a different color.*
- Q.** I thought you used a great deal of a particular green in the small pictures painted on the spot that afterwards changed in the big pictures, various kinds of green.
- A.** *That's true.*
- Q.** What do you carry in your backpack?
- A.** *I carry a Grumbacher portable easel. I carry eight tubes of color because I only use eight colors when I paint, eight tubes of paint, usually in triplicate. Brushes, a can of turpentine and medium, rags, water jugs, toilet tissue, binoculars, spy glass, that's it, I think.*
- Q.** Did you ever weigh it?
- A.** *Yes, my pack weighs 70 pounds when it has everything in it, including water.*
- Q.** And you go quite far?
- A.** *Yes, and it gets very heavy.*
- Q.** What are the eight colors?
- A.** *The eight colors are white, ivory black, cadmium red scarlet, manganese blue, ultramarine blue, lemon yellow, cadmium yellow, talens green light.*
- Q.** Sometimes you don't actually get the color you're looking at, but the color that reminds you of that color.
- A.** *I never try to get the color I'm looking at. I never copy the color I see. NEVER.*
- Q.** I see. That is to say the sketch is a painting itself. Already a translated painting.
- A.** *Yes.*
- Q.** And then it gets...
- A.** *Translated again.*
- Q.** Yes.
- A.** *Into a larger scale. But I never, never try to copy the colors out there. If I mix a color and put some of it on the object I'm painting, on leaves for example, I have done that before, it always looks bizarre. I'm not interested at all in "painting from nature". I'm not interested in that at all.*

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

ALEXANDRE GALLERY ALEXANDRE FINE ART INC. ESTABLISHED 1996

ALEXANDRE

- Q.** The translation into the big painting changes the color because the area is so large?
- A.** Yes.
- Q.** And the absolute color wouldn't work, the color in your sketch.
- A.** *The color in the sketch wouldn't work, but the color in the sketch is not an imitation of nature. Because to imitate nature you need a tube of air or something and I don't have a tube of air, so I found something that makes it look like there's air in the color. Does that make sense to you?*
- Q.** Well, it's easily called space in the critical language of painting.
- A.** *This isn't critical.*
- Q.** Well, is that the same thing?
- A.** *No, it's not the same thing because an object is bathed in a certain kind of light, or there is an absence of light, or however it appears in a certain way. To try to imitate that with paint is, for me, not a very interesting way to spend my time. I am much more interested in finding a color that makes it look like it is, again, surrounded by air.*
- Q.** Is the winter more luminous than the summer?
- A.** *Yes. Because you have an ultimate reflector there and everything, all the light, is bouncing off the snow in all directions and it's extremely luminous, much more so than in the summer when there are a lot of absorbent materials around, certain leaves and grasses. But the winter is just that white snow bouncing color in all directions, and everything is intensified terrifically. A lot of the brightest colors disappear because they're dead, they're dormant. But the color that is there, those brown violets, those blacks, those greens that are on very low life forms, they are phenomenally luminous. In the summer you can't see them because they are completely overshadowed by the leaves and other organic forms.*
- Q.** The blue sky in winter and the blue sky in summer... are they different?
- A.** *Yes, very different. I would hate to defend that in court, but they are very different. It seems even more crystalline, if that's possible, in the winter. There is less of that sort of atmospheric stuff that you get in the summer where you get warm air and cold air meeting and fog and mist and so on. In the winter it is inclined to be crystalline 90% of the time. Completely clear.*
- Q.** Of course it must get quite cold.
- A.** *Very cold.*
- Q.** For you, too.
- A.** *Very cold.*
- Q.** You didn't mention a bottle of rum with you when you listed what was in your pack.
- A.** *No. Painting outside in winter is not a macho thing to do. It's much more difficult than that. To paint outside in the winter is painful. It hurts your hands, it hurts your feet, it hurts your ears. Painting is difficult. The paint is rigid, it's stiff, it doesn't move easily. But sometimes there are things you want and that's the only way you get them.*
- Q.** Why do you staple the big charcoal drawing to the white canvas.
- A.** *The charcoal drawing, when it is stapled to the white canvas, is ready to be transferred to the canvas and it's been perforated with a little pouncing wheel so it is filled with tiny holes along the lines of the drawing. When it is stapled there, that puts it in position, so it is registered more or less with the canvas. That drawing is basically to work out problems of scale and size. It has very little to do with description. The description takes place when I'm painting. I mean the painting is in fact done when I paint. That drawing establishes size and to some extent, position, although that changes, too. And when it is punctured with the pouncing wheel, it generalizes the drawing again so that all of the changes that you made on paper to find the right size and position and so on, disappear, and the drawing becomes quite general simply because the little wheel is not a drawing tool but rather a tracing tool. And then when it goes to the canvas it is transferred in these very tiny dots which give you a general placement. It tells you roughly where things are going to go on the canvas.*
- Q.** The charcoal doesn't mix with the paint?
- A.** *I don't like to mix it with the paint. After I put the charcoal on, I isolate it, with a spray, with a synthetic varnish. I was told by a fortune teller not to use charcoal with my paint.*
- Q.** Yes, I remember that at the Union Fair.
- A.** *At the Union Fair, yes, she said, don't...*
- Q.** She was very clever.
- A.** *She asked me to ask her a specific question and I said, I use charcoal with my paint. I thought that was very*

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

ALEXANDRE GALLERY ALEXANDRE FINE ART INC. ESTABLISHED 1996

ALEXANDRE

specific. Should I continue that? She said to me, "Is it messy?" And I said, "Yes". She said, "Don't do it". Very affirmative and very funny. I've never done it since. That's good advice for one dollar.

- Q.** Why do you mix your colors from bright blues and cadmium reds and yellows since earth and Mars colors or oxide of chromium green would be closer to the colors you have in your paintings?
- A.** I've eliminated all of the earth colors from my palette. I've eliminated them because there is a luminosity I'm after, that I can never find in those colors. I prefer to mix something which is their equivalent which is, for me, more luminous. If I want a green earth, I'm much more inclined to make that from a manganese blue and black and cadmium yellow with a touch of red, which creates a color that is its equivalent but, for me, livelier.
- Q.** Do you think some 19th century American landscapists were as sensitive to color in painting and the transposition from nature to the painting?
- A.** No.
Or European ones?
- A.** No. Not really. Some in Europe.
- Q.** Courbet seems to be an example.
- A.** Yes. Courbet is marvelous in the way he saw those greens and all the variants, but the color, my use of color, is really predicated on the painting of the last 50 years and not 19th century painting at all.
- Q.** Who would you name? Anybody that gave you suggestions by his painting? That you then changed into your own?
- A.** That's a complicated question. Albers, certainly. Mondrian, too, for those constellations of colors that are separate. Yes, I learned a lot from Mondrian. Bonnard, a great deal. Monet, obviously. In the late Monet, it doesn't seem as though he is looking anymore. He is putting colors together and fabricating an image.
- Q.** Among the young Americans, I am thinking of Pollock, was his color of interest to you?
- A.** Not particularly. The thing about Pollock that excited me, and still does, is accepting the physical fact of the canvas. Acknowledging the fact of the painting. Pollock's aggression about the fact of the painting and so on. I like that. I feel I come much more from that than I do from anywhere else.

Q. De Kooning...

- A.** Yes, de Kooning. Because there is the development of the image and at the same time an insistence on the fact of the painting. And it's that I would like to have. I want to develop a much more, whatever you want to call it, precise image. But really, my interest in painting lies in the fact of the painting. And I think that's why sometimes people find the big paintings uncomfortable. Because they, in fact, perceive the space, sense it, and at the same time are repelled by the aggression of the painting, of the pigment, of the fact of the picture, its size. And it's the same in the small ones. It's absolutely the same in the small paintings, it's just that it is less aggressive, easier to digest there. People who object to my painting, and they do, object very often to the aggression of the fact of the picture. They find the canvas, that surface, what happens on there, too much for them. They would really prefer to drift off into Bierstadt or someone, Corot, or something like that where you can really just enter into it and leave. With mine, there is the resistance of the surface of the painting. The fact of the painting is always in the way.
- Q.** But large pictures, if there is much going on in them, are hard to accept. It takes longer.
- A.** It does take a while longer. Yes. But, you know, if you look at the 19th century American luminous painters, as they are now called, Church, in particular, or Bierstadt. If you look at the construction of the larger pictures, there is a very careful overlapping construction which takes you "in" to this thing, in, in, in, in, to the painting. And a denial of the surface of the painting by its construction. It still relates back to that Renaissance idea of denying the surface, divine perspective, etc., that still pervades those paintings and between the late 19th century and now comes this, what is for me one of the great ideas of 20th century painting, and that is the fact of the painting again. The assertion of the...
- Q.** The cut of the edge?
- A.** Right. And the surface of the picture is a fact on which you paint. The maintenance of that is very exciting to me, but I also want the other thing, so you have that conflicted image. What you hope for is something that virtually oscillates, where you go in and there's a surface and you go in and there's the surface. And that, I think, is difficult to look at.

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

ALEXANDRE GALLERY ALEXANDRE FINE ART INC. ESTABLISHED 1996

ALEXANDRE

- Q.** And that's what you would like to do?
- A.** *Yes. Have my cake and eat it too.*
- Q.** Yes. That's what art's about.
- A.** *Right.*
- Q.** When did you first want to become a painter?
- A.** *Shortly after I no longer wanted to be a fireman or a pilot or an engineer.*
- Q.** Is that 12 or 18?
- A.** *In my case, it was 28 (laughter). When I was very small.*
- Q.** Where did you study and who were your teachers?
- A.** *I studied at the Philadelphia Museum School and no one would know the teachers I studied with there, with the exception of Emerton Heitland, a traditional watercolorist. And then I went to Yale and studied with Albers, Marca-Relli, Brooks and Diller.*
- Q.** Did you like any of them particularly?
- A.** *Yes, I particularly liked Jim Brooks, who had a marvelous capacity for looking at any kind of painting and being able to see it in terms of the way it was put together. Diller was a very interesting guy to study with. I remember an occasion when he came to a figure and cut out a little red rectangle and put it on the forehead of the figure and said re-establish the picture plane. So he taught that straight De Stijl stuff and was relentless. And of course, Albers. I must say he was an absolutely incredibly good teacher and most of the teaching and conversation and so on was outside of art. It had to do with color and how colors interacted, the optics of color. That was very exciting stuff for me. In a curious way you learned a lot about the mechanics of painting, even when you weren't painting... studying with him. Finally, I think he was interested in poetry like everyone else and that was the bottom line, but there was a great deal to be learned from him. He was a very good teacher.*
- Q.** You've lived in New Haven and Philadelphia, but not in New York. Why do you live in Lincolnville?
- A.** *Well it's not entirely fair to say that I haven't lived in New York. That certainly was for a long time, in fact, still is the locus of any social life I had at all, and Polly and I kept an apartment there for 12 years. While I don't actively live there, I certainly spent a lot of time there. I live in Lincolnville, Maine because this is where I am painting. I'm painting the woods here and I can't do that in Philadelphia, or New Haven, or New York.*
- Q.** Could you talk about color relationships, gray values and tone. Can you tell us something to do with what you said about Albers?
- A.** *Well, you can talk about that for a year. I don't know what to say about that. Color is central to my painting, no question about it.*
- Q.** Not values?
- A.** *Not particularly, but rather color in its entirety. No one particular part of it. I'm most interested in color where the light is very middle, not in the intense sunlight and not in the darkest dark. Because when the light is very middle-ish, not intense nor reduced, it's brightest and richest and to see those very small differences in the relationship between greens, that some are darker and some are brighter and some are bluer and some are greener. To be able to see these relationships and paint them and so on is central to my interests.*
- Q.** You mean like today... this overcast day?
- A.** *This overcast day things are very, very bright. If the sun were out, it would be very light and much more active in some ways. I assume that's why you can photograph so well when you have a mildly overcast day. You're not dealing with those highlights. I do paint the very contrasting relationships at times, but the very close ones that occur in nature when it's unaffected by very intense light relationships is the part of color that really interests me the most. I've done very little black and white graphics and I've done very little monochromatic painting. It's really that fullness of the color that interests me the most.*
- Q.** I wonder if you found any special problem in painting animals in the landscape?
- A.** *Yes, I do because there aren't so many wild animals to be seen anymore. The idea of animals has been very heavily assimilated in the popular imagery, popular culture. The idea of the deer has almost been completely taken over by Walt Disney, bear by the television programs. These animals now relate very poorly in people's minds to the real animal. I haven't seen any deer paintings (that's why I'm now painting them) that interest me at all since Courbet. The Homer paintings seem to me basically to be in the fur, fish, and game tradition, in the hunting tradition, sportsman tradition. The whole Disney thing, the incredible nostalgia about animals, when there is very little contact with them, and then to*

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

ALEXANDRE GALLERY ALEXANDRE FINE ART INC. ESTABLISHED 1996

ALEXANDRE

- be able to go out and re-see them and overcome that incredible weight of the popular arts and paint them again is a real challenge. I'm very interested in animals and in their preservation.*
- Q.** Why did you paint so many nude figures? Was it for the privilege of an artist to have a long, close look at a female figure?
- A.** *I've had long close looks at female figures and wasn't painting at all. So I assume that's not the reason.*
- Q.** How long does it take to paint a large painting?
- A.** *The eight foot paintings take a month to six weeks.*
- Q.** They often look as though you painted them in one or two days, as though they were still wet when you went on the next day.
- A.** *I constantly fuse wet paint into wet paint and it's one of the reasons why I paint the paintings in sections, so that I can lock one wet area into another. When it's finished they look like they are painted very rapidly, because anyone who paints, when they see wet fluid paint, assumes that it was done very, very rapidly. In fact, I paint very slowly and very deliberately.*
- Q.** Have you thought about the difference in style between painting fast and painting slow? How do you overcome that slowness in the look of the painting?
- A.** *That's a trade secret. I can't tell. It took me a long time to figure out how to do that. If I tell you, you will be doing it in a week or so (laughter).*
- Q.** How long does it take you to make a study?
- A.** *A few days.*
- Q.** Oh, it does?
- A.** *Yes, I usually, well that's not quite fair, about 9 hours. I usually paint in 3 hour increments and the light is gone. I find I can paint in a 3 hour period and then the light is changed too much for me to use it. I usually paint them in about 9 hours. On the large paintings, I paint from 4 to 7 hours every day, steadily.*
- Q.** Depending on the weather?
- A.** *No. When I paint the big painting, I am painting from that 3 hour sequence and then I control the light.*
- Q.** Do you choose a particular instant in your own mind, so to speak, or no? Do you choose a particular relationship?
- A.** *Relationship. Color relationships, and then the instant is in fact fabricated as a big painting is made. Closing in on, and creating, that moment is the excitement of the painting, of making the big paintings.*
- Q.** How do you choose the study to make a large painting?
- A.** *Well, when they look too small, I make them large.*
- Q.** Otherwise you would leave it as a study?
- A.** *Yes. Often.*
- Q.** Is there a wait between the study and the large painting?
- A.** *Sometimes. The small paintings are very fleeting and one makes the study and loads the mind with information, material, and the feeling of the place, etc., and then it seems you can't wait, because if you do some of it will drift away. Then I do them directly after, for that reason, because I am afraid they will drift away from me. And at other times they are very substantial. The image is very solid and very substantial and I can wait awhile before I do it. I make a lot of studies before I go to a large painting.*
- Q.** You make several?
- A.** *Sometimes.*
- Q.** In the same place?
- A.** *In the same place. Sections even, of the painting. Maybe one particular part of it that interests me greatly and feels like it needs to be focused on. I will make two or three studies of that and then one of the entire situation.*
- Q.** Are you dealing with changes in the landscape?
- A.** *Yes.*
- Q.** When you come back the next day?
- A.** *Yes.*
- Q.** From the particular way you are looking at it?
- A.** *Yes.*
- Q.** So you include that in the next sketch?
- A.** *I hope. Yes.*
- Q.** And finally, in the large painting, is it an equivalent?
- A.** *I will tell you an interesting story. I made a painting once over a 9 hour stretch. A large painting in the woods. And I began at the top and I was painting morning light. It came noon. It was time to leave that, but I continued painting. And as I came down I painted noon light. Then I painted through the afternoon and painted afternoon light on the same picture. It was a very interesting painting. It looked like time was passing. Very illogical.*
- Q.** But very interesting.
- A.** *Very interesting to me. Yes. I've done things like that numerous times and it is something that interests me a great deal. Painting through a long time stretch and*

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

ALEXANDRE GALLERY ALEXANDRE FINE ART INC. ESTABLISHED 1996

ALEXANDRE

change the light within the painting. And now I do more and more of that.

- Q.** You're not interested in an exact reproduction, obviously?
- A.** No.
- Q.** But in the arrangement of light and color that you like?
- A.** Right. *I'm not interested in reproduction at all. And exactitude, very slightly.*
- Q.** Are you pleased with your success as a painter? Do you feel it's about right or not enough or too much?
- A.** *I'll tell you seriously, to some extent I am very indifferent to success. If I didn't have it, I think I would not be indif-*

ferent and I would be sore as hell about it, if I didn't have it. But having it, I sort of take it for granted and I don't know whether it's too much or too little or whatever.

- Q.** Would you keep on painting if your work didn't get exhibited and appreciated?
- A.** Yes.
- Q.** Have we said enough?
- A.** *Yes. Plenty. It's interesting isn't it, that no matter how long one talks about painting, that which is important (and which one knows if they paint), never gets said. It's really ineffable.*

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

ALEXANDRE GALLERY ALEXANDRE FINE ART INC. ESTABLISHED 1996