

# ALEXANDRE

## ARTFORUM

Emily Nelligan

ALEXANDRE GALLERY | 291 GRAND

Roughly two miles long and a mile wide, Great Cranberry Island is, like many of the settlements along Maine's juddering Down East coastline, a place defined as much by water as by land. Reachable via a short boat trip from the bigger and busier tourist island of Mount Desert, it is itself a (much more modest) vacation destination, with a year-round population of a few dozen that swells by a magnitude of ten in the warmer months. Artist Emily Nelligan (1924–2018) was one of its part-time residents. Making work solely on the island in the summer and early autumn, she produced numerous quietly profound drawings, which she primarily gave as gifts or traded with artist friends. She exhibited her work sporadically until, at the age of seventy-six, she received her first full-scale exhibition at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in Brunswick, Maine: The occasion brought her theretofore deeply private practice to the attention of the art world.

A recent show at Alexandre's Grand Street space comprising thirty of Nelligan's small charcoal drawings had an outsize poignancy grounded in her unselfconscious, devotional habituality. The artist—who was born in New York and studied painting at Cooper Union in the 1940s—drew that coastal landscape exclusively for roughly seven decades, and her faithfulness to it lends her renderings an aura that verges on the sacred. In her attention to, and entwinement with, one place for the whole of her creative life, she discovered again and again the numinous in the convergences of sky, ground, and sea. As is the case with her entire oeuvre, the drawings on view here (all but one dating to between the early 1990s and the early 2010s) were essentially uniform in material and format—all unfixed charcoal on pieces of plain seven-by-ten-inch writing paper, as though Nelligan brought with her everywhere on the island the same small window with which to frame its forested shorelines and fog-banked horizons, the sun radiating in its hazy skies or glinting off the seawater pooling in its tidal inlets. Her control over her medium was exceptional, and her pieces seem to effortlessly modulate between pitch-black densities and moments of reflection, plainspoken terrestrial figuration and atmospheric abstraction that roils with Turner-esque disquiet.

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Nelligan's no-nonsense, inventorial titling allows for a fascinating glimpse into how she favored a particular approach, and perhaps particular locations, at any given time. For example, judging by a number of works on view dated October 1999, she seemed then primarily engaged in relatively direct depictions of the interplay of light and water along the island's pine-lined coves. Meanwhile, two works from late summer 1994, titled *11 AUG 94 (2)* and *19 SEPT 94 (1)*, offer cloud forms—a skein of wispy cirrus and a solitary cumulus, respectively—like illustrations from an Impressionist guide to meteorology. Her keen interest in celestial effects can also be seen in solar drawings such as *9 AUG 07*, and *24 AUG 91 (2)*, both of which feature the sun in high, late-summer skies, and in lunar studies such as *26 SEPT 08*, and *4 AUG 98 (1)*, in which full moons drift in the nighttime gloom like chimeric balloons released from the hand of Redon. For all the delicate beauty of her more “documentary” works, however, her project is at its most affecting in her most thoroughgoing abstractions, such as *14 OCT 01 (1)* and *27 SEPT 01 (1)*, where the rolling waves of dark and light suggest eddies in the Jovian atmosphere. The artist defamiliarizes the intimately familiar in order to see, and to show, its essential nature.

— Jeffrey Kastner

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