THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ARTSEEN | JULY/AUGUST 2025

Neil Welliver

By Faye Hirsch

Neil Welliver
Alexandre at 162 Russell Avenue
July 3–August 10, 2025
Rockport, ME

Wander around the coastal cities in Maine in the summer and you will see, posted in the windows of galleries, endless landscapes of forest and sea, Maine's natural wonders, still abundant even in our era of dwindling resources. To transform the picturesque into something more idiosyncratic, more deeply the product of an artist's observational yet critical eye, is rare: I'm thinking, for example, of Lois Dodd, no fan of unnecessary detail, or of Alex Katz, with his broad summary of color and shape. So it is a particular pleasure to see an ambitious display of over thirty works by Neil Welliver in a pop-up outpost of New York's Alexandre Gallery in Rockport. Welliver resided in mid-coastal Maine for some half a century before his death in 2005, but this is, according to the gallery, his "first significant showing" at home since a major exhibition at the Ogunquit Museum of Art in 2001.

Welliver's experience of the coastal marshes and forests was immersive. An avid outdoorsman, he trekked the countryside as a plein-air artist, beginning with small studies, many of which were scaled up back in his studio into grand works aimed at immersing a viewer in an experience somewhat analogous to being there. The exhibition includes both small oils and large, a few early nudes, and a selection of his superb intaglio and woodcut prints. A film of the artist at work in various periods includes helpful footage showing his very particular methodology of pouncing sketches based on the oil studies, transferring them to a grand scale, then systematically filling-in from top left to bottom right. One is reminded of his contemporary Chuck Close who likewise relied on a system, though for all works, large and small. Such a process in Welliver may well have contributed to the sense, in the big paintings, of a kind of flattening of the surface, a giant tipping-forward that is unique to his work. What is especially appealing in this exhibition is the presentation of different modes: the greater spontaneity of the small paintings and studies, the sweep of the big ones, and the analytical breakdown of the prints. Throughout, the artist's eschewal of straight color—he preferred to mix most of his paints to create what he sought as complexity in light—is manifest. One sees this especially in the views in which shadowy stretches are rendered in subtly blended earth tones, such as *From Zeke's* (1974), with its brooding middle ground that upsets a smooth transition from here to yonder.

The three largest works, 96 inches square, are presented side-by-side. The earliest, *Big Flowage* (1979), offers the biggest adventure. It depicts a vast view of water and sky divided by a thin strip of scruffy woods at the horizon. A few pyramidal mounds—beaver dams—hint at an oddly Maine-like tribute to Monet's haystacks. Giant clouds and their reflections swoop along at a mirroring diagonal as if to meet in some impossible world beyond the frame. Welliver changed up the blues in sky and pond, which not only conveys a feeling of wind and water, but also the transformation of the natural elements into art. You feel like the

whole world is here. Three years later, Welliver turns to winter in *Old Avalanche*, in which birches climb a hillside above what well might be a flow of water beneath the snow and ice, revealed in patches that themselves reflect branches and trunks in miniature. Those patches syncopate with the bits of darker bark in the birches. The entire image, appropriate to its title, feels as though it is tilting precariously forward, and combined with the overall white on white, with its tangles of patches and shadows, you quite lose your bearings. Welliver often spoke of his admiration for Jackson Pollock, and in such paintings as these, with their big scale and flow to surface, one feels an echo of the old Abstract Expressionism.

The exhibition is kind of a mini-survey that ranges from a few nudes of the 1960s (Welliver began with the figure before turning to landscape after he moved to Maine) to an aquatint of birches from 2005 that was posthumously proofed. Again like Close, Welliver had a particular genius for printmaking, working with some great collaborative master printers. He understood well the additive nature of prints, their propensity to break down the "natural" into its constitutive parts. Though he worked in all the printmaking media at different times in his life, his proclivity was toward woodcut and etching, particularly aquatint. He worked for years with the ukiyo-e master, Shigemitsu Tsukaguchi, who both produced the different woodblocks and printed the translucent colors typical of the technique. The latest of these is *Stump*(2000), which took five years to complete, with 30 blocks and 40 impressions. A venerable tree stump seems to materialize within all the dappling shadows and light. Early woodcuts are much less painterly, with shapes popping in an almost cartoonish fashion, but still very lively. Arlene Gosten was his collaborator on a number of the intaglios, including a pair of etchings with aquatint that utilized the same plates to create a view of St. John in winter and spring, from snowy woods to fresh blues and greens. The winter scene, with its spare palette, truly pops. Perhaps the most poignant, and in many ways least characteristic, of the aquatints is *Trees Reflected on Ice* (2002), created when the redoubtable New Hampshire printer Peter Pettengill traveled to Welliver's studio, plate in hand. The result is a much looser affair, with lines transformed, perhaps by lift-ground, into drizzles, as if the whole scene is weeping. You really feel the melt in the sort of marshy landscape that Welliver clearly adored.

Faye Hirsch's forthcoming book, co-written with Ingrid Schaffner, is *In The Company of Artists: A History of Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture* (Hirmer Verlag).