

ALEXANDRE GALLERY

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Marvin Bileck, *All the King's Men*, n.d.

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Nelligan and Bileck

In his *Theology of Artistic Sensibilities* (1986), John Dillenberger said: "Art and theology, different and related, are both rooted in humanity's transcendent nature. They belong to each other." Genuine works of art affirm and enlarge our sensibilities, a core component of our humanity. By their instinct for the essential, they disclose a reality transformed by beauty, one that touches—if only for a moment—our sense for the possibilities of our own ultimate destiny. This expansive imaginative capacity informs the work of Emily Nelligan and her husband, Marvin Bileck (d. 2005). The couple summered and worked on Cranberry Island, Maine, for more than half a century. Exhibited side by side at Alexandre Gallery (November 19, 2009–January 23, 2010), the work of both artists testified to the ways a disciplined hand—a seeing hand—serves that miraculous moment when marks on a page quicken into a work of art.

Throughout her creative life, Nelligan has used only charcoal and an eraser on whatever paper was at hand. Her spare means have yielded an extraordinary body of work that is more than the Maine landscape that prompts its imagery. Here are elegant distillations of rocks, eddying pools along the coastline, the shifting textures of sea and sky, the temper of a day's weather. The immensities of nature in their detail are recognizable yet, at the same time, refined—etherialized—to a point close to abstraction. Her shimmering atmospheric light suggests the light of creation. She comes as close as a modern can to the medieval embrace of light as a means for experiencing the presence of God, or, as the nineteenth century preferred to call it, the Sublime. *7 October 2008* is characteristic of her gift for illuminating her motif from within and without. A high horizon line shatters where sunlight glances across the surface of the sea, seeming to penetrate the depths. *25 September 2008* continues the motif but at a different time of day and under less intense, more diffuse light. Diffusion mutes and disperses reflections so that the luminescence appears to rise upward from below the surface to meet a dimming reflected light. It is an astonishing performance, part sensual tactility, part inference. At the emotional center of each of Nelligan's charcoals is a painterly regard for texture and values—the grey scale—that renders color unnecessary. There is nothing to be gained by adding prismatic hues to the color of Nelligan's monochrome drawings. That is a subtlety that once prompted André Lhote, an astute colorist, to comment: "This is a thing the dull birds of painting will never grasp." Charcoal yields a range of beautiful blacks and greys that vary in density and transparency as much as in tonality. Nelligan's transitory approximations create an aura of rapidity, suitable for capturing a moment, while building a surface as if with paint. In addition, her use of black and white keeps the eye on the design, free of distraction by the changes of hue visible in nature.

The power of monochrome continues in Marvin Bileck's drawings. One of the surprises of this show lay in the range of his artistry. While his sensibilities were in communion with his wife's, his art took an altogether different tack. The complementarity of his creativity with hers is most obvious in his limpid, finely detailed landscape etchings. Previously exhibited at Alexandre, they have been exchanged this time for a suite of drawings—several kissed with hints of color—that were the basis for his distinguished career as a designer and illustrator of children's books. Art created with children in mind manages to escape the attentions of a punditry drawn to platforms for their own pretensions. An illustration's prime obligation is to the mood and matter of the tale. The linear requirements of pacing and selection are subservient to a story. Humility is a rare quality in an artist but it is fundamental to one whose art sustains a text. Bileck's drawings for *Rain Makes Applesauce*, a children's classic for forty years and a Caldecott Honors winner, illustrates the reciprocity between drawing and writing. His lettering is of a piece with the beauty of his line. Both animate the page and quicken the spirit. The first thing that strikes the viewer of these delectable illustrations is the infinite superiority of the hand over any software drawing program. There is no possible comparison between the character and quality of line that results from digital drawing programs and that of a trained hand in service to a sensitive eye. Several small figurative etchings on view carry an authority and vigor that can only be called Rembrandtesque. *All the King's Men* is a caustic comment on the political class, no less biting for the fluid grace of the graphics. Bileck's pencil drawings retain the sinuous, finespun quality of engraved lines. This couple's work differs in content, but the heart of both is haunting and magical. They shared a capacity for infinite subtlety that is outside any stylistic categorization. Alexandre Gallery, 41 East 57th Street, New York, New York 10022. Telephone (212) 755-2828. On the web at www.alexandregallery.com

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