

ALEXANDRE

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MARIO NAVES

Welliver Captured Nature's Logic With a Serenely Intractable Vision

Neil Welliver, the American artist who died last spring at the age of 75, was one hell of a painter, and if you want a surefire way of confirming it, go to the memorial exhibition mounted at Alexandre Gallery, take advantage of the bench in the main gallery, and take a good, hard gander at *Back of Hatchet* (1978), a depiction of birch trees in winter painted on a swath of canvas measuring eight by 10 feet.

Note the crisp, almost clinical lucidity with which Welliver delineated the dense forest, seeming to capture every wiry twist and turn of the leafless branches. Marvel at how he retained the bracing blue of the sprawling Maine sky, seen through the thicket in the distance. Realize that though the palette is limited, it's effect is nevertheless expansive, an illusion aided by three green trees placed precisely and unexpectedly in the foreground. Finally, scratch your head at how a picture so true to life—to the light, sweep and untamed logic of nature—could simultaneously have so little to do with representation.

Welliver *didn't* care about representation. You don't have to get up close to the canvas—with its confounding network of drawling and, at times, impatient slurs of buttery oil paint—to sense Welliver's remove from observed phenomenon or his not altogether unskeptical debt to Abstract Expressionism. You can read his motivations in the insistent, all-but-mantic attention paid to every last inch of the composition and in the way clarity of definition keeps the image resolutely



Neil Welliver's *Back of Hatchet*, 1978.

on the surface of the canvas. Welliver was an impudent painter: He set up certain expectations (ah, the grandeur of nature!) only to thumb his nose at them (it's just colored mud on a piece of rag).

That paradox is inherent to the art of painting, of course, but rarely has it been brought to such a relentlessly inflexible conclusion. The accompanying prints are merely fetching in comparison, and the smaller canvases are muddled. Oil paint and a mas-

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sive scale were integral to Welliver's coolly intractable vision. Luckily for us, five other big pictures tag alongside *Back of Hatchet*, offering plenty to take pleasure in.

Neil Welliver: A Memorial Exhibition is at Alexandre Gallery, 41 East 57th Street, until Oct. 22.

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