

ALEXANDRE

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Neil Welliver, 75, Painter Of Large-Scale Landscapes

By **KEN JOHNSON**

Neil Welliver, a painter widely admired for his large-scale Maine woods landscapes, died on April 5 in Belfast, Me., near his home in Lincolnville. He was 75.

The cause was pneumonia, said Phil Alexandre, Mr. Welliver's New York dealer.

Mr. Welliver came of age as an artist in the late 1950's and 60's, at a time when nonrepresentational styles of painting like Abstract Expressionism and, later, Color Field and Minimalism were accorded the highest critical prestige. Along with artists like Larry Rivers, Alex Katz and Philip Pearlstein, Mr. Welliver strove to paint representational images without sacrificing the formal innovations that the Abstract Expressionists Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning had introduced to modern painting.

In the mid-1960's, Mr. Welliver began painting large-scale pictures of nude female models in forest settings. Exhibited to critical acclaim at Alexandre Gallery in 2001, those pictures were animated by tension between the realistic illusions of nature and human bodies on the one hand and the surface patterns of wide brushstrokes, on the other. By the mid-70's, Mr. Welliver had eliminated the figure from his work. Typically, he would paint outdoor studies of trees, grass, snow, rocks and streams encountered in places around his home and then translate the small paintings onto large canvases in the studio. Rendered with emphatic, generously paint-loaded brushstrokes, the myriad details filling the picture would create a kind of sensory overload of representational lucidity and abstract texture.

He had his first solo exhibition in 1954 at Alexandra Grotto in Philadelphia and his first solo show in New York at the Stable Gallery in 1962. His paintings have been collected by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Born on July 22, 1929, in the lumber town of Millville, Pa., Neil Gavin Welliver graduated from high school with a class of 21. He earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Philadelphia Museum College of Art (later the Philadelphia College of Art, which is now part of The University of the Arts) in 1953 and, in 1955, an M.F.A. at Yale University, where he studied with the formalist painter Josef Albers. Mr. Welliver stayed on to teach at Yale for the next 10 years, and then he became chairman of the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Fine Art, from which he retired in 1989.

In 1962, at the urging of his friends the painters Alex Katz and Lois Dodd, Mr. Welliver visited Maine and soon bought a 106-acre farm. Eight years later he moved to Maine permanently, continuing to commute to his teaching job in Philadelphia. Over the years, he expanded his property to 1,600 acres and took up organic gardening on a large scale.

Meanwhile, a series of misfortunes occurred. A fire destroyed his farmhouse and studio in 1975. The following year, a baby daughter died of sudden infant death syndrome, and his second wife, Polly, died shortly thereafter from a strep infection at 37. And in 1991, his 21-year-old son, Eli, was murdered while on a trip to Thailand. Despite those events, Mr.



Lindsey Stewart, courtesy of Alexandre Gallery

Neil Welliver in Maine in 2001.

Welliver continued to paint with the determination that gave his paintings their Thoreau-like combination of the pragmatic and the spiritual.

Mr. Welliver's first marriage to Norma Cripps and his third marriage to Sheila Geoffrion ended in divorce.

He is survived by his wife, Mimi Martin Welliver of Lincolnville, Me.; three children, Titus B. Welliver of Los Angeles, Ethan A. Welliver of New York City and John W. Welliver of Rockport, Me.; and two grandchildren. Another son, Silas B. Welliver, also died before him.

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