

# ALEXANDRE

Maine's rugged and raw beauty has been a lure to many of America's foremost landscape artists. Thomas Cole, founder of the Hudson River School of art, first visited Mount Desert Island in 1844. When he returned home to New York, his wealthy patrons were astounded by the mix of mountains and sea on his canvases. Man versus the chaotic forces of nature kept Winslow Homer busy on the boulder-strewn shores of Prouts Neck for more than two decades. Ten years after Homer's death, Georgia O'Keeffe, Marsden Hartley, and John Marin all mined the Maine coast for inspiration, changing the landscape to fit their modernist styles.

With the advent of abstract expressionism in the late 1940s, landscape painting met its demise. The fine-arts community snickered as landscapes were relegated to commercial art. The New York school desperately wanted to put the artist back in the artwork, eschewing pretty pictures for a frenzied attack on the canvas, be it Jackson Pollock's drip paintings or the works of Willem de Kooning, which flattened the canvas and emphasized brush strokes. This decade had a profound effect on a young artist named Neil Welliver.

Welliver had studied under colorist Josef Albers at Yale in the 1950s. But instead of diving headfirst into abstraction, Welliver painted sensuous nudes bathing in shimmering ponds. "Albers would say to me, 'These nudes look awfully naked, don't they?'" says Welliver, now 75, who sits in a wheelchair in his living room in Maine for this interview.

Welliver was undeterred, bringing his figurative works to Lincolnville, Maine, in 1962, at the suggestion of fellow artists Alex Katz and Lois Dodd. He summered at a 106-acre farm

and moved there permanently eight years later. Gradually, his nudes and other figures, like his painting of one of his young sons paddling a canoe, grew less important, receding into an overgrowth of forest thick with pines and sparkling with water. In the mid-1970s, the people in his work disappeared altogether.

Three tragedies in Welliver's life may have led him to this decision. The studio in his barn burned, along with many of his works. Then, in 1976, his only daughter succumbed to sudden infant death syndrome, and his wife, Polly, died soon after. Welliver retreated to his woods, by then totaling 1,600 acres and stretching a mile along the sinuous Ducktrap River and across the pasture called Briggs Meadow. The result on canvas was a dark foray into a forest where trees are uprooted, the land is scarred from fire, and thick bogs are home to submerged and steely rocks. But light started to seep back into his paintings, especially in the winter months, when the Maine sky is often crystal clear and snow illuminates the landscape. Welliver would snowshoe out to some virgin locale and paint for hours.

"He hit his stride and developed his mature style in the late 1970s," says Phil Alexandre, owner of the Alexandre Gallery in New York, which represents Welliver. "Those are the large-scale

paintings acquired by the Met and MOMA in Manhattan, the MFA in Boston, the Hirshhorn Museum in D.C." Welliver began to reap praise from art critics such as Robert Hughes at *Time* magazine, who wrote that his "paintings of the Maine woods are among the strongest images in modern American art."

As if Welliver hadn't faced enough adversity, he would also have to deal with the deaths of two of his five sons and overcome health problems, including a heart attack and, of late, hydrocephalus, more commonly referred to as water on the brain. Last May, Welliver and his wife, Mimi, moved from the farm to a new home perched high above his beloved Ducktrap River. On the mend, he is unable to give elaborate answers to questions but is sharp enough to shoot off one-liners. "How did you go about choosing the locales in the woods that you painted?"

"Wherever I could park my easel and it wouldn't fall down."

"Were you friends with de Kooning?"

"Sure, but he was still a pain in the ass."

Welliver doesn't let his malady interfere with his work. He continues to paint every day. Hanging from the wall in his new studio is a large canvas of the Ducktrap River, viewed from above. The ubiquitous forest stands on either side of the water, loosely painted and more abstract than in his earlier offerings. In Welliver's paintings, which have been compared to the works of realist painter Gustave Courbet, you'll find thick brush strokes that look slick and wet, as if they were created only yesterday, and a limited palette of green, red, blue, yellow, and white. "You think you're looking at an accurate Maine landscape, but then you realize his colors are quite unnatural," says Chris Crossman, director of the

Farnsworth Museum in nearby Rockland.

Welliver is clearly a landscape artist of the post-abstract expressionist era, or as Hughes states in his book *American Visions*, "he could only have matured in the 30 years after Pollock." His plein-air studies in the woods are merely sketches for large paintings produced in his barn, often as grand as 8 feet by 10 feet. Welliver outlines the sketch on the canvas and paints from top to bottom until finished, never returning to touch up the work.

There's only one way to truly immerse yourself in Welliver's woods: Leave the art behind and frolic in the same trees, marshes, bogs, and river that so enrapture him. Welliver recently donated 695 acres of his farm to Maine's Coastal Mountains Land Trust, allowing the public to traverse his woods. Many of the trees seen in paintings like *The Birches* (1977) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art have been lost due to ice storms, but a thick forest and dense underbrush remain, timber crackling underfoot. Light splinters through the branches of fallen firs onto their newborn cousins, dwarf pines — a cycle of nature, death, and rebirth that mirrors the ebb and flow of Welliver's life. **EG**

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## Survival Artist

Neil Welliver has used the tragedies in his life and the woods on his Maine property to become one of America's finest painters.

BY STEPHEN JERMANOK

PHOTOGRAPH BY AMY TOENING

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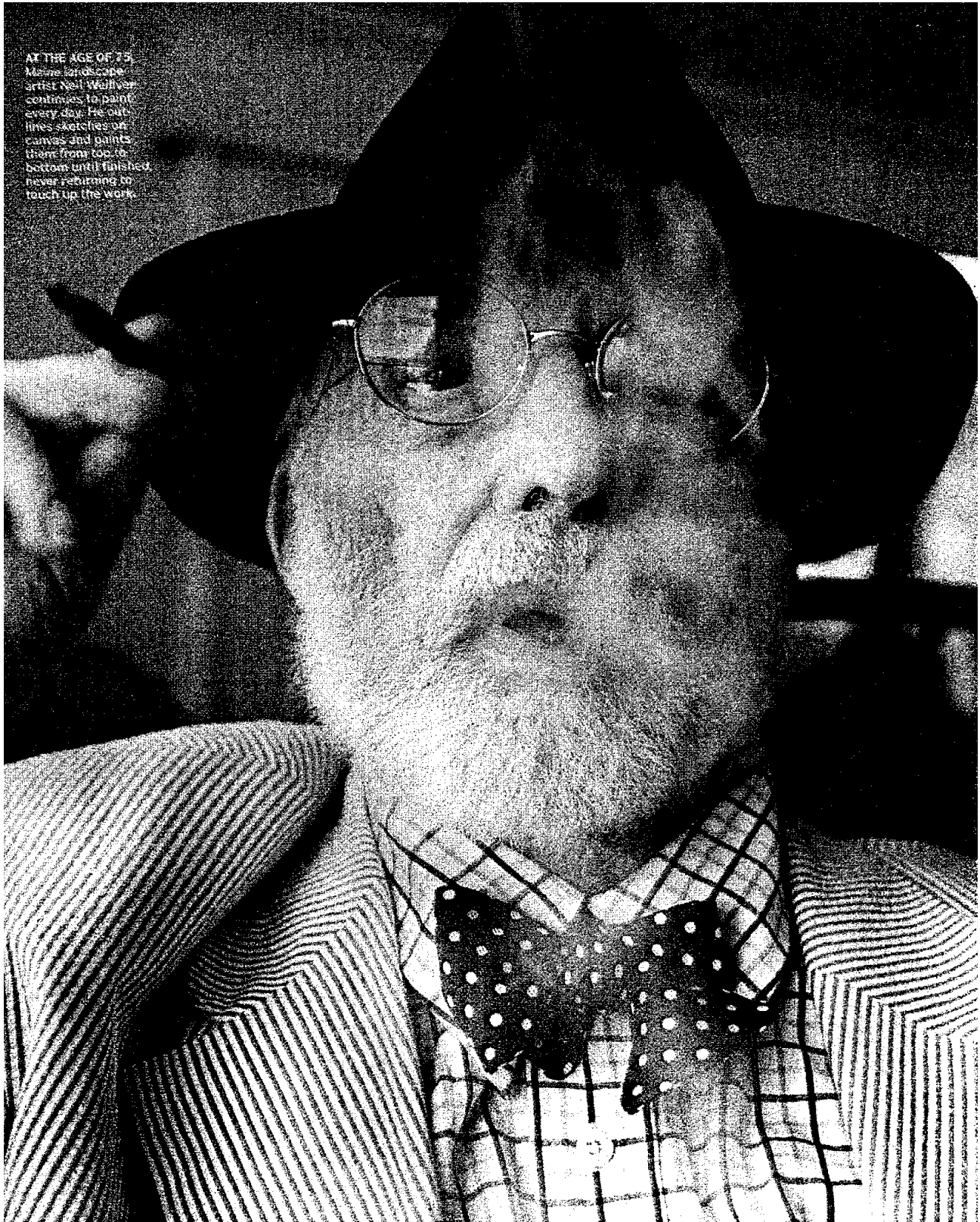
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