

ALEXANDRE

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ALEXANDRE GALLERY, NEW YORK

Neil Welliver's "Illusory Flowage" is part of a show at the Alexandre Gallery that outshines the higher profile Matisse exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Far left, Balthus's portrait of Pierre Matisse, son of Henri.

The Pierre Matisse Collection: Little New Under the Sun

By TERRY TEACHOUT
Special to The Washington Post

AS the dormouse in "Alice in Wonderland" observes, "Things are much of a muchness." That's what the cultural life of Second City is like—much of a muchness, so much so that it's sometimes too much so. On the other hand, what looks cool on paper often fails to pan out in person. Even the near-infallible Metropolitan Museum of Art has been known to slip a cog on occasion, a case in point being the recent opening of the Pierre and Maria-Gaëtana Matisse Collection. You'd think that the first of three planned exhibitions of paintings,

sculpture and drawings left to the Met by Henri Matisse's son and daughter-in-law would have been the surest of sure things. Instead, it proved to be eminently skipworthy.

Don't get me wrong: Mr. and Mrs. Matisse gave some nice things to the Met, most of them by Matisse the elder. But even the Matisses' Matisses don't really profit from being shown as a group, while none of the distinguished items by other artists is stop-press news. "Tall Figure," for instance, is a first-class Giacometti bronze, but I've seen plenty of first-class Giacometti bronzes that look pretty much like this one. In any case, too much of the collection is forgettable stuff, some of it by second-stringers. (Raymond Mason, anyone?)

You'd be much better off heading over to Salander-O'Reilly, where "Constable's Skies" is on display through June 25. It's a top-drawer show consisting of two dozen cloud studies and finished paintings by John Constable. The gallery is billing it as "the first sky studies show by John Constable in the United States," which sounds right to me. First or second, it's a dazzler: Constable's cloud paintings, made in 1821 and 1822, rank high among his most personal efforts, all the more so because so many of them seem all but abstract at first glance.

No less lookable is "Neil Welliver: Oil Studies," up at Alexandre Gallery through June 18. It's an exhibition of small-scale preliminary studies for about 35 of Welliver's large paintings of the woods of Maine. He views the world through the prism of "all-over" abstract expressionism, filling his canvases with rich, not quite realistic detail. Here, the modest size of each painting makes for a tauter, more focused effect, in much the same way that Jackson Pollock's smaller drip paintings have a concentration missing from his giant-size work.

What's remarkable about these exhibits is that either could have been booked by the Met without raising a hackle. That's New York for you: Even our galleries mount shows that smaller museums would kill to present.

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