

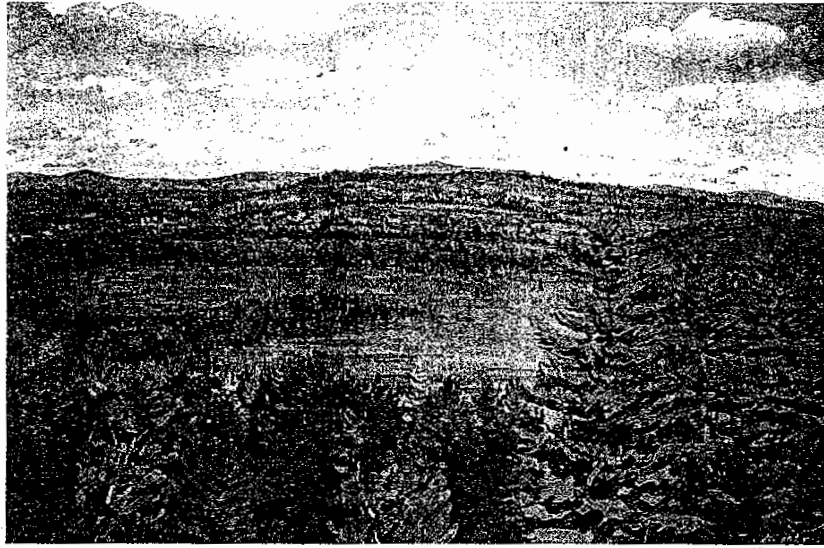
ALEXANDRE

THE NEW YORK SUN



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GALLERY-GOING



Neil Welliver, 'Study for Peat Bog' (1982).

ALEXANDRE GALLERY

By DAVID COHEN

Neil Welliver paints snow as nicely as anyone since Sisley. With the white froth of his fast-flowing brooks, he almost makes you think the Maine landscape has been smothered in cream.

This mouthwatering suggestion is bolstered by the succulence of the (for him) small oil sketches that are the subject of this fourth exhibition with Alexandre. These have a fresh, painterly directness usually absent in the tight, compulsively detailed, formally closed compositions for which he is better known.

Whatever the season, Mr. Welliver is a devotee of charged light. Even in dense woodlands — a favorite motif — he has the sunlight dapple the mossy ground and the edges of his pine trunks. He is much given to building representation out of perfunctory, almost digital dabs and strokes. But snow defeats a would-be pointillism and insists on rounded forms, which extracts a voluptuous legato from an otherwise staccato brush.

Mr. Welliver is a substantial, original artist who works in terrain similar geographically and stylistically to that of Alex Katz and Lois Dodd, who are his peers. But he has neither the high-octane improvisatory verve of Mr. Katz nor the quirky, wondrous obstinacy of observation to be found in Ms. Dodd. Other painters he resembles, and may have influenced, include Robert Berling and George Nick, but he equally lacks the uninhibited frankness and compositional compactness of these protégés.

Examination of these sketches, arguably the most likeable of his works, suggests his problem has to do with a kind of mimetic greed: Like another Mainer, Andrew Wyeth, he wants to record every blessed leaf, twig, branch. In terms of pictorial economy, this means missing the wood for the trees.

This proclivity, in a way, is on the other side of the same coin as a horror vacui, a fear of open color, bare ground, ambiguous space. He finds brushstrokes appropriate in scale to each individual form he is painting, then loads the composition to bursting point with these undifferentiated, and perceptually gratuitous marks. The result of the almost tapestry-like evenness of detail and attention is a claustrophobic closure that contradicts the natural order he has taken as his subject.

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