

ALEXANDRE

Art in America

May 2002

Neil Welliver at Alexandre

This exhibition of Neil Welliver's work from the 1960s to the early '70s covered a period when the artist switched from quasi-Fauvist fantasies to large, more realistic paintings of naked women partially submerged in woodland streams. The early fantasy pictures, represented here by several almost psychedelic watercolors, feature buxom nudes accompanied by cows or, in an apparent nod to Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, clothed men. In the later paintings, which can be as large as 6 feet square, the women are solo or in pairs, without cows or men. The show also included several 1967 oil-on-paper paintings. Marking an intermediate stage, they employ broad brushstrokes to block in voluptuous women with a generalized summer forest behind them. In works from later that year, the flat, cartoony blankness of the oil sketches disappears and the figures gain a more specific character. Often draped in leaf shadows and reflected in the patterns of water, their bodies are enriched by a seductive luminosity.

Welliver's nudes seem inspired by de Kooning's "women in the water" paintings of the '60s (e.g., *Clam Diggers*), but transported from Long Island beaches to the Maine woods. Where the older artist only provided glimpses of his subject through an expressionist scrim of gestural brushstrokes, Welliver chose to build an image that is completely legible a few feet away and only becomes abstract when the paintings are observed close up, where the subject is transformed into bristly swipes of greens, grays and browns, and opaque butterings of off-white, baby blue and pale orange.

The women depicted maintain a self-possession that comes from their staring right back at you from the frame with an amiable awareness of their erotic power. In a 4-foot-square canvas titled *Diane with Soap* (1967), the subject sits in shallow transparent water confronting our gaze as she towels her knee. She seems to be fully conscious that her pose and even her name are imitating some standard Boucher subject like "Diana at Her Bath." What she doesn't seem to realize is that the scene is constructed with the pokes and sidings of the pliant tips of round brushes, as if, dare one say it, the surface had been painted with a battery of phalluses.

This exhibition suggested how Welliver's painting technique became codified during his realization of a priapic Eden, which was left behind in the ensuing years of his landscape work. What has remained are his distinctive brushstrokes, encoded with the memory of a paradise now lost.

—Joe Fyfe

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Neil Welliver: *Figure with Shirt*, 1967, oil on canvas, 72½ by 72 inches; at Alexandre.

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