

ALEXANDRE

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2001

ART IN REVIEW

Neil Welliver

'Early Figurative Paintings'

Alexandre Gallery
41 East 57th Street, Manhattan
Through Jan. 26

All the women in Neil Welliver's large nude-in-the-landscape paintings from the late 60's and early 70's are gorgeous. They have bodies a Playmate of the Month could envy and lovely girlish faces. Partly immersed in forest pools, they gaze back at the viewer with wide-eyed come-hither expressions. Far from the neutered professional models of Philip Pearlstein's paintings, they exude a powerfully inviting sexuality as well as a pantheistic mystery; they are more like minor goddesses than artist's models. One can't help imagining that the artist himself found them hard to resist.

Mr. Welliver did at least partly resist the sexual allure of his models to concentrate, like a late-20th-century Monet, on the relationship

between paint and optical perception that gives these paintings a visceral tension. You keep shifting between levels: from the voluptuous girl to the play of light on bright green foliage and rippling water, from the wiggly bodies underwater to the lively action of paint generously applied to canvas. The tension between formalism and fantasy is an exquisite tease.

For Mr. Welliver the sexy woman and the business of painting proved ultimately irreconcilable. Like Odysseus he left the sirens behind and went on to concentrate on the painterly parsing of nature minus the distraction of female flesh. But he left behind these unusually revealing documents of a deep Puritanical rift in the American soul.

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