

# ALEXANDRE

Memorial Service for Neil Welliver, July 22, 2005  
Remarks by Dr. John Silber, President Emeritus of Boston University

We are here to celebrate the life of a remarkably complex man and a very great artist. Neil Welliver, like Mozart, knew as a child what he was destined to become. His overwhelming gift for visual expression foreordained his choice of work. In fact he had no choice—he was called to the life of painting.

Though small of stature, he was powerfully built, and his body was topped by a large ruggedly handsome head, penetrating dark eyes, high broad forehead, a thick black mustache and after the passage of a few years a striking fringe of snow white hair. He was arrestingly good-looking.

I met him in an aesthetics class at Yale in 1953 taught by Theodore M. Greene. Seated in the back of the lecture hall, we sometimes spent more time talking to each other than in attending to Greene's excellent lectures.

Welliver spoke reverentially of Josef Albers and was also influenced by Paul Klee. I already knew Klee's work and found it fascinating. But Welliver's comments and insights on Klee were instructive and could only increase and deepen one's appreciation of his works. I did not share, however, Neil's enthusiasm for Josef Albers. I thought his paintings of layered squares of different colors offered little to engage the human spirit. I asked Neil, "Why are you so devoted to Albers? Are you limited as a draftsman; is it that you can't draw?" Neil's obscene instructions to me were followed by a quick sketch of a human head at three-quarters and an explanation of how before drawing the visible ear one must locate the ear on the unseen side of the head. Only by thinking of the entire head in the round, both the seen and the unseen parts, Neil explained, can one achieve a three-dimensional effect on a flat surface. So he could draw with speed and with great accuracy and control. But, since he had an extraordinary ability to draw, I asked him why he wished to limit himself to the abstractions of Albers and Klee.

Neil said his interest in Albers lay in what Albers had taught him about color. He said Albers had such understanding and control of colors that in his paintings, some squares move toward you while others recede. As an exercise Albers gave his students hundreds of colored patches of various hues and values and required students to assemble square surfaces made up of hundreds of different colored patches so that they resulted in what appeared to be a flat surface. The test of one's success was easy: if done correctly, a black and white photograph would show a square of undifferentiated grey. When one can finally see colors in this way, Neil observed, one can paint with intelligence. One then does not break the surface of a face or of a road or a lake or a wall by introducing the wrong color or shade. In the Yale art gallery he pointed out successful and unsuccessful uses of color. Finally Neil added that when you learn what Albers has to teach you, you see colors with an understanding and can paint surfaces to come forward or recede as you will. Albers, deeply impressed by Neil's ability, appointed him to the Yale faculty in 1955.

Neil was my entrée into a small group of artists who then studied at Yale, including the late Robert Slutsky, who was also a protégé of Albers. I was struck by their range of interests, which went far beyond art to architecture, politics and philosophy. Neil was a driven intellectual, interested in everything. He loved to expound on ideas and to argue, often heatedly and sharply, but never in ways that were demeaning. If he said in the

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midst of an argument “You’re full of --it,” as he frequently did, he only referred to your ideas, and never to you personally. If one was offended by his comment, Neil would be astonished and at a loss to know why. And he could take a hit as well as deliver one. This made conversation with Neil always exciting and instructive.

While still teaching at Yale, Neil was asked by the philosopher Paul Weiss to teach him how to paint. Weiss was writing a book on art and wanted an insider’s perspective. I doubt that God ever created anyone with less artistic ability than Paul Weiss. But, remarkably, Neil was able to reveal to Weiss the way an artist looks at the world and how his view translates into drawing or painting. Weiss turned out a prodigious number of awful drawings and paintings—and I regret to report that he proudly gave one to me—but, nevertheless, he somehow caught the essence of the process and wrote incisively about the making of art. His debt to Neil was fulsomely acknowledged in his book. The relationship with Paul Weiss was a two-sided one, for Paul engaged Neil in philosophy and deepened his knowledge and interest in philosophy, which continued throughout the rest of Neil’s life.

To watch Neil at work was to observe a man with the visual equivalent of perfect pitch. Colors were in his head, and he could see them without regard to the surroundings. Beginning at the top left corner of his huge canvas, he would paint diagonally down and across. He began painting with a loaded brush of colors directly on a white canvas. But when the painting was two-thirds done and the contrast of the blank canvas minimized, there was no alteration of color. His memory of colors was as unflinching as an excellent musician’s memory of a pitch.

Neil hit his stride in the early and middle seventies. In 1973 we held a small exhibition of Neil’s work at Boston University—primarily his small landscape sketches. They were representational without being photographic. One was of a watered marsh with mountains beyond. The marsh and the waterways within it lie flat as they recede into the distance. Albers would have been proud. On that occasion I mentioned to Neil that our house had been torched and we had lost all of our paintings and all of my personal drawings and paintings. Neil was touched by our loss and gave me the painting I had just admired. He said, “This will help you get started again.”

Only two years later, Neil’s studio went up in flames. But he carried on. While his power as an artist continued to expand, and while recognition of his work increased, his personal life was one tragedy after another: first the death of his daughter, then of his wife, and then of two sons. The murder in Thailand of Eli simply unhinged Neil. He frequently called me asking whom I might know in Thailand or in the United States that might assist him in finding his son’s murderer. In his grief he plunged close to insanity. As he raged one afternoon, I thought him as mad as poor Lear, who on finding Cordelia murdered wailed,

No, no, no life!  
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,  
And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more,  
Never, never, never, never, never!

Neil spent over \$1 million in the vain pursuit of Eli’s murderer. He couldn’t do less. And his sanity, never fully impaired, was largely restored by his work, for he was tireless in his sketching trips in all kinds of weather, blessed by a rugged constitution, and after a

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sketch was done he worked steadily to complete the full-scale painting housed in his imagination.

He called me once to complain about a favorable review of his work in Time magazine. One of his paintings, a mountain half in sunshine and in shadows, was illustrated. The reviewer was at a loss to explain the shadow across the mountain. It was obviously the shadow cast by a mountain behind the painter, adding additional depth to the landscape. Neil was very annoyed. How could one miss the obvious? That was often the case, I thought, in reading what was written about his work. I suspect it was a blind critic who compared Neil's landscapes to those of Courbet, unless he meant merely that both painters were excellent.

I have not recited all of the places where Neil's works have been exhibited and the museums that have added his paintings to their permanent collections or made any attempt to describe his massive work. All of this is well known to those present here; we all knew both Neil and his work.

Although Neil could be abrasive, he was also kind and concerned to help others. He was devoted to Shigemitsu Tsukaguchi, who made remarkably detailed woodcuts used in the complex color prints of many of Neil's paintings. Neil was awed by the craftsmanship and artistry of Tsukaguchi and felt beholden to him. When his son Kenneth applied to our School of Management, Neil telephoned me on his behalf to ensure that his strong application was not overlooked. I then learned that based on Kenneth's outstanding record, he was admitted and awarded a scholarship.

In 1995 when my wife was recovering from pneumonia, Neil gave her a print of a loon, a bird dear to Kathryn, a species she had often observed on Squam Lake in New Hampshire. The generosity Neil showed to my wife and to me and to his printmaker was also expressed to many other friends, acquaintances and institutions.

Neil was also a devoted environmentalist and he took pains to ensure that much of his farm would be preserved in its present state while at the same time persons were to be allowed to walk through it to see the woods and the waterways as he had seen them.

Neil told me on more than one occasion of his good fortune in having Mimi by his side to see him through the difficult last few years as he declined toward death.

It is hard to say goodbye to a person as vibrant as Neil. His talent, his wit, his learning, his gift of speech and his generous heart are treasures now lost. For me, and as I suspect for you, our feelings are well expressed by Edna St. Vincent Millay:

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.  
So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been, time out of mind:  
Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely. Crowned  
With lilies and with laurel they go; but I am not resigned.

Lovers and thinkers, into the earth with you.  
Be one with the dull, the indiscriminate dust.  
A fragment of what you felt, of what you knew,  
A formula, a phrase remains, - but the best is lost.

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Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave  
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;  
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.  
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.

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