

# ALEXANDRE

## EXCERPT FROM CATALOG ESSAY

Neil Welliver: Early Figurative Paintings, Alexandre Gallery, 2001 (exhibition catalog).

By Barry Schwabsky

### Neil Welliver's Nudes

I'm glad I'm not the one who broached to Neil Welliver the notion that there might be, shall we say, a certain quantum of prurience in his undertaking to paint, some three decades ago, a great many paintings of the female nude. "I've had long close looks at female figures and wasn't painting at all," the artist replied. "So I assume that's not the reason." Discussion closed.

Or is it? Painting can only ever be an act of desire. What else could ever lead from the blank canvas to something more satisfying? Work might be the retort, to which one need only nod in agreement before asking, But what motivates work? One needn't ultimately disagree with Welliver's assessment that his work is better understood through its evident pictorial properties than through some highly speculative psychological ones to realize that the nude is and has always been a charged subject. Not every artist is capable of treating it with equanimity, so if Welliver in fact has done so—and that remains to be seen—the fact is worth exploring.

One way to see the paintings of nudes in landscapes that occupied Welliver in the late '60s and early '70s is as the mid-point in a determined journey from an art of fancy to an art of the real. This was also a transition from the figure to the landscape as the painter's primary subject. Knowing that as a student Welliver was electrified by the work of Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning while being taught by the strict Constructivist Josef Albers, we may be surprised at how a Welliver painting from the '50s like *Big Head* (British Royal Portrait) shows instead the influence of artists like Larry Rivers, who were trying to synthesize the gestural painterly qualities of Abstract Expressionism with history painting. More surprising still, in the light of Welliver's subsequent work, may be the fact that this "portrait" is of an invented face—more than just a motif on which to hang some lively brushwork, perhaps, but nonetheless an object of whimsy rather than observation.

By the mid-'60s, when Welliver made a large painting titled *Couple with Leslie*—a nude woman and a man in jacket and tie sitting on a living room easy chair set, oddly enough, outdoors beneath a tree with a young girl standing nearby—a good deal of direct observation has entered his work. These feel like real and not imaginary portraits. In fact the solidity of the scene suggests that Welliver set it up in order to paint it. So there is an observed reality—but also an underlying theatricality to the situation. The painting is less about looking than it is about imagining. The unanswerable question of how to envision the relationships among these three individuals—are they a family, for instance?—dominates our contemplation of the paintings. The vigorously painted landscape flattens out into something resembling a stage backdrop. The painting is also about art history. The juxtaposition of a clothed man and a naked woman in an outdoor setting cannot help but recall Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe*. In that context the substitution of a young girl for the second man might seem a deliberately provocative move.

In the dense, high-focus landscape paintings that now most readily come to mind when we think of Welliver's work, the insistent literalness or factuality of the painted surface

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never really flattens out in the way that the landscape background of the painting *Couple with Leslie* does. That may be surprising, especially in the case of those that present impenetrable, horizonless expanses of words in which branches and foliage are as intertwined as the skeins of color in one of Pollock's poured paintings of 1950. But Welliver's literalness about paint never negates his literalness about describing things—and the things depicted in his mature paintings include intangibles like air and light as well as things you can touch, like trees and soil. Welliver's woods are no backdrop. Not even for the artist's feelings as he paints them. There is undoubtedly a tremendous desire to work in such paintings, but it is a desire to find the reality in things rather than in oneself.

The point of Welliver's nudes, I think, must have been to see whether it was possible to find that reality in things in a situation in which human relations were among the things to be taken into account. In other works, Welliver was not working as textbook formalist, using the figure as a neutral motif to be drained of all extra-pictorial feeling. The women in these paintings are for real—not only in their bodies, but in their character. They are not fantasies of the artist's. And they're not timeless or idealized: Their hair, their facial expression, their attitude somehow place them as specifically in their time as their clothes would have. The look forthrightly at the painter, therefore at the viewer, each in her own way—tough, vulnerable, blasé, self-conscious, or just plain cold and not very pleased about it—and with those looks vanish any illusion we might have that these women are just raw material for what we've learned to call “the male gaze.” And yet we are no longer concerned, looking at these pictures, about potential narrative implications arising from the interactions among various figures, even in paintings that actually show two models together. What narrative there is has to do with interaction between the model and the painter. It's story about work. We don't wonder why woman in a painting is nude of the clothed man (whom we don't see) is busy painting her. She's a model, and nudity is just part of the job description.

Just as the women pictured here are not characters in a literary drama but models doing the job of modeling, the landscape in which we see them no longer resembles a theatrical backdrop, as the sea did behind the woman singing along the beach in Wallace Stevens' “*Ideas of Order at Key West*.” I'm almost tempted to say of it what I said about the modes: It looks forthrightly at the viewer. That might seem an unacceptable anthropomorphism applied to the work of a painter of whom it's been said that “the surfaces of his pictures present a barrier to poetical speculation”—by John Ashbery, who of all people should know. Of course, Ashbery also knows the difference between poetry and what's merely poetical, and it's the latter that Welliver (in common with most good modern poets) has tried to banish from his work. In any case, what faces us in a Welliver landscape is tangible, complex, and indifferent to any ideas of order, beauty, or benevolence we may bring to it—indifferent but not antithetical, as may be seen from the order, beauty, and probity of the painter's transcription of it.

The nudes of the late '60s and early '70s are certainly as complex and tangible as the landscape, but they could never be indifferent to the painter's desire—I am speaking of the desire to submit them to the demands of his art—the way that trees, grass, and lakes are. The model's psychological opacity presents problems of an entirely different order. The reality of a person escapes observation, demands speculation. As poetry is what gets lost in translation, character is what gets lost in description. And so, given that the landscape does not function as a “setting” for the figure as it would in a traditional

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painting, a never-resolved tension haunts these pictures—a tension between two different ways of looking, between poetry and prose.

In many of these paintings—in many of the best of them—we see the model standing or sitting in water. Why? On one level, there are undoubtedly compositional reasons for this. The reflective qualities of water mixed with its transparency means that things below its surface become mingled with what's above it; and the movements of the surface work to fragment what's seen of both realms. So the use of water is clearly a very useful device for creating something more like the knit-together, all-over surface image that Welliver admired in the work of painters like Pollock and de Kooning, but in the context of representation. (Posing the model in certain paintings beneath a tree's foliage so that its shadows dapple her body functions similarly.) And of course it creates possibilities for a degree of top-to-bottom symmetry within the picture that also help make for a more abstract kind of space. But above all, it goes as far as possible toward emphasizing the idea that the model is actually within the landscape: when we see her skin through the water, we are seeing both water and flesh at the same time. But what's never mingled with water and its reflections is the model's face—where personhood is at once communicated and withheld.

The maker of these paintings was involved in a drawn-out process of vacillation over whether to be a figure painter or a landscape painter. He had the capacity to succeed brilliantly at either one, or at both if he practiced them separately as painters like Frank Auerbach or Lucien Freud do. Apparently he could not sustain indefinitely the tension between the two modes as he practiced them. In retrospect it might seem inevitable that the landscape would win out, but that's the illusion of hindsight. If Welliver had not elected to move to Maine full-time in 1971, the balance might have tipped the other way; if an unimaginable sequence of tragedies had not struck in 1975—a studio fire that destroyed much of Welliver's lifework, followed by the deaths of his wife and a child—the silent consolations of the natural world might have seemed less attractive than the social and psychological complexities involved in painting (and therefore collaborating with) other people. What had to be rigorously expunged to make Welliver's best work possible was a poetry of desire.

So as I view these paintings, I can't help but feel a certain nostalgia, if that's the right word. Not only of the many paintings from this series that were lost in the 1975 fire, but also for the paintings that might have been made in an alternate career in which—who knows?—Welliver might have developed into a sort of American answer to Manet, an answer made in full cognizance of the history of modern painting that flowed, to a great extent, from the tracks of Manet's brush. But why regret the loss of one remarkable painter when it's meant the development of another? In these paintings emerges the blunt yet intricate, spontaneous yet methodical art that is Welliver's alone.

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