

ALEXANDRE

Introduction by Ruth E. Fine

Originally appeared in Neil Welliver: PRINTS 1973-1995, published by Down East Books, 1996.

The wilderness is Neil Welliver's subject--the source of inspiration for his paintings, drawings, and prints. His work encompasses a unity within the dense texture of the natural world, suggesting the tame (or tamable) within the wilderness as well as the wildness within a setting of serenity. One senses that the artist finds his own exploration of the land not only to be a way to make contact with nature's grandeur, but also a way to embrace it on his own terms, to locate a core set of elements that leads to his personal arena of understanding.

Welliver makes his home in Lincolnville, Maine. The distinctive ruggedness of this northern landscape has attracted artists for generations, and while many painters today come to the area for summer months, Welliver has been a full-time resident of Lincolnville (Maine) for more than twenty-five years. His work in the region continues a visual dialogue central to American art, part of the landscape tradition that was developed in the late nineteenth century by such artists as Albert Pinkham Ryder and Winslow Homer, then continued in the early part of this century by Marsden Hartley and John Marin. These artists tackled pointed firs surrounding deep lakes, waves crashing against jagged rocks along the coast, the drama of brilliant red sunsets and powerful gray storms, the serenity of billowing clouds hovering above rolling fields. It is within this milieu that Neil Welliver's art must be placed. Homer's attraction to wildlife is paralleled by Welliver's to deer, fish and waterfowl. Hartley's best known subjects are its mountains, and Marin's the sea. Welliver's are the woods and the streams.

To make his art, Welliver has found it important to observe nature closely, to work in the landscape, the wind and light and air serving as part of the inspiration, even though the forms themselves often seem generalized rather than meticulously observed. This generalization serves to set up a distancing, a suggestion of universality, rather than specificity, each clump of trees, for example, functioning as an archetype.

Welliver works from places he knows and loves, places of grandeur and intimacy, places of extraordinary natural beauty and power. He returns to the same site repeatedly. In this way the artist comes to know his subjects by immersion, by osmosis; he learns how to seek out the secrets of each place. . .

Welliver's art is based in great part on memories formed during his long hours of looking at the landscape but also in part on the drawings made on site. These set out the scheme but lack a real sense of finish that is later developed in the prints and paintings. He makes many, many little sketches of a place. The drawings on site often are followed by watercolors before the more highly developed prints (or paintings) are undertaken. In the end, the screenprints and lithographs, etchings and woodcuts are "not portraits of places." They are attentive as much to defining

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and reinforcing the surface of the sheet of paper as they are to suggesting the deep landscape space. When used, the figurative elements are iconic in their clarity and scale within his compositions. They suggest a kind of unity of all elements in nature.

Welliver works on his prints slowly, and he takes up the various graphic media only sporadically. Completed in the late 1980s, *Deer* and *Black Bear* are color etchings with aquatint, both depicting a creature in its environment. The rhythmic patterning of the woods as the animals move through them, as well as their own shadowy patterns, are both elements of strong focus. Conceived with strength and conviction, they confirm the artist's ongoing love affair with his surroundings, with Maine. They confirm as well the viability of the American landscape tradition as an aspect of our contemporary vision.

1. On Welliver's paintings and drawings, see J. Ashbery and F. H. Goodyear, Jr., *Welliver* (Geneva: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1985).
2. On the American painter-etcher movement, see J. Goldman, *American Prints: Process and Proofs* (N.Y.: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1981), 34-39; C. F. Mandel, *The American Painter-Etcher Movement* (Southampton, N.Y.: Parrish Art Museum, 1984); and T. P. Bruhn, *American Etching: The 1880s* (Storrs, Conn.: Univ. of Connecticut, 1985).
3. For an overview of the various printmaking processes, consult D. Saff and D. Sacilotto, *Printmaking: History and Process* (N. Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978) or J. Ross, et al, *The Complete Printmaker: Techniques/Traditions/Innovations* (rev. ed.) (N. Y.: The Free Press, 1990).
4. All quotations are from brief telephone conversations with the artist between January 1988 and June 1989.
5. This flatness was a common characteristic of screenprinting in the 1960s. It clearly is not one that is essential to the process, as is apparent in the screenprints of Jasper Johns and Jonathan Borofsky. For examples, see R. S. Field, *The Prints of Jasper Johns 1960-1993, A Catalogue Raisonné* (West Islip: Universal Limited Art Editions, 1994), nos. 146, 147, 20; and J. Cuno and R. E. Fine, *Subject(s): Prints and Multiples by Jonathan Borofsky 1982-1991* [exh. cat. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College] (Hanover, 1992), nos. 8, 18, 30.
6. See *Hand Colored Prints* (N. Y.: Brooke Alexander, Inc., 1975).

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