

ALEXANDRE

Introduction

by John Ashbery

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Much—and not enough—has been made of the fact that Neil Welliver paints large-scaled landscapes of an unspoiled American wilderness in the tradition of Kensett and other nineteenth century luminists, but that the tone of the work seems to reject these influences and to refer instead to mid-twentieth century abstraction, particularly the “all-over” canvases of Jackson Pollock. How can this be, we wonder? For “we” are accustomed to dealing with one idea at a time, at least when these ideas are proposed by our artists, and the spectacle of one of them keeping two or half-a-dozen ideal aloft simultaneously, of according equal importance to all of them, makes us uncomfortable. For situations that are a common feature of daily life seem strange and even threatening when beamed back at us by the mirror of art.

Having accepted in the relatively recent past that painting can be, is allowed to be, something we call abstract for want of a better term, and having even more recently digested the fact that descriptive, figural painting, that told stories and proposed images did not on that account dry up and blow away, we are hard put to see how Welliver can deliver both propositions without asking us to choose. Part of the problem is that the nature he paints is untamed and therefore must be noble in the way that noble savages are noble—rude and harsh but ultimately forgiving of our increment of effete civilization, for that is the way the nineteenth-century landscape painters taught us to look at it. Frederick Church’s icebergs are inhuman colossi, vast and threatening as indeed they are in nature, yet their swooning rainbow tints speak of some kind of dream of salvation for us, some kind of complicity with our insignificance. Courbet, whose forest scenes are certainly antecedents of Welliver’s, doesn’t do this overtly: he gives us raw particulars, the grittiness of loam and congested underbrush like that in Welliver’s Maine landscapes. Yet there is here too a subtext of romanticism, of the romantic bravery of realism, even when Courbet is being most objective. Only natural then that we should attempt to read Welliver in the light of idealistic attempts such as these. And indeed, the drama of the land in Welliver’s remote citadel in Maine often encourages us to do so. “Midday Barren,” a 1983 painting, is one instance: a boulder-strewn field (known in French as chaos) presided over by an impassive pale-blue sky and some delicate clouds, that looks as emblematic as Caspar David Friedrich’s “Artistic Shipwreck.”

Yet it would be risky to begin to interpret this or any other work by a painter who considers his paintings “facts.” Facts are facts and his choice of this word implies that interpretation ends just about there. The openness, the emptiness seems to invite you in, but before the invitation can be accepted one is ushered firmly back out. “What you hope for is something that virtually oscillates, where you go in and there’s a surface and you go in the there’s a surface,” he told Edwin Denby during an interview, at a point when Welliver was making a distinction between his own method and that of a painter like Church, whose work abounds in devices for denying the surface and drawing the viewer inside. Welliver’s illusionism is of quite another kind. The surfaces of his pictures present a barrier to poetical speculation. Even when one can seem to see through them, like scenery painted on a scrim which allows one to view the stage behind it, there is no ignoring the fact that the picture plane really is a wall. What lies behind it is apparently of no concern to the painter.

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Nor should this cause any surprise, given Welliver's background and formation. Growing up in the lumber town of Millville, Pa., during the Depression, he was awed by the matter-of-fact ease and skill with which his grandfather, a cabinet-maker, crafted furniture, though it never occurred to him then that he might one day become an artist. Like other American boys, he intended to be a fireman, or a pilot or an engineer, though this phase lasted longer than usual—"until the age of twentyoeitht," he told Denby jokingly. In fact, by that time he had already obtained a Master of Fine Arts degree at Yale, where he studied with Josef Albers, and though his favorite subject at the time was the nude, which caused Albers to "give up on" him as a painter (Albers is reported to have told him: "For a long time now you have been very good with green, but oh those bo-zooms!"), the latter's theories of colour relationships expressed in conversations outside the studio were what impressed Welliver. The opulent light, the reverberating space, the atmospherics of the canvases he does today are the product not of some retardataire nineteenth-century Yankee hankering after the sublime, but had their origin in the flat, saturated squares of Albers and in other seeming abstraction; in Mondrian's "constellations of colour that are separate"; in late Monet where "it doesn't seem as though he is looking anymore. He's putting colors together and fabricating an image"; in Pollock, not for his color but for "accepting the physical fact of the canvas."

Just what this fact might be is of course unclear, like all the important things in art. ("It's interesting, isn't it," Welliver remarked at the conclusion of his interview with Denby, "that no matter how long one talks about painting, that which is important...never gets said. It's really ineffable.") Probably it's what William James meant—no more and no less—when he wrote: "The more we can steer clear of theories at first, the better... 'Facts' are what are wanted." But Welliver, to judge from reproductions of his early paintings, didn't always manage to steer clear of theories "at first." Despite their charm and novelty, the posed quasi-allegorical groups in landscape settings, with both clothed and naked figures, seem the product of a generalizing fancy (and also show the curious influence of Eilshemius, a painter Welliver still holds in high regard). The facticity of birch twigs and leaves and pebbles that we prize in his later work hadn't yet emerged, though the idyllic background was even then propitious. Reviewing a Welliver show for Art News in 1967, Rackstraw Downes wrote: "Models are sometimes used and locales visited as a kind of preliminary research; but the atmosphere of these paintings is entirely mythical. While there was always a suggestion of the outdoors, the new paintings have become real Eclogues—the scene is an idealized nature, the wildwoods, with rocks, ferns and unpolluted streams, distinctly arcadian, though in a rather special sense." This characterization, accurate then, no longer holds true. Welliver today is not content with "preliminary research," only "hard looking" will serve: "I look very hard then I make it up as I go along."

In 1971, bothered by the fact that he could not return to verify details of the landscape as he expanded his plein-air studies into full scale paintings in his city studio, he moved full-time to his summer home in Lincolnville, a move that also allows him to paint the winter scenes that have become such an amazing dimension of his later work, even though "to paint outside in the winter is painful. It hurts your hands, it hurts you feet, it hurts your ears... But sometimes there are things you want and that's the only way you get them." Welliver's slow coming to terms with the "slovenly wilderness" (as Wallace Stevens half-admiringly called it in "Anecdote of the Jar") has, then been arduous: not merely the physical discomfort of painting the Maine landscape in sub-zero temperatures or in the black-fly infested summers, but the frequent isolation which, one suspects, doesn't set easily with this gregarious family man who wishes to remain in

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close touch with the art of his time and which, after a horrifying series of personal tragedies in the mid-seventies that might well have driven a less determined artist back to the tepid embrace of “civilization,” must often have seemed intolerable.

Nevertheless, artists are supposed to suffer and spectators find themselves comfortable with this arrangement. What could upset them more are Welliver’s strange techniques and subterfuges. For instance, his much commented-on practice of beginning his pictures at the top of the canvas and slowly working downward until the whole surface is covered. Isn’t that cheating? Isn’t the artist supposed to hold himself open to revisions and improvisations while confronted with the emerging reality of his work? Shouldn’t there be occasions for reassures and accidents that will then have to be repaired or accommodated? How do you paint “nature” in a way that seems so unnatural, so cold and calculating? And what about his insistence on painting wet into wet, of giving the paint its final finish while it is still in the process of being born? If a “slapdash” look were what he was after, that would be one thing, but the end result is a complex and unforgiving as mathematics, nowhere more than in the recent “Snow on Alden Brook,” with its thousands and thousands of snowflakes that threaten to obliterate the thousands of bare twigs on the trees that fade away into the heart of the snowstorm. Here is a major embodiment of one of the paradoxes of Welliver’s art: the falling flakes are patterned as rigidly as God would have programmed them, nothing is left to chance, yet what emerges is a powerful, subliminal projection of an ephemeral moment: you can smell and taste the cold, and the damp penetrates your bones even as you wonder at the magisterially orchestrated and ordered precision of the complex surface, which would seem to leave no quarter to stray sensual impressions.

Surely he must have been obfuscating when he said, “I’m not interested at all in painting from nature. I’m not interested in that at all.”

Denby shrewdly pointed out that Welliver’s large landscapes, which take him from four to six weeks to paint, look as though they were done in one or two days, to which Welliver replied, “Anyone who paints when they see wet fluid paint assumes that it was done very, very rapidly. In fact I paint very slowly and very deliberately.” Denby then asked:

Have you thought about the difference in style between painting fast and painting slow? How do you overcome that slowness in the look of the painting?” “That’s a trade secret,” was the reply. “It took me a long time to figure out how to do that. If I tell you, you will be doing it in a week or so.”

This is to me the most remarkable of Welliver’s statements about his painting and what is remarkable is not the unguessable nature of the “trade secret,” whatever it may be, but the fact of its existence, the felt necessity to make slow painting look like fast painting, and the steps that led to the realization of that necessity. It’s hard to imagine anyone caring, anyone but the painter, that is, how long he took to finish a painting. Since Pollock and de Kooning are two of the painters he most admires, one would, it is true, expect to find in his work something of their immersion in gesture, of the painting as nothing more, nor less, than a history of the explosions that caused it to be. The Apollonian stasis of Albers, in whose work colour supplies the only movement, might be closer to Welliver’s stated aims. But the end result—armies of particulars in which confusion is, if not celebrated, at least enshrined—is a splendor far removed from that of Albers’ elementary syllogisms.

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Like Cordelia's response to Lear's questioning, Welliver's discussions of his working habits seem sly and sassy, sincere but cold. One almost forgets that they are the only possible explanations, which is to say that they are the truth. And the reason that they are the truth is to be found in the work, which defeats any attempts to explain or justify it simply by towering over them. Queer methods, reasoning by paradox, cryptic statements carry us a certain distance toward it but then stop: there is a blank separating how he works from his achievement, which finally defies analysis just by being better than that, by the rich rotundity and dissolved poetry that circulate somehow in and around these uncompromisingly flat surfaces. The painting is, like any art, more than the sum of its parts, and we have every right to expect that, even though we never do expect it and are always surprised each time it happens. It originates in a paradox and is nourished there. And there is nothing mysterious about that since the paradox is a commonplace, invoked almost daily by everyone, a part of speech.

Denby: and that's what you would like to do?

Welliver: Yes. Have my cake and eat it too.

Denby: Yes. That's what art's about.

Welliver: Right.

John Ashbery,
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