

ALEXANDRE



# *Island Light*

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**Emily Nelligan** has spent a lifetime using charcoal to interpret the never-ending plays of light and form she sees on one small Maine island.

BY JOHN A. PARKS

**E**mily Nelligan's entire body of work constitutes a series of charcoal drawings that forms an extended meditation on the light and atmosphere of a single place: Great Cranberry Island, off the coast of Maine.

The works combine great clarity and great mystery. Forms are simplified, and in the deep twilight represented in so many of the drawings large areas of shadow come together to form dense silhouettes whose interior depths remain obscured to the

viewer. Yet a sense of illumination permeates everything. Softened by veils of watery mist, clouds and sea spray, the light surrounds and infuses the landscape

with drama and life. The results are not only marvelous evocations of light and atmosphere but moving elegies that communicate the artist's deep spiritual affinity with the place itself.

"I owe everything to the island," says Nelligan. "When I'm away from it I can't work. I feel claustrophobic. I grew up in New York City, and I suppose I was always dealing with that. When I got to Maine with all that openness, the expanse of the sea and the sky with nothing there, it was such a relief. It was wonderful."

The artist spent almost all her adult summers on Great Cranberry Island in company with her artist husband, the late Marvin Bileck. The pair first met when they were students at The Cooper Union in New York City in the 1940s. Those early years were hard. "I just loved art and that's what I wanted to do," recalls Nelligan. "But in order to do that one couldn't have a full time job.

**22 Oct 99 (1)**

1999, charcoal,  
7¼ x 10½.

All artwork this  
article courtesy  
Alexandre  
Gallery, New  
York, New York.

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At least that's how it seemed to me. I didn't realize I could be a teacher, although eventually that's what my husband did. I babysat for 50 cents an hour and made enough to cover the nine dollars for a shared apartment. I lived from hand to mouth."

It was around this time that Nelligan began working in charcoal. "I went early to charcoal simply because it was cheap," she says. "I was orphaned at 18, and I had no relatives. There was no money. Charcoal was cheaper than oil paint and gradually became my exclusive medium." The artist's decision to work on commercial writing paper was also initially motivated by the fact that it was inexpensive. "I never considered it a limitation," she says. "I had art, and there were others who understood things in a similar way."

When Nelligan and Bileck began spending summers on Great Cranberry Island, the place was home to just a small community of fishermen. The artists rented a shack for a few dollars a week. "You had a roof over your head and an outhouse," Nelligan says. "It was very simple, but it was all you needed."

The couple soon established a working routine that they would maintain for decades. "We used to go out every day in the morning and then again in the afternoon and just set ourselves down and look," says Nelligan. "Sometimes something would present itself and sometimes it wouldn't. But the process was looking and waiting and hoping to come up with something."

The artist never proceeded from an idea or a plan for a drawing. "If the light was right I would set myself down and try and capture it," she says. "I'm utterly dependent on what I see. The quality of the light is the essence of the work." Nelligan



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**22 Oct 01**

2001, charcoal, 7¼ x 10½.

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**11 Oct 99 (1)**

1999, charcoal,  
7¼ x 10½.

BELOW

**28 May 81**

1981, charcoal,  
7¼ x 10½.

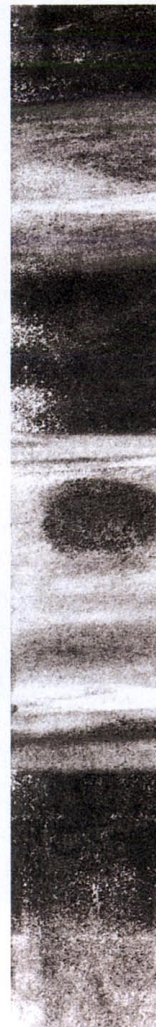
particularly enjoyed long summer twilights when tonal values in the landscape would get close and the raking angle of the dying sun could reveal all kinds of layers and events in the sky. Often she would work until it was dark.

The sense of clarity and quiet that dominates Nelligan's drawings emerges from a process that is intense and very physical. The artist tracks the subtleties of illumination with active manipulation of charcoal, erasers and other tools. "I use the eraser a lot," she says, "and I work the charcoal into the paper with various cotton swabs. I also rub it in with my finger, although I read that this is not a good idea because oil from the hands can make the work deteriorate more quickly." During this process the grain of the writing paper that the artist uses shows itself as a fine granular texture that reinforces the sense of depth in the work. Moreover, the flexibility of the process allows for a long dialogue between the artist and her subject as the work is pushed toward its conclusion. As for knowing when that conclusion is reached, the artist says: "I don't really. Finally it just doesn't seem to need anything more. That's all."

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All of Nelligan's works are identified by date but otherwise untitled. If she does more than one drawing on a particular day they are numbered as such. Each drawing is a testament to a particular moment in the history of the island with its ever-changing skies, damp fogs and shifting seas. In *22 Oct 99 (1)*, for instance, a heavy sky sits over a bay. The skyline is formed by a long stand of trees, and two low promontories are barely visible in the bay itself. Simple as this piece appears, the artist has organized the tone with considerable sophistication. The dark of the skyline is slightly deeper than any of the darks in the sky. The reflection in the water is actually lighter than the piece of sky that it reflects, a fact that may contribute to the somewhat otherworldly or even magical sense of the image. As in all Nelligan's drawings, understatement reigns. We are told only what we need to know, provided with a set of hints and clues that remarkably conjure up an entire world.

Nelligan's delight in this kind of reduction sometimes leads her right up to the point where any reference to the world starts to disappear altogether. In *11 Oct 99 (1)* we find



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in the middle of a gray expanse of paper. It is only after a moment that we discover a horizon beneath the luminosity and a stretch of sea barely illuminated by the sky above. This is one of those ethereal moments at the very end of a summer day when the last of the light is illuminating soft layers high in the atmosphere. In *22 Oct 01* we are similarly presented with a single diagonal swath of white on a dark ground, which we only slowly realize is a wave catching the last of the darkening twilight. While these works verge on abstraction, Nelligan says that she never considered the issue. "I just followed what I was working on at that moment," she explains.

*incident. 28 May 81* shows a bay at low tide with a stand of evergreens reflected in the limpid pools that lie among the sand and rocks. The artist's sensitive eye teases out a wealth of tonal subtleties throughout the piece, and she seems to delight, however quietly, in the drama of the silhouetted trees and in the suggested mass and character of the large rocks. Throughout her work, evidence of human life is nowhere to be seen. "People aren't needed in that landscape," she says. "They're an intrusion really.

"As for artistic inspiration Nelligan says that although she admires many artists there is no one who



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**28 July 10 (2)**

2010, charcoal, 7¼ x 10½.



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particularly inspired her to do the kind of work that she does. “People have said that it relates to Seurat’s drawings in Conté crayon,” she says. Indeed the deliberate suppression of detail and the powerful suggestiveness of tone are qualities that the two artists share. Nelligan also professes a great admiration for the work of Albert Pinkham Ryder, whose dark and sometimes brooding paintings certainly have some connections with her drawings. But for the most part the artist admires a broad range of great masters. “Who could not be inspired by the work of Rembrandt or Goya?” she says.

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Remarkable as her work is, Nelligan made no effort to promote or sell it for many years. “Mostly I thought that what the art world stood for had nothing to do with art,” she says. “And now more than ever it’s just a business. People buy paintings for the investment and put them in their cellars hoping for more money when it comes time to sell.” The artist has no regrets about her decision to avoid the commerce of art. “I feel we were very lucky,” she says. “We made enough money to be able to do what we wanted to do, we spent our lives doing it, and we were grateful. Although it required sacrifice we never felt we were sacrificing.”

Even so, Nelligan’s drawings

eventually made their way out into the world. “My husband and I never took our work anywhere to show it,” she says. “But now and then someone would ask if we would put something in a show.” In this way a number of artistic luminaries acquired her work, including Richard Poussette-Dart, Wolf Kahn and Hilton Kramer. About 12 years ago Nelligan and Bileck were asked to participate at an exhibit in Maine and soon after received a call from the art dealer Philippe Alexandre asking if he could see more of their work. “And that’s how our friendship began,” says Nelligan. An exhibition at Alexandre Gallery followed in 2005, and it received warm reviews in *The New York Times* and elsewhere. “We were in our 80s when we had our first exhibition in New York,” says the artist with a laugh.

As much as her work is a celebration of Great Cranberry Island, Nelligan’s drawings are also something of an elegy for a place that has greatly changed. “But it can’t really be spoiled,” she says, “as long as the sea and the sky are still there.”

Bileck died in 2005 and Nelligan, now 90, has been unable to visit the island for the last two years. “I have to take things one day at a time,” she says. “I daren’t think that I might not be able to get out to the island again. It’s a wonderful place. If you can spend a summer there you are bound to achieve something beautiful.” ❖

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