

ALEXANDRE

The NEW YORK Sun

THURSDAY, MAY 26, 2005

GALLERY-GOING

MARVIN BILECK & EMILY NELLIGAN: CRANBERRY ISLAND, DRAWINGS & PRINTS

Alexandre Gallery

By MAUREEN MULLARKEY

The more you are moved by particular works of art, the harder they are to talk about. Work opens to you in silence, like a breviary; you enter it and can only bow to what you find there. Words fail because none correspond to the power of what you meet within. The poetic intuition on exhibit at Alexandre Gallery is rare.

For Emily Nelligan and Marvin Bileck (1920–2005), art-making was a vocation, a way of being in the world and attending to it with wonder and grace. The couple lived and worked together in northwestern Connecticut and Cranberry Island, Maine, until Bileck's death in April. In each one's art, love of the particular yields a hint of transcendence.

As a young artist, Ms. Nelligan took up charcoal because paint was too expensive. By now she has so perfected her medium that paint would look paltry beside it. Her drawings can be defined in terms of landscape motifs, but that cheats them of their resonating abstract splendor. If the ancient canonical hours could be observed by images instead of prayers, here they are.

Her imagery arises from blacks and whites functioning reciprocally as antiphons and responsories. Work is dated rather than titled, reminding us that time itself is measured by light. Morning anthems alternate with lyrical nocturnes; Lauds anticipate Vespers and the night vigil. What else is that luminous form emerging from midnight "22 October 2001" but a call to matins? Each drawing is an act of praise and gratitude for the infinite variety of nature and the daily surprises of the visual world.



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Emily Nelligan, '7 Oct 2004.'

Limpid, fine-lined, and full of incident, Bileck's work has a Flemish quality but with details fused by an enveloping atmosphere created by working the plates over long periods, even years. "And Dreamier the Gloaming Grows" (2001–2) and "Uprooted Trees — Ruth's Woods" (1990), combining etching and engraving, are exquisite samples of the process. His pencil drawings accent the dancing contours of wild roots, rocks, and twisted trunks; subtle caesuras between marks suggest the cultivated dialogue between hand and eye.

Ms. Nelligan is barely known outside a small circle of artists. Her husband, a fine printmaker and distinguished illustrator of children's books, was somewhat more public; he exhibited in museums around the country. It is anyone's guess when these works — irresistible in their intelligence and beauty — will be seen again. Do not miss them.

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