

ALEXANDRE

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Art in Review

Emily Nelligan

Marvin Bileck

'Cranberry Island, Drawings and Prints'

Alexandre Gallery
41 East 57th Street, Manhattan
Through June 17

Maine and its moods have challenged artists from Winslow Homer to Alex Katz. But it's probably safe to say that none has responded as obsessively as Emily Nelligan. Or, more precisely, to a tiny part of Maine called Great Cranberry Island, one of several specks off the coast near Mount Desert, where she and her artist-husband, Marvin Bileck, summered and worked for more than 50 years. (He died just before this show opened.)

Using only charcoal and eraser on ordinary letter paper, Ms. Nelligan has produced an extraordinary account of the islands, distilling coastlines, rocks, trees, sea, skies and weather almost to abstraction, while restricting her palette to the blacks, grays and whites that seem perfectly keyed to Cranberry's reticent Maine character.

In the arresting "22 Oct 01" (most of her works are titled only by date), a long, foamy streak of white that crosses the bottom of a nuanced sheet of blackness could be sea spume backed by the delicate scrim of a night sky. "4 Aug 82" is raked with glimmering lights and lines that indicate clouds and a body of water before a dark triangular thrust of scrubby bank. "Dusk" (1958), one of her most beautiful works, sends what seems to be a meandering stream struck faintly by light at various points into a screen of tall pines that part at their tops to reveal a bright V of sky.

But the important thing is not the specifics of these drawings. It is the spirit she conveys: that of a pure, unsullied wildness whose changes and constancies reverberate deeply in her mind.

Although it complements hers, Mr. Bileck's work is of a different order. He, too, is smitten by the place, but he focuses on rendering its factual here-and-nowness — piled-up rocks, tangles of trees, deep woods and the general lay of the land — in meticulous drawings and etchings. "Along the Shore: Cranberry Islands" (1950) is a long view of scraggly trees on a hump that thrusts up from the water, with intimations of low hills in the background.

In contrast, the gnarled, wind-blown, exquisitely drawn trees and fissured rocks of "Murch's Cove" are depicted close up, a scene striking in its observation of nature's relentless tweaking. If Ms. Nelligan is a wizard at generalized mood, he is a master of specificity. GRACE GLUECK

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

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