

# ALEXANDRE

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## Nelligan and Bileck: Charcoal Contours And Nature in Decay

*Two on a Maine Island—  
She in Light and Shadow,  
He in Baroque Profusion.*

BY HILTON KRAMER

Some years ago, I began hearing about the drawings of the American artist Emily Nelligan, and it was mostly other artists who were talking up her work. I soon discovered that it was these other artists who were also buying Ms. Nelligan's drawings. The mainstream galleries hadn't yet heard of Emily Nelligan, and neither had most of the critics and collectors. When I finally did get to see a rather modest gallery show of her drawings, they were a revelation of a remarkable talent.

This was soon followed by a show in which Ms. Nelligan's drawings were exhibited with the prints of her husband, Marvin Bileck, a renowned

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## A Maine Island Inspires Two Very Different Artists

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printmaker and illustrator. It was in 2000 that the first full-scale exhibition of Ms. Nelligan's drawings was organized at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in Maine. Now the Alexandre Gallery in New York has mounted a splendid survey of the drawings and prints devoted to the subject that inspired both artists over a period of 50 years: the landscape of Great Cranberry Island, off the coast of Maine near Mount Desert.

Emily Nelligan and Marvin Bileck met in the 1940's, when both were art students at the Cooper Union in New York. For many years, they divided their time between their home in Connecticut, where they spent winter and spring, and Great Cranberry Island in summer and fall. Sadly, Bileck died in April at the age of 85 while preparations were in progress for the current exhibition.

While both artists devoted their principal endeavors to works on paper depicting the visual enchantment of this isolated landscape, they brought very different sensibilities to their graphic

accounts of it. Ms. Nelligan's medium is unfixed charcoal on white paper, which she transforms into virtuosic varieties of shadow and light. The sea, the sky and the fog-misted earth are devoid of sharp contours in these drawings, and seem instead to have an apparitional character. From every smudge and erasure of charcoal dust, she has been able

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to wrest subtleties of coastal light unlike anything that has heretofore been seen in pictures of Maine or any other coastline. In contrast to those images we carry in our memories from paintings of Maine by Winslow Homer and John Marin, Ms. Nelligan's drawings are nocturnes in which light is more fugitive than shadow and a velvety darkness dominates every prospect.

Bileck's forte was close-up, linear observation of nature in decay. Fallen trees, tangled underbrush and lonely rock formations were frequent subjects for both his graphite drawings on paper and his etchings. The sky all but disappears as the artist concentrates his attention at ground level, where a once-vital jumble of roots and

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