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Luminous and Numinous: Emily Nelligan in Shades of Gray

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In Emily Nelligan's (1924–2018) charcoal drawings—almost all of which depict landscapes and seascapes around Great Cranberry Island off the south shore of Mt. Desert Island—the world is manifested in shades of gray as though twilight were eternal and fog a constant.

Nelligan has been called the Emily Dickinson of American art both because she was famously shy and reclusive and because her brooding charcoal drawings are at once subtle and powerful.

This summer (2 July–16 August 2026), New York's Alexandre Gallery will bring a Nelligan pop-up exhibition—featuring sixteen charcoals and four pen-and-ink drawings—to the former Maine Coast Artists building in Rockport village.

Nelligan was born in New York City in 1924 and studied at Cooper Union, graduating in 1944. Several Cooper Union artists—including Ashley Bryan, Louis Finkelstein, Gretna Campbell, Nelligan, and her husband Marvin Bileck—formed the nucleus of the art colony on the Cranberry Isles. Among the other artists who summered on the islands were William Kienbusch, John Heliker, Robert LaHotan, and Dorothy Eisner.

Nelligan and Bileck divided their time between winters and springs in Winsted, Connecticut, and summers and falls on Great Cranberry. The island was Nelligan's primary subject matter. She evoked the soul of that island in ghostly grays as though she were painting with fog and mist. Her charcoals are at once luminous, glowing with an inner light, and numinous, possessing a sense of mystery that is almost spiritual.

Nelligan first took up charcoal because it was so affordable and portable, but as humble as charcoal crayons may be (being essentially glorified burnt sticks), Nelligan was able to summon visual magic with them, drawing mostly on small sheets of white writing paper. Applying the charcoal directly, or erasing or smudging with her finger, she rendered Great Cranberry in shades of gray. She didn't even apply fixative, preferring to allow the dry, dusty charcoal to sit upon the surface.

Some of Nelligan's Cranberry images, such as *16 Oct 99*, *18 Oct 99*, and *Dark Pool*, read as more or less straightforward black and white landscapes. Some of her more obscure untitled drawings conjure residual imagery as the island shores and seas slip into darkness.

All visual art is revealed by light whether it is about that light or not. Emily Nelligan's art was about it.

“If the light was right I would set myself down and try to capture it,” she once said. “I’m utterly dependent on what I see. The quality of light is the essence of the work.”

Nelligan’s use of light is evocative rather than descriptive. Dawn, dusk, twilight, haze, fog, moonlight, and all manner of nocturnal lighting define a quiet yet full world according to Emily Nelligan.

In the catalogue to a 2005 Alexandre Gallery exhibition of work by Nelligan and Bileck, master colorist and pastel artist Wolf Kahn gave Nelligan high praise when he wrote, “Emily Nelligan’s charcoal drawings are charged with a near-mystical intensity. They speak of the melancholy resignation of prolonged solitude. They have the quiet concentration of deep meditation. Like Morandi’s etchings, Redon’s lithographs, and Seurat’s conté drawings, they are evidence that black-and-white, when its full potential is realized, renders all other colors unnecessary.”

A shy, modest person, Nelligan was never greatly concerned about exhibiting or selling her work. She made it for herself. She was in her seventies before she was given a solo museum show, the 2000 *Littoral Abstraction* exhibition at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art. Alexandre Gallery held a memorial exhibition in 2019, the year after Nelligan died at age ninety-four.

In 2020, the Ogunquit Museum of American Art held a Nelligan exhibition entitled *Nocturne*. Ogunquit’s then-curator Ruth Green-McNally distilled the essence of Nelligan when she wrote, “the artist is the light from which the natural world is perceived.”

In 2008, on behalf of the Union of Maine Visual Artists, artist Deb Vendetti of South Hope shot six hours of videotape of Nelligan on Great Cranberry and in Winsted, Connecticut, where Nelligan and Bileck lived most of the year on a thirteen-acre property they called Edendale. The footage was meant to be featured in a Maine Masters Series video that has yet to be made.

The bucolic setting of Edendale featured woodlands and a pond, but Nelligan did not feature Edendale in her art. When asked why, she explained that there wasn’t enough sky.

Unlike the more storied Monhegan and Mount Desert Island, the Cranberry Isles are flat and low-lying, a gentle place that Vendetti came to feel “evoked something inside her.”

“Emily took me to the Pool at dusk,” recalls Vendetti, the Pool being a shallow, protected inlet that drains into the Gut between Great Cranberry and Islesford. “At the Pool, the combination of sky and water excited her. Winsted did not have that expansive sense of light. She told me she was trying to capture the atmosphere of the island and she got very excited about what was going on with the light.”

It’s hard to think of any artists who achieved as much as Nelligan did while restricting themselves to one subject, one place, and one medium. The quality of light. The island of Great Cranberry. Charcoal and writing paper. Emily Nelligan.