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3 gallery shows highlight work of artists of long standing

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'Emily Nelligan' (through Aug. 16), Rockport, alexandregallery.com, 203-219-6615

You could hardly get more hyper-specific than Emily Nelligan (1924-2018). She worked only June through October, the period of each year that she spent with her husband, artist Marvin Bileck, on Great Cranberry Island. She worked exclusively in charcoal. Her only subject matter was the island and the surrounding sea.

In a sense, if we believe art arises at least in part from the innermost expression of the artist's soul, the Nelligan known through her work shares similarities to Transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau and the poet Emily Dickinson. Both imposed strict parameters on their life and work — Thoreau had his Walden Pond, Dickinson her Homestead in Amherst, Massachusetts, and Nelligan her Great Cranberry Island. These proved to be beloved escapes from the frenetic world where they could experience silence, solitude and deep contemplation, and where they could work intensely.

As 'Emily Nelligan' proves, the charcoal drawings she produced in this place were transcendent. One of Nelligan's most profound contemplations was about the ephemeral, specifically as it is expressed through qualities of light. The full chromatic range of this medium is explored with unusual thoroughness.

Just consider two works: '14 Oct 01(1)' of 2001 and 'Untitled Maine' from the 1960s. The former is a dark, moody rendition of a roiling wave under a night sky. Most of the work is steeped in an inky blackness. Across the upper third, however, the wave's whitecaps begin to break. Using only charcoal, the work conveys the qualities of a moonless night, the sense of rushing forward movement of the wave, and the frigid temperature of the water.

Conversely, 'Untitled Maine' depicts an evergreen tree-rimmed meadow in hot, blazing sunlight. Again, the sensations evoked — the scratchiness of the meadow grasses, the heat, the pine scent — feel alive and palpable through a simple gradation of black, gray and white. In other works, there is fog, either an island emerging from a blanket of mist or a long view obscured by curtains of it. There are beaches with overcast skies, moonlight and dark clouds.

All these works evolve through Nelligan's profound knowledge of her medium — how hard she presses down, how light her touch, whether the charcoal is applied with a pointed end or dragged across the paper on its side, how much is erased or smudged with her finger, and what is left blank. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of painters who, working with a full range of colors, convey less. Nelligan's charcoal drawings are distillations of a feeling or state.