

Alexandre Gallery  
Statement by Chris Crosman

Emily Nelligan: Drawings  
Marvin Bileck: Thimbleton Bridge

In previous exhibitions of drawings and prints by Emily Nelligan and her late husband Marvin Bileck at the Alexandre Gallery, the focus has been on works by both inspired by summers on Great Cranberry Island located just off Mount Desert, Maine. For this joint exhibition--along with Nelligan's charcoal drawings spanning more than a decade on the Cranberry islands--an extraordinary set of illustrations for a never published children's book by Marvin Bileck is featured.

Nelligan's work over the past half-century and more has never wandered far from Cranberry's often fog-shrouded, intertidal shorelines. Nelligan has stated that she finds it difficult to draw anywhere else but on Cranberry Island. Utilizing only charcoal (always unfixed) and an eraser held in either hand, her drawings transcend any limitations her modest tools would seem to impose; through Nelligan's caressing touch the subjects include the blurred, soft edges between abstraction and representation, seeing and not, between being and not. While there are no direct precedents for Nelligan's work, she speaks to traditions rising out of late 19<sup>th</sup> century tonalism—Whistler's gentle admonition that paint "...should be like breath on a pane of glass," as well as the organic abstraction found in early twentieth century American modernism. For instance, Alfred Stieglitz's photographs of clouds, the "Equivalence" series, or Arthur Dove's glowing orbs in indeterminate space. Nearly dumbstruck, as have been other notable critics in front of Nelligan's drawings, Maureen Mullarkey can only invoke liturgical metaphor: "If the ancient canonical hours could be observed by images instead of prayers, here they are." Some drawings convey the impenetrable darkness of dense fog enveloping the island at night. In others, there is a quality of moisture-laden light, of breaking dawns and distant clearing. Littoral immanence. And we cannot help but wonder if the drawings in this exhibition, mostly created after her husband of nearly fifty years' death in 2005, aren't in some measure prayers and homages to their long life together.

Unlike Nelligan, who has only recently attained wider recognition and critical acclaim—largely through previous exhibitions at the Alexandre Gallery--Marvin Bileck has long been known for his illustrations of children's books including his Caldecott award-winning, *Rain Makes Applesauce* and *A Walker in the City* by Alfred Kazan. It is, therefore, no accident that he and fellow Cooper Union graduate, Ashley Bryan, also a noted children's book author and illustrator, found themselves collaborating on a book for children. Initiating and developing the project between 1965 and 1970, they chose an obscure manuscript by Virginia Woolf, *By Trolley Past Thimbleton Bridge*. Bileck's magical, whimsical drawings, shown here for the first time, even in this partly finished form, conjure a world of enchantment through free association and play—primarily word play and visual puns (tales and tails are hopelessly entwined throughout). Embodying childhood memories that are often fragmentary, out of temporal sequence, isolated and interwoven—jostling vignettes as presented by Bileck--these lively, complex drawings need few words to convey a narrative that is itself almost entirely about the joys of sensory experience. Indeed, letters and words vary in size, location and prominence and often become their own visual mysteries and surprises as they swoop and bend across the page. Bileck's invitation to board the author's magical "trolley" back to childhood wonderment, alludes, perhaps, to his own first memories of children's books. The drawings have an antique, faded appearance, as if pulled from some forgotten bookshelf of his own fast receding childhood. Arthur Rackham (*Peter Pan*) and Lionel Feininger's early "Kin-Der-Kids" come to mind. In their reticence and dissolving legibility—like the nearly lost, blurred recollections of childhood itself--they come closest to his wife's ethereal landscapes. Or as the narrator of *Thimbleton Bridge* tells us:

OUR DAY DREAMS AND FANCIES  
TAKE OFF IN OUR PLAY  
WHAT'S REAL, WHAT'S IMAGINED  
NO ONE CAN SAY