Essay by Alison Ferris: 2005
Essay for Marvin Bileck and Emily Nelligan: Cranberry Island Catalogue
Catalog essay by Alison Ferris

Marvin Bileck and Emily Nelligan: Cranberry Island

Marvin Bileck and Emily Nelligan share a long and deep attachment to Cranberry Island, the place that has served as a recurring subject in both of their work. Ever since their first trip to Cranberry Island following their graduation in the 1940s from Cooper Union in New York City, Bileck and Nelligan have returned almost every summer to make drawings of the shoreline and sea on this Maine island off Mount Desert.1 In fact, Nelligan has found the island her primary source of inspiration. While Bileck has found many places to work and subjects to portray in his etchings, engravings, and drawings over the course of his career, the work he has done on Cranberry Island is a particularly distinct body of work.

Like much of Maine's northern coast, Cranberry Island is a moody place, austere in its beauty, rich in wet, dark spruce trees, and overwhelmed by the atmospherics of the sea and sky. In many of her drawings, Nelligan captures the island at twilight when the failing light softens the outlines of the trees and mutes the contrasting textures of sky and water. The softness of her lines and forms is an appropriate vehicle to evoke the way that fog obscures details—such that the fog that made Nelligan first fall in love with Cranberry Island has, in a certain manner, never left her drawings of it. Nelligan's use of charcoal contributes to her ability to capture the dramatic weather changes and atmospheric moods typical of this island's environment. Cumulatively her drawings give us a sense of what it is like not only to see but to feel the moist foggy air on our skin, allowing us to imagine the smell of the cool crisp ocean breeze tinged with the pungency of washed-up seaweed, or the sound of the deep, grand rhythms of the ocean's waves as they roll on to the shore.

Although the importance of the island to the work of both artists is clear, it is equally clear that Bileck's infatuation is, first, with drawing. He is as quietly and sensitively emphatic about his long-time love of line drawing as Nelligan is about the inspiration she finds on Cranberry Island. Bileck's voice still contains astonishment at the joy he feels when drawing. He's written that, to him, drawings are like
apparitions, making their way forth—out of paper—coming forward from a little pencil point—sparking and piecing themselves together out of the here-and-there and the in-and-out interweaving of marks and breaks, crackling and bristling from within turbulent scribbling, and coupled with a bit of wit and some human sympathy.

Cranberry Island is a place where Bileck can focus his attention on uncluttered views—the islands, rocks, and trees—and transform specters into a "bright" and "intensified" clarity.

Habitually sitting just a few feet apart while working outdoors, Bileck and Nelligan have developed and maintained their own distinct interpretations of the island. Each has established his and her own favorite time of day to work; each has determined his and her distinct subject matters; and each has chosen his and her preferred medium. Each artist's work stands on its own. However, when their work is observed together each enhances the other's. One can imagine Nelligan's atmospheric drawings gracefully settling in, on, and around the skeletal under-structure of the island that Bileck renders

in his depictions. In this way, their partnership has clearly enhanced each other's individual works. From a broader perspective, Nelligan's and Bileck's drawings are more similar than they are different. Nelligan represents the sea in its complex simplicity, as a powerful component of nature that is a world unto itself. The emotion we observe in her work is authentic—she pours months of anticipation and longing for the sea into drawings that result in profound and contemplative works of art. Likewise, Bileck's delicate, sensual lines transform the natural elements of the island into a personal and visual poetry.

But to look at them individually: the strength of Nelligan's drawings, despite their modest size, lies in their lyrical abstract descriptions of the sea, rocks, coastline, and sky. Nelligan plays on the tension between representation and abstraction not only through her forms and lines but also in her use of dark and light. 7 August 1994 is an especially quiet and rich drawing depicting low tide along the shoreline at dusk. The left side of the drawing contains a dense, black layer of charcoal suggesting a deeply shadowed beach and hill in the distance. The blackness of the solid landmasses is balanced by what appears to be low light in the sky which in turn is reflected in the calm shallow water. The composition is balanced, while Nelligan's play on light and reflections confuses representation and reasserts the work's abstract qualities. Nelligan emphasizes the symmetry of the drawing by evoking what might be seen as a translucent grid, created by the fine raised white horizontal lines in the paper and black vertical lines that appear to have been initially created by falling charcoal dust and then reworked into deliberate marks.

The classic compositional strategy in depicting the sea, whether in drawings, paintings, photographs or prints, has been to subdivide the sheet into stacked horizontal zones with water at the bottom, the sky at the top, and a horizon or land mass separating the two bands of color and texture. Nelligan alters this prescription to varying degrees in her works. We see this in 15 October 2003 (1) (cat. no. 29) where the entire composition is focused on the mood of the sky while the sea and beach are almost indistinguishable. The sky is depicted at sunset, a time when its performance can overwhelm the usually noisy, theatrical ocean. Large, dense, dramatically lit clouds are rendered in bold loose strokes of charcoal and are accented by minute curlicue cumulus clouds.

In addition to expansive planes of the sea and sky, Nelligan spends considerable time studying the dynamic of the water as it assaults, spills, and streams over rocks. Two works in the collection of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art examine one particular place under two different sea conditions. Untitled, Cranberry Island, 10 July 1998 depicts the turmoil of rough water in a cove of rocks on a stormy day. White sea foam and spray are accentuated by small dark marks of charcoal which suggest swirling energy around one particular rock jutting out of the water slightly at the right of the drawing. The commotion of the water and the resulting mistiness in the air convey a dense, almost claustrophobic atmosphere in which time and space are obscured. In Untitled, Cranberry Island, 28 July 1998 (3) the weather still appears to be stormy. However, the ocean responds by producing giant swells as opposed to frenzied waves. The rock is central to the composition: a large white cap has just broken over it, and, after it has crashed, the sea foam remains, cloaking the jutting boulder. This exhibition includes one particularly stormy ocean scene. In 25 July 2001 (2) (cat. no. 26), Nelligan depicts the white foam of a large wave that has just hit a bank of rocks. She creates the white foam using her eraser, a tool she uses as much as she uses her charcoal. While two swells are about to

roll in behind the wave that's just broken, the focus of the work is on the way the white foam seeps in between the rocks in a web-like pattern just before it is about to disappear.

Bileck's drawings, etchings, and engravings frequently focus as well on the rocks along the edge of the sea or the island's trees in the forest or on the edge of rocks. The details of his work suggest, correctly, that Bileck prefers to work in the mid-day sun, around two o'clock, when the light reveals every crack and crevice of rock ledges, highlighting their angular or round shapes. Likewise, when the sun shines on the spruce trees, the patterns of the bark and the tapestry of the pine needles become visually more ornate. Because he favors line, Bileck is not tempted to capture the water that at this time of day sparkles with light and activity, nor does he study the distinct and transient cloud formations of the ocean sky. His focus on the solid, unmoving materials of nature contributes to the qualities of stoicism we find in his works.

Bileck's lines, though delicate, are also extremely strong and expertly rendered. Without having to touch, his eyes alone can mine the surfaces and contours of the rocks and the textures of the spruce trees while simultaneously translating all of it into drawing. Some of the works in this exhibition, such as Drawing for Bald Rock at Great Head, look as if he drew much of the scene without ever looking down at his paper. The boldest lines of the drawing gently descend from the left, splitting the page in half. The line traces the edge of a view that includes a large boulder accompanied by a couple of rocks, followed by what appears to be the surface of a large, flat slab rising out of the earth. There are lighter, smaller, and looser lines in front of the boulder and slab that suggest rocky, hard dirt with some low growing vegetation. The top and bottom of the page is left completely unmarked, but one does not view it as empty. The negative space in the foreground suggests mass (the ground) and the negative space at the top of the page suggests a great expanse (of either water or sky). This sort of negative space is integral to virtually all of Bileck's drawing and many of his prints. The viewer is left to appreciate his ability to translate what he considers only the most salient details of a chosen place as well as to imagine what he deliberately left out.

Bileck's prints are made in his studio in Connecticut and are based on the drawings he makes on the island. While remaining graceful and lyrical, the lines in his prints contain a more robust intensity and therefore infuse the prints with a slightly different tone than we find in his drawings. In part, this is the result of a medium that requires deliberation and physical effort. In Bileck's prints, however, the difference is also a result of his own particular printing process. Bileck works on his plates over the course of a number of years. As a result, one print might be very different than a previously made print even though they were made from the same plate. Additionally, each print varies and is determined by how wet the paper is, how much pressure Bileck decides to put on it, and if and how he might burnish the back side of the paper before it is dry. Sometimes he even considers one of his counter prints the finished product. All of this indicates that Bileck is perfectly correct when he says that no one else could print his work. The copious amount of time that Bileck spends on his prints instills in them a complexity that distinguishes them from the spontaniety of his drawings, some of which are completed in a day or so.

In Bileck's etching Ruth's Woods Fallen Trees (cat. no. 15) a number of strong sloping horizontal lines depicting a fallen tree trunk dominate the foreground. The tree looks as if it has collapsed across a dry riverbed, its roots exposed on the left from which a gracefully arched branch emerges bending up and to the right. Neither the trunk,

branches, nor roots are rendered with much detail: the white space between the outline suggests the mass of the tree. Behind the fallen tree, however, the forest is composed with dense lines, giving the print a depth that is not usually found in his drawings. However the density only reaches the base of the canopy of leaves; there the lines stop, and the details are left to the imagination. The strategic voids lend a quality of abstraction to his works that mitigates the specificity of place. In this way Bileck transforms his scenes of Cranberry Island into metaphors.

Nelligan almost always looks out to the sea and the sky except when she becomes intrigued by the motion of the water. In this sense, Nelligan almost seems to be seeking to escape from the earthbound through her works—losing herself in the horizon, the motion of the sea, the billowing clouds, and the fog. Bileck, by comparison, tends to be much more comfortable in the presence of the physical natural world, though his delicate, expressive lines do contribute an ephemeral quality to the work. The tone of Bileck's works is contemplative rather than longing; he works in the moment and then, in his prints, translates and extends the moments, retracting them over time.

There is none of the affect or attitude in Nelligan's or Bileck's work that one finds in nineteenth or early twentieth-century depictions of water. Because it was so difficult to render water, artists such as J.M.W. Turner and Winslow Homer painted and drew to flex their technical muscles and display their mastery of a medium, while also expressing grand ideas such as the manifestation of the Sublime. Others such as Albert Pinkham Ryder and Marsden Hartley have painted expressionistic seas to represent metaphorically the journey of life and its all-encompassing elations and struggles. Since then, seascapes have taken on a whole host of meanings as each generation defines its own idiosyncratic relation to nature.

Bileck's and Nelligan's modernist depictions of the island and the sea clearly present a contemporary interpretation of our relationship to nature. Significantly absent from their works are human beings or any sign of them. Both were attracted to Cranberry Island years ago partly because it was inhabited by lobster fishermen and their families with only a handful of artists and summer people. They have in their time witnessed a significant population growth on the island, especially by summer residents. Increased human habitation of islands and the coast, and growing use of the sea itself by military, fishing, recreation, and other industries, have redefined our relationship to it. Nelligan's and Bileck's depictions of the island are tinged with melancholy not only because the moodiness of the sea and the isolation of the island can produce such emotions, but because they have borne witness to human activities that have damaged this vast, albeit delicate, body of water. The bravura and awe of earlier artists are absent in their work in part because they understand that humankind has compromised nature. Nelligan's drawings are instead filled with disquiet in the face of potential loss—knowing that her time on the island is transitory and her vision of it fleeting, as the islands and the coast are being altered by human interference. Bileck's works too could be seen as premonitions, his drawings of the island perennially haunted by absence. In this sense, Nelligan's and Bileck's drawings of Cranberry Island and the sea are an act of preservation—preserving views of the sea as we know it today in anticipation of what may be drastic change.

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1. My writing about Emily Nelligan's work is largly from my essay published in the now out-of-print brochure Littoral Abstractions: Drawings by Emily Nelligan (Copyright 2000, Bowdoin College Museum of Art) that accompanied an exhibition of the same name at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art.