Neil Welliver

Alexandre

The best part of this stunning show of paintings of the Maine woods was the opportunity it offered to see Neil Welliver's small studies alongside his finished, large-scale oils. Viewing the 24-inch-square "preps" juxtaposed with the 60-inch canvases showed that Welliver needed the larger format.

In the gallery's foyer, the study for composition of the finished painting close to that of the study, the fertile-looking patch of earth—which takes up nearly two-thirds of the painting—seems almost startling in the way it dominates the painting's space, and the rocks have enough room to relax into suggestions of other forms, like a fish skeleton.

The six other large works on view mostly depicted snowy scenes of Maine woods. In Thawed Ledge (1988) and Thaw on Black Brook (1991), streams cut through mostly virgin snow, and shadow rendered in soft violet and gray plays on white boulders. The curvaceous organic forms of these streams—almost feminine in their roundness—communicates the extent to which nature, even beneath a frozen exterior, remains fruitful. The evocation of the body is no accident: although Welliver made his name painting woods, he began his career portraying nudes.

The artist's use of color (he studied with Josef Albers) and the way he balanced short, quick brushstrokes with large, abstract forms grant these paintings a striking sense of movement, testifying to his facility with the brush and ability to translate what he saw.

—Rachel Somerstein