

Picturing Maine — Drawings by Emily Nelligan & Marvin Bileck

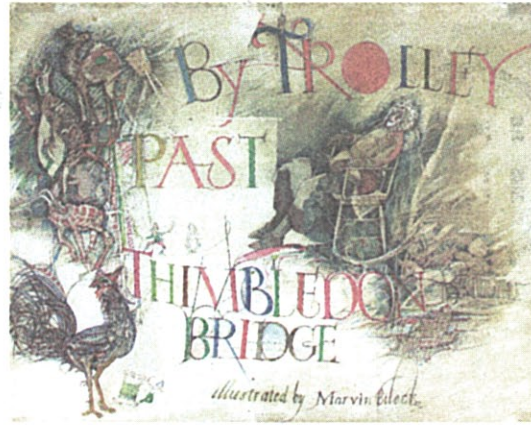
by Chris Crosman

Drawings by Emily Nelligan and her late husband, Marvin Bileck, are being featured in a dual show at the Alexandre Gallery in New York City through January 18, 2014. (By way of full disclosure, I am a paid consultant to the gallery.) In previous exhibitions of drawings and prints by Nelligan and 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. For this joint show Nelligan's charcoal drawings spanning more than a decade on the Cranberry islands are featured as well as an extraordinary set of Bileck's illustrations for a never-published children's book.

Nelligan has stated that she finds it difficult to draw anywhere else but on Cranberry Island. Her work over the past half-century and more has never wandered far from those often fog-shrouded, intertidal shorelines. 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 19th-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 20th-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 the death in 2005 of her husband of nearly 50 years, aren't in some measure prayers and homage 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,

Thimbleton
Bridge
illustration by
Marvin Bileck
(page 07 – Title
Page), 1965-
1970,
colored pencil
and graphite on
paper, © Marvin
Bileck and
Emily Nelligan
Trust, courtesy
Alexandre
Gallery



including his Caldecott award-winning *Rain Makes Applesauce* and *A Walker in the City* by Alfred Kazan. Bileck and Nelligan became acquainted with their year-round Cranberry Isles neighbor Ashley Bryan, the acclaimed author, poet, educator, illustrator and all-around pied piper whose home is a magnet for local children, who are given free access to paints and art materials along with gentle, wise encouragement. Bryan's own award-winning work features the African American experience, and he has introduced generations of children of all races to ancient traditional songs, spirituals and stories as well as to his own re-telling of fables such as *Beautiful Blackbird* and *Dancing Granny*.

It is, therefore, no accident that Bileck and Bryan, a fellow Cooper Union graduate, 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, her only known children's book, entitled *By Trolley Past Thimbleton Bridge*. Bileck's rarely exhibited, magical, whimsical drawings — even in this partly finished form — conjure a world of enchantment through free association and play, including word play and visual puns (tales and tails are hopelessly entwined throughout). Embodying childhood memories that are often fragmentary, out of tem-



"3 Oct. 06 (2)," charcoal on paper, 2006, by Emily Nelligan, © Marvin Bileck & Emily Nelligan Trust, courtesy Alexandre Gallery

poral 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, meander 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

Editor's Note: This is one in a series of occasional articles by Chris Crosman featuring Maine artists, past and present, often concentrated on a single work of art. The articles are largely edited and excerpted from previous publications by the author during his tenure as director of the Farnsworth Museum, Rockland, and founding chief curator for Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas.