



# Littoral Abstractions

Drawings by Emily Nelligan

Bowdoin College Museum of Art  
Brunswick, Maine

## Littoral Abstractions

The wordplay in the title of this exhibition is more than verbal mischief. Littoral/literal. The first term describes a location, albeit a slippery one. It pertains to the shore, the edge, the margins, the ambiguous zone between water and land. Literal, on the other hand, identifies an exact representation. Emily Nelligan's drawings are littoral but, although they record specific points of view and particular qualities of light and atmosphere, they are far from literal. Like dusk (a time of day the artist particularly enjoys, when edges erode and forms dissolve) her drawings lie between representation and abstraction.

Emily Nelligan's responses to the edge of Cranberry Island, where she has summered for more than fifty years, are deeply personal iterations of a complex experience that is neither, and both, land and water. She is attempting the nearly impossible, to capture a set of conditions that cannot be pinned down, by laying down a dark, powdery dust. Even the charcoal itself is unfixed, for the artist refuses to compromise the atmospheric surfaces of her drawings.

Her modest but potent pages range from spectral profiles of barely recognizable topography to forinless, intangible, atmospheric insinuations. She chooses a paper conventionally used for letter writing, and her quiet vistas transmit the eloquent intimacy of private messages. Her drawings are titled by the particular dates whose feel and experience they record. Nelligan's landscapes often manage to seamlessly weave together the zones of sea and sky, dark and light, above and below, almost like the yin yang diagram of the complementary principles in Chinese natural philosophy.

*Littoral Abstractions* is the second in what we hope will become an annual series of exhibitions highlighting fresh and unconventional investigations of the legendary natural beauty of the state. During the summer of 1999 we presented the bold charcoal drawings of unprepossessing roadside grasses by Susan Hartnett. Emily Nelligan's small studies transcend the modesty of their scale and black and white palette and join Hartnett's robust gestures to claim an important position in the venerable Maine landscape tradition.

We would like to acknowledge the Colby College Museum of Art for agreeing to loan two works from its collection and, of course, Emily Nelligan herself for her cheerful cooperation at every stage of the project. This exhibition and publication have been generously supported by the Association of Bowdoin Friends, a lively and committed group whose interest in the vitality and variety of College programs is enormously appreciated.

Katy Kline  
Director

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*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 10 July 1987* (detail)

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*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 16 August 1990*

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## Littoral Abstractions

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Bowdoin College Museum of Art

Brunswick, Maine

June 23–September 3, 2000

# Littoral Abstractions: Drawings by Emily Nelligan

Ever since her first trip to Cranberry Island following her graduation in 1944 from Cooper Union in New York City, Emily Nelligan has returned every summer to make charcoal drawings of the shoreline and sea of this Maine island off Mount Desert. Cranberry Island is Nelligan's sole muse.

When asked which aspect of Cranberry Island made her fall in love with it, Nelligan says it was the dense fog that veiled the island. Like much of Maine's northern coast and islands, Cranberry Island is a moody place, austere in its beauty, rich in spruce trees, and overwhelmed by the atmospheric of the sea and sky. In almost all her drawings, Nelligan captures the island at twilight when the failing light softens the outlines of the trees

and mutes the contrasting textures of the sky and the water. The smudgy softness of her lines and forms is an appropriate vehicle to evoke the way that fog obscures details, such that the fog that Nelligan first associated with Cranberry Island has, in a certain manner, never left her drawings of it. Nelligan's proficient use of charcoal contributes to her ability to capture the dramatic weather changes and moods typical of this island's environment. Cumulatively her drawings give us a sense of what it is like to feel the moist foggy air on our skin and even allow 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.



*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 25 October 1994 #1*  
charcoal on paper  
7 1/8 x 10 7/16 inches

It has only been since the end of the seventeenth century that artists in the West have regularly depicted the sea. Before then, the sea was considered a “menacing reminder of Old Testament doctrine,”<sup>1</sup> a primal force to be feared rather than revered. Not until the Romantic movement began did the sea become a source of wonder and inspiration. Alain Corbin explains that the Romantics made the seashore the favorite spot to seek self-knowledge:

Within the perspective of the aesthetics of the Sublime recently advanced by Kant, standing on the shore stirred the self in a special way; the stirring arose from the exalting experience of confrontation with the elements. Individuals no longer came there to admire the limits set by God to the ocean’s power. They came in search of themselves, hoping to discover—or better yet, perhaps, rediscover—who they were.<sup>2</sup>

The shore soon also became a destination for relaxation and recreation and an environment in which to regain one’s physical and emotional health. Since then, seascapes have taken on many meanings as each generation defines its own relationship to nature. Because it is so difficult to render water, artists who paint and draw the sea often do so to flex their technical muscles and display their bravura mastery of a medium, while also expressing grand ideas such as the manifestation of the Sublime. (J.M.W. Turner and Winslow Homer come to mind.) Others such as Albert Pinkham Ryder and Marsden Hartley have painted expressionistic seas to metaphorically represent the journey of life and its all-encompassing elations and struggles.

There is none of this affect or attitude in Nelligan’s work. Instead she represents the sea in its complex simplicity, as a powerful component of nature that is a world unto itself. The emotion we observe in Nelligan’s work is authentic—she pours months of anticipation and longing for the sea into her drawings which result in profound and contemplative works of art.

The strength of Nelligan’s drawings, despite their modest size, lies in their lyrical abstract descriptions of the sea, rocks, coastline, and sky. Nelligan masterfully plays on the tension between representation and abstraction not only through her forms and lines but specifically in her use of dark and light. *Untitled, Cranberry Island, 16 August 1990* is an especially quiet and rich drawing depicting low tide along the shoreline at dusk. The left side of the drawing contains a dense, jet black layer of charcoal suggesting a deeply shadowed beach and hill in the distance. The blackness of the solid land masses 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 expertly balanced, while her play on light and reflections confuses representation and reasserts its 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 in *Untitled, Cranberry Island, 21 July 97* by emphasizing the sky to the point that the sea and beach are suggested by only a few discrete lines. The sky is depicted at sunset, a time when its drama can overwhelm the usually noisy, theatrical sea. Large wispy clouds are rendered in bold loose strokes of charcoal and are accented by minute curlicue cumulus clouds in the lower center. Though there is no color in this or any of her drawings, one can easily imagine the flamboyant reds, oranges, and pinks Nelligan saw in these clouds. While Nelligan’s work has been getting more and more abstract over





*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 21 July 1997*  
charcoal on paper  
7<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches

the years, *Untitled, Cranberry Island, 25 October 94 #1* is the most realistic in this selection of works. Similar in sensibility to *Untitled, Cranberry Island, 21 July 97*, this work depicts a quiet evening on the island, as the waves gently wash up on the shore. We can tell by the line of seaweed washed up on the beach that it is low tide. The gentle curved line of seaweed parallels the bend of the beach while a stand of spruce trees lines the horizon.

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. *Untitled, Cranberry Island, 10 July 98* 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. *Untitled, Cranberry Island, 28 July 98 #3* is a study of the same rock from a different perspective, though the weather still appears to be stormy. This time, 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 rock.

Significantly absent from Nelligan's works are humans or any sign of them. Nelligan was attracted to Cranberry Island fifty years ago partly because it was inhabited by lobstermen and their families and only a handful of artists and summer people. Nelligan has witnessed a significant population growth on the island, especially by summer residents. Increased human habitation of the islands and coast, and growing use of the sea itself by military, fishing, recreation, and other industries, have redefined our relationship to it. Nelligan's seascapes are tinged with melancholy not only because the moodiness of the sea can produce such emotions, but because she has witnessed human activities that have damaged this vast albeit delicate body of water. The bravura and awe of earlier artists are absent in Nelligan's work because she understands that humankind has compromised the sea. Her 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 island is being altered by human interference. Nelligan's drawings of Cranberry Island and the sea are an act of preservation—preserving views of the sea as we know it today in the wake of what may be, if care is not taken, dramatic change.

Alison Ferris  
Curator

1. James Hamilton-Paterson, "The Cultural Impact of Oceans," in Trudy Wilner Stack, *Sea Change: The Seascape in Contemporary Photography*, (Tucson, Arizona: Center for Creative Photography, 1998), 10.
2. Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World, 1750-1840*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 164.





*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 10 July 1998*

charcoal on paper

7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 10<sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches



*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 28 July 1998 #3*  
charcoal on paper  
7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 10<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches

## Works in the Exhibition

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 5 June 1982 #2*  
7 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 4 August 1982*  
6 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 10 $\frac{5}{8}$  inches

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 26 June 1986*  
7 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 10 $\frac{9}{16}$  inches

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 10 July 1987*  
7 x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 15 July 1988*  
7 $\frac{5}{16}$  x 10 $\frac{5}{8}$  inches

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 22 September 1988*  
7 $\frac{7}{16}$  x 10 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 7 October 1988*  
7 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 10 $\frac{11}{16}$  inches

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 29 August 1989*  
7 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 10 $\frac{13}{16}$  inches

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, July 1990*  
7 $\frac{5}{16}$  x 10 $\frac{11}{16}$  inches

\**Untitled, Cranberry Island, 16 August 1990*  
7 $\frac{5}{16}$  x 10 $\frac{9}{16}$  inches  
Gift of Bruce Brown in recognition of Katharine J. Watson,  
Director of the Museum of Art Emerita  
Bowdoin College Museum of Art (2000.19)

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 17 June 1991*  
7 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 10 $\frac{11}{16}$  inches

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 31 August 1991*  
7 $\frac{5}{16}$  x 10 $\frac{11}{16}$  inches

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 13 September 1992 #1*  
7 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 10 $\frac{9}{16}$  inches

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 17 June 1993 #1*  
7 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 10 $\frac{5}{8}$  inches

\**Untitled, Cranberry Island, 25 October 1994 #1*  
7 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 10 $\frac{7}{16}$  inches

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 15 October 1994/1999*  
7 $\frac{5}{16}$  x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 25 July 1995*  
7 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches  
Gift of the American Academy of Arts and Letters  
Courtesy of Colby College Museum of Art

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 7 July 1997*  
7 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches  
Gift of the American Academy of Arts and Letters  
Courtesy of Colby College Museum of Art

\**Untitled, Cranberry Island, 21 July 1997*  
7 $\frac{5}{16}$  x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

\**Untitled, Cranberry Island, 10 July 1998*  
7 $\frac{3}{16}$  x 10 $\frac{9}{16}$  inches

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 28 July 1998 #2*  
7 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 10 $\frac{7}{16}$  inches

\**Untitled, Cranberry Island, 28 July 1998 #3*  
7 $\frac{1}{16}$  x 10 $\frac{7}{16}$  inches

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 7 August 1998 #1*  
7 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, September 1998*  
7 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 26 October 1998 #2*  
7 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

*Untitled, Cranberry Island, 12 October 1999 #1*  
7 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 10 $\frac{3}{8}$  inches

All works are charcoal on paper and are courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.

Starred works are illustrated in this brochure.



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