

George Daniell

by Carl Little



Mark Baldwin

A portrait photographer with a penchant for watercolors.

The creative spirit can be a powerful sustainer of artists. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the person of George Daniell. About 20 years ago Daniell, who turned 90 in December, suffered a stroke, which left him with limited use of his right arm. To deal with this disability he turned from photography, which had been the core of his artistic enterprise, to painting in watercolor. The medium became his

life and forte—the means, if you will, to aesthetic well-being—and he has flourished.

Daniell's reputation as an artist was built on black-and-white portraits he made of individuals both famous and anonymous. The list of the former is remarkable: actresses Sophia Loren and Audrey Hepburn; painters Georgia O'Keeffe and John Mann; fellow photographer Berenice Abbott; singer Lena Horne; writers W.H. Auden and Tennessee Williams. His images of people encountered on travels around the world appeared in the best-known publications of his day, including *Life*, *Time*, *Scribner's*, and *Coronet*. Numerous exhibitions served to spread his name, among them Edward Steichen's "Then and Now" show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1960. His portraits of Mann were featured prominently in a major retrospective of the artist at the National Gallery of Art in 1990.

More recently, Daniell has shown his camera work in galleries in New York and Santa Monica, and at the Blum Gallery at the College of the Atlantic. This past fall, several of his pictures were featured in a major survey of Maine photographers mounted by Maine Coast Artists in Rockport. Further extending Daniell's audience, Borealis Press in Ellsworth has reproduced a number of his photographs in a series of delightful notecards that have proved widely popular.

All along, as he aimed his camera at the world, Daniell was also painting. His art education was minimal: life drawing at Yale, three months of study at the Art Students League in New York, and a few sessions with Carl Nelson at the American People's School in the Bronx. Yet he became an accomplished oil and watercolor painter, his expressive approach offering a striking con-

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trast to his documentary-style photography. In 1947 he won the Sesnan Gold Medal for the best oil landscape at the Pennsylvania Academy's annual show. He had exhibitions of his work in New York and elsewhere.

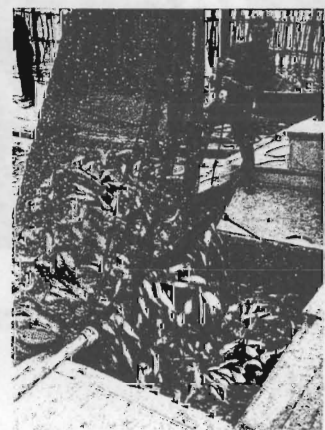
In some instances, Daniell painted and photographed the same subject, wishing to document what he saw but also to respond to it. Such was the case with a fishing weir on Grand Manan. His photographs of this Canadian island were syndicated across the country the year he took them, in 1938.

Many a world traveler has ended up in Maine, but few have celebrated their adopted state with Daniell's ardor. Born in Yonkers, New York, in 1911, the artist began his romance with Maine by chance in 1937,

when a week-long visit to Monhegan Island to escape hay fever turned into a month-long stay. Of this time, he later wrote: "I was twenty-three and loved my seven-dollar-a-month lobster shack and my canned Sterno meals.... It was my first time on my own, doing what I wanted to do, and was the precursor to my living in Maine 20 years later."

Today, Daniell lives in a light gray clapboard house on the Oak Point Road in Trenton, his home since the 1950s when he moved Down East with his companion Stephen Dorland. The weathered exterior belies the colorful work that goes on inside this rambling structure that serves as home, studio, and gallery.

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Two views of a Grand Manan fishing weir, both by George Daniell.

*I am my own best friend
as guardian angel here by*



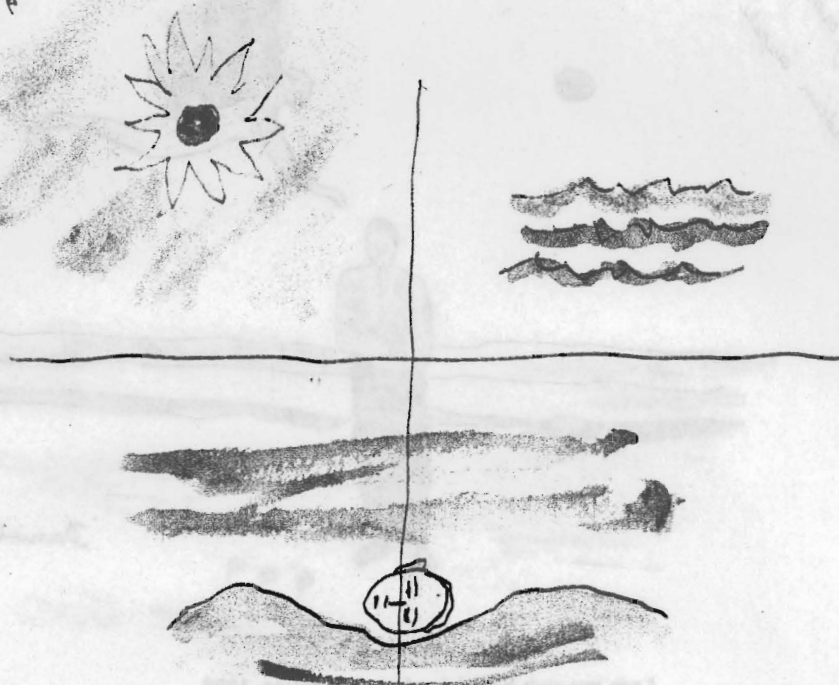
I am my own best friend..., watercolor, 1998

*A place of young pines
Getting older every day
like me
The sheltering below of their
outstretched limbs
Encircle & guard me
Old pines, old limbs
WE belong together
Entwined in Twilight
Remembering, receding
As night falls...*



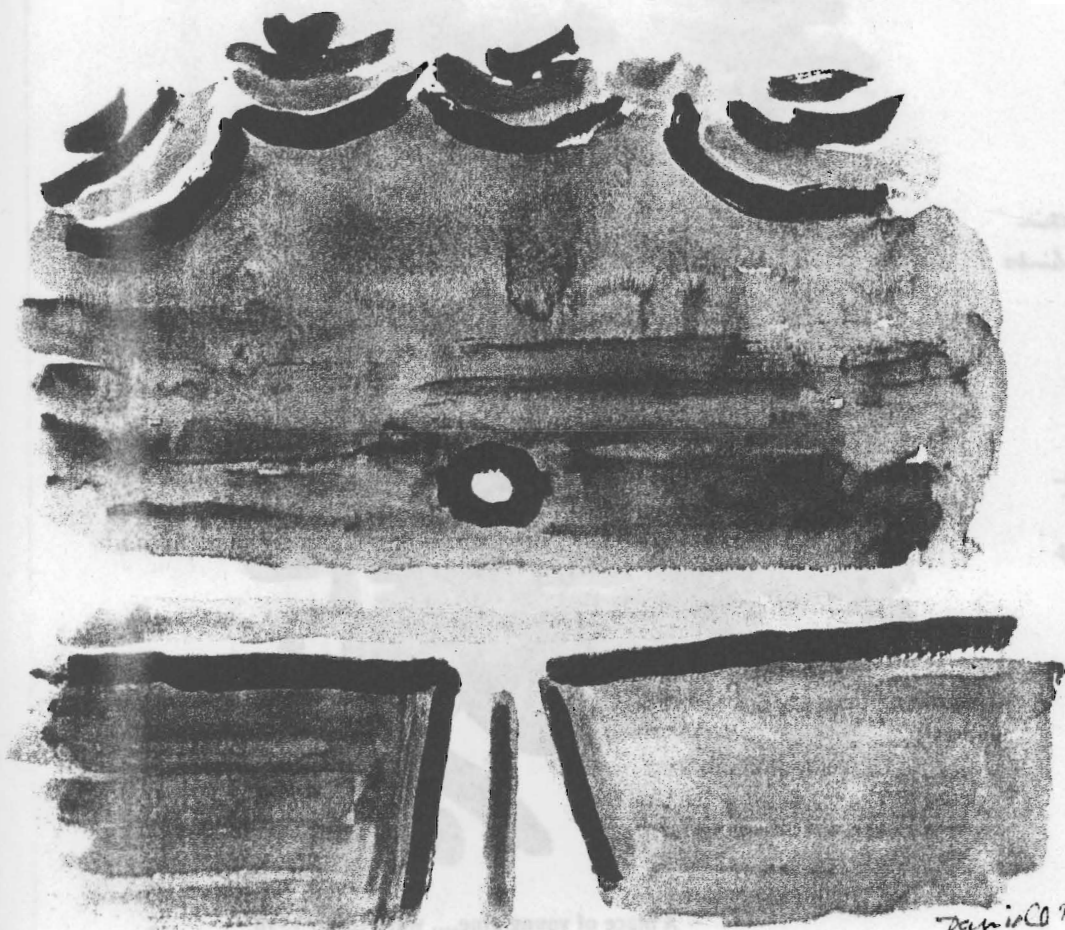
A place of young pine..., watercolor, 1998

The sun is my god
 The sea my bed
 The earth a soft pillow
 For this soon-spent head



The sun is my god..., watercolor, 1998

Daniell 98



Few have
 celebrated
 their adopted
 state with
 Daniell's ardor.

Passion recollected in tranquility, watercolor, 1998

Daniell 98

Maine is a province
unlike any other

Forever Evergreen—
Maine is what you make it



Daniell 98

Maine is a province unlike
any other..., watercolor, 1998

His nudes display
a freedom and
dynamism that
at times recall
Matisse's dancers.

"To paint good watercolors," Eliot O'Hara wrote in his book *Making Watercolor Behave* (1932), "is a full time job, not a relaxation from other kinds of artistic expression." Daniell might be heeding this statement, as he takes up the brush nearly every day, performing his colorful ablutions on white paper. Tables, beds, and chairs hold stacks of watercolors from the past several years, evidence of his active study of color and design. Indeed, the artist considers himself a colorist, and he is a daring one at that.

John Mann's dynamic watercolors had a strong impact on Daniell. He viewed them at Alfred Stieglitz's gallery in New York and when he photographed Mann painting in his studios in New Jersey and at Cape Split in South Addison, Maine. He is also a great admirer of Homer and Sargent.

As one leafs through Daniell's watercolors, certain subjects recur. There are many bouquets and still lifes, daffodils in a vase, a study of fruit with plenty of white space around it. Daniell likes to have the paper show through; in one watercolor, birches are represented by vertical strips of unpainted paper.

Daniell admits to having a penchant for lobsters and he handles the king of Maine crustaceans with admirable skill. He sometimes uses graphite or pen to shape a composition. He is also enamored of the human figure; his nudes display a freedom and dynamism that at times recall Matisse's dancers.

Other Daniell watercolors are elemental, related to the landscape. An image of the aurora borealis is a lively fantasy of the northern lights moving wildly across the sky. Daniell has been moving away from realism, exploiting the accidents that can happen when painting in watercolor, going with the

flow, the washes and the bleeds, of the watery medium. Often working from memory, he lets his imagination call the shots.

In a recent series called "Intimations," Daniell has added lines of poetry and sayings—his own and citations from others—to the watercolors. Some of them are aphoristic, which leads the artist to state with a chuckle that he should have been a preacher. Alongside a depiction of a plane crashing into the ocean is the statement, "Chance, not God, rules." Another painting carries the humorous message, "Follow your dreams but take a flashlight—and wear your rubbers." These works can be minimalist, the ocean and the sun represented by single strokes of paint. The simplicity of several of them reminded me of the illustrations by Saint-Exupéry for his classic fable *The Little Prince*.

Daniell confesses that he isn't thrilled with his role as "shopkeeper," showing his work to a steady stream of visitors, but on the other hand he enjoys the company as friends, curators, museum directors, and the like drop by for a look and, frequently, a purchase. He has had assistants over the years and has established an important relationship with John Bueche, who runs A.J. Bueche Fine Arts in Northeast Harbor.

Bueche has shown Daniell's watercolors for the past six years. To celebrate the artist's 90th birthday, he will be mounting a one-person exhibition in the summer of 2001.

The dealer, who is also an artist, refers to Daniell as a "stayer," and expresses amazement at the freshness and joyous optimism of his watercolors. His friend's dedication to art never ceases to inspire his own efforts as an artist.

Daniell has rolled with the punches that old age has thrown him, overcoming physical adversity to achieve renown. Since Edgar Allen Beem declared him "one of Maine's overlooked art treasures" on the occasion of a show in Portland ten or so years ago, the artist/photographer has received the kind of recognition due him. In an autobiographical sketch written a number of years ago, Daniell cited a line from Shakespeare's *King Lear*: "Ripeness is all." There is plenty of ripeness in the art and life of this Maine master. ✱

Carl Little is the author of a number of art books, most recently *The Watercolors of John Singer Sargent*. In recent months he has lectured at the Belfast Library, the Penobscot Marine Museum in Searsport, and the 69th annual State of Maine Writers' Conference in Ocean Park.