

## VISUAL ART

## SIMPLICITY DEFINES HIS WORK

**Niewald portraits are human still lifes, subjects painted from reality only.**

By ELISABETH KIRSCH  
Special to The Star

It takes a brave person to sit for a portrait by Wilbur Niewald.

Not just because it takes him 70-plus hours to complete a typical vertical painting. Nor because Niewald's working method is akin to a Zen-like exercise performed mostly in silence.

It's because the sitter knows ahead of time that the entire process and subsequent outcome are completely controlled by Niewald. Unlike most artists who make portraits, Niewald makes no preliminary drawings or studies. Nor does he copy from photographs. His portraits are made from direct observation. And it's clear from the start the final result will not be the kind of fluffy piece of flattery that most often ends up hanging over the living room mantelpiece.

Niewald's portraits, as evidenced in his current exhibit of 14 works from 1971 to 2011 now at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, are defined by a spiritual, emotional and physical gravitas that can make them challenging to contemplate at length. They are not easily dismissed. They can even make one uncomfortable.

His paintings of friends and family, as well as his self-portraits, are not the glamorous, bubble-gum portrayals of the rich by Andy Warhol. Nor do they resemble in any way the 6-foot-high, inscrutable photo-realistic heads by artists such as Chuck Close and photographer Thomas Ruff.

Niewald's art is not avant-garde; his subjects are easily identifiable, and he depicts them by means of a naturalistic, painterly palette.

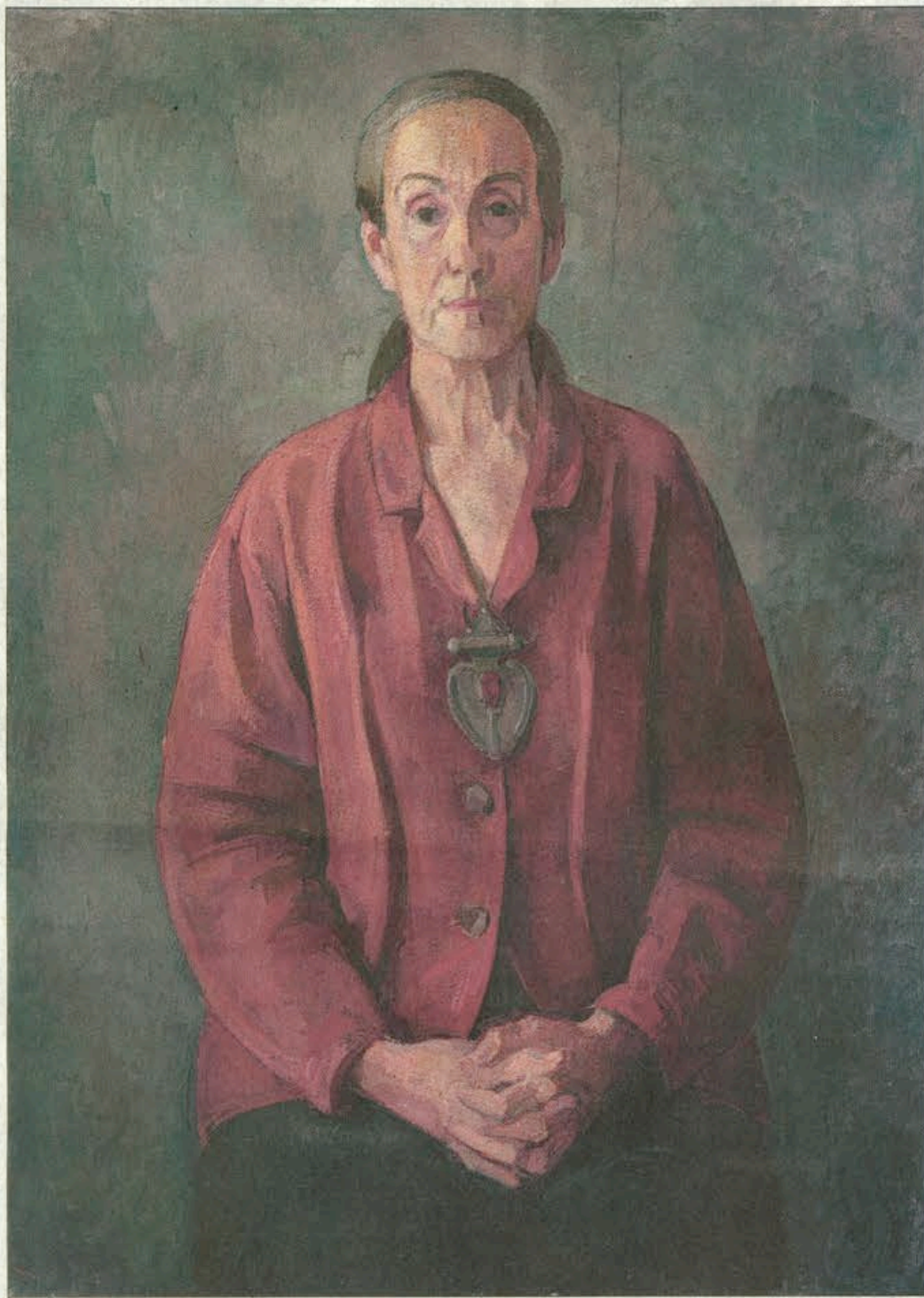
Even so, unlike more traditional portraiture (think John Singer Sargent or Thomas Gainsborough), the status of Niewald's sitters cannot be imputed from their clothing or environment; there are no additional people or animals in the picture to help define their place in the world. That's not the point.

Niewald's subjects are alone, lost in their own thoughts. They can be careworn, sad, intimidating, even defiant. Their physical attributes are neither enhanced nor denied. In short, they are real people who have let down their guard, and their vulnerability is inevitably touching.

This is Niewald's first exhibition of portraiture only, somewhat overdue given that one of his portraits resides at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Locally, he is much better known for his still lifes, and landscapes and cityscapes of Kansas City, where he was born in 1925.

A true eminence grise of the Kansas City art world, Niewald worked for 43 years as head of the Kansas City Art Institute's painting department, where he is now professor emeritus. Over the years he has won many awards, including the College Art Association award for distinguished art instruction in 1988 and a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation in 2006.

His paintings hang in numerous museums in the region, including the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and the Albrecht-Kemper in St. Joseph. The Kemper Museum owns two of Niewald's works: "Trees at Lin-



PHOTOS BY E.G. SCHEMPF | FROM THE ARTIST

Pam Hoelzel, the subject of Wilbur Niewald's 2009 portrait, "Pam With Turkman Pendant," describes the artist as "so disciplined and exacting it's unbelievable."

#### ON EXHIBIT

"Wilbur Niewald: The Studio Portrait" continues through June 17 at Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 4420 Warwick Blvd. Admission is free. Hours are 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Tuesday-Thursday; 10 a.m.-9 p.m., Friday-Saturday; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday. Closed Mondays (816-753-5784 or [www.kemperart.org](http://www.kemperart.org)).

da Hall Library" from 1996, and a superb early abstract work from 1965, "Current River II."

The broad brushstrokes that characterize Niewald's early abstractions are reflected in his first portrait, that of his daughter Janet, from 40 years ago. It is the most loosely painted work in the exhibit. It is lovely, as is his 1974 depiction of "Sherry," seated in a chair.

By 1980, Niewald had established a template for his portraits that remains constant: a simple gray background in which his subjects retain a frontal posture, head upright, eyes straight ahead or slightly averted. The exhibit offers fascinating time capsules with the four paintings of Niewald's wife, Gerry, painted over a 32-year span, and in his own three self-portraits.

Pam Hoelzel, the subject for "Pam With Turkman Pendant" from 2009, recalls sitting for her portrait in Niewald's studio. "It allowed me a lot of quiet time, which I liked. In terms of the result, I can't comment. I look at myself as another form of still life. For me, it was about



Niewald paints his subjects alone, lost in their own thoughts, as seen in this 1971 portrait of his daughter Janet.

the experience of seeing the process that Wilbur goes through. He's so disciplined and exacting it's unbelievable ... he doesn't spare himself.

"He doesn't direct and he doesn't demand," Hoelzel added. "But a brushstroke doesn't go on unless the sitter is there."

Niewald's Kemper exhibit coincides with his inclusion in

"The Annual: 2012," an exhibit of works by more than 100 contemporary artists and architects at the National Academy Museum of Art in New York. He is also represented in the "Abstract Kansas City" exhibition now at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art at Johnson County Community College.



The exhibit includes four paintings of Niewald's wife, Gerry, painted over a 32-year span, including "Gerry in Yellow Sweater" (1973).



"Gerry With Scarf" (1985) is the second painting in the show of Niewald's wife, Gerry. Other portraits show her in 1998 and 2007, providing a kind of time capsule.



Niewald has painted many self-portraits over the years, including this canvas made in 2010.