

Wilbur Niewald Early Paintings at Dolphin Gallery

Elisabeth Kirsch

Wilbur Niewald Early Paintings — 1960s
Dolphin Gallery
1901 Baltimore Avenue
Kansas City, Missouri
February 28-April 1, 2006

As the eminence grise of the Kansas City, Missouri art world, it's no surprise that Wilbur Niewald, the former chair of the KCAI painting department, was just awarded the esteemed Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship. Niewald's classically beautiful landscapes and still lifes grace the collections of such museums as the Nelson-Atkins, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York City), and numerous other public and private collections.

What is a surprise is the recent shock of seeing Niewald's paintings and watercolors from the 1960s exhibited together, for the first time, in a one-person show at the Dolphin. In dramatic contrast to his art of the last 35 years, most of the 1960s' works are completely abstract. The paintings and watercolors are startlingly muscular and masculine and look as fresh as anything being made today. While his palette of blue, terracotta and gold is essentially comparable to that which he uses now, the concentrated force of Niewald's staccato-esque brushstrokes in the 1960s pieces, applied with total confidence in various post and lintel formations, blows the viewer away.

Ultimately, in the late 1960s, Niewald rejected abstraction in favor of representation. In works such as *Mission Landscape II* and *City*, both from 1968, we see the beginnings of this formal transition to his work of today.

Niewald was not the only serious painter to turn his artistic back on abstraction in favor of "the real" (e.g., Alfred Leslie and Philip Guston also made similar, radical stylistic changes at approximately the same time), but it is fascinating to learn what prompted Niewald's departure from this watershed body of work from over 40 years ago. In a recent interview, Niewald talked about his thoughts and work process in the 1960s.

"First of all," Niewald cautioned, "let me say that I don't like one style of my work more than any other. In everything I do, what has always been important to me is a direct experience of nature. And that was as true in the sixties as it is now."



Wilbur Niewald Early Paintings — 1960s, installation view.



Wilbur Niewald, Trees II, 1967, 54" x 69"



Wilbur Niewald Early Paintings — 1960s, installation view.

What was different in 1960, however, was Niewald's search for "a more universal ideal." Early in his career, he remembers "I saw a 180 degree photo of the Grand Canyon and I wanted that vastness, that space, in my work. In the early years I wanted it to be grander. Now I want description.

"There are experiences you can't explain. In 1951, I was alone in Mexico in the mountains. I came across these vast pine trees, all of these vertical trees ... and I wanted to paint that kind of oneness that comes out of looking at that one thing."

Niewald's other great influence was the work of Piet Mondrian. "I never really worked at the art of the time, which was abstract expressionism; it just wasn't important to me ... There was a drawing of Mondrian's at the KCAI Gallery (in the 1950s), and no other painting style seemed real to me after that.

"Those +s and -s of Mondrian's *Pier and Ocean* series all had that kind of oneness I wanted. In those early stages I only wanted the relationships of those vertical and horizontals."

Niewald differed importantly from Mondrian, however, in his concern with the depiction of space. "I couldn't lose the illusion of space, as Mondrian did. I literally was trying to push things forward and back — light forward, dark back, alternating warmth and coolness.

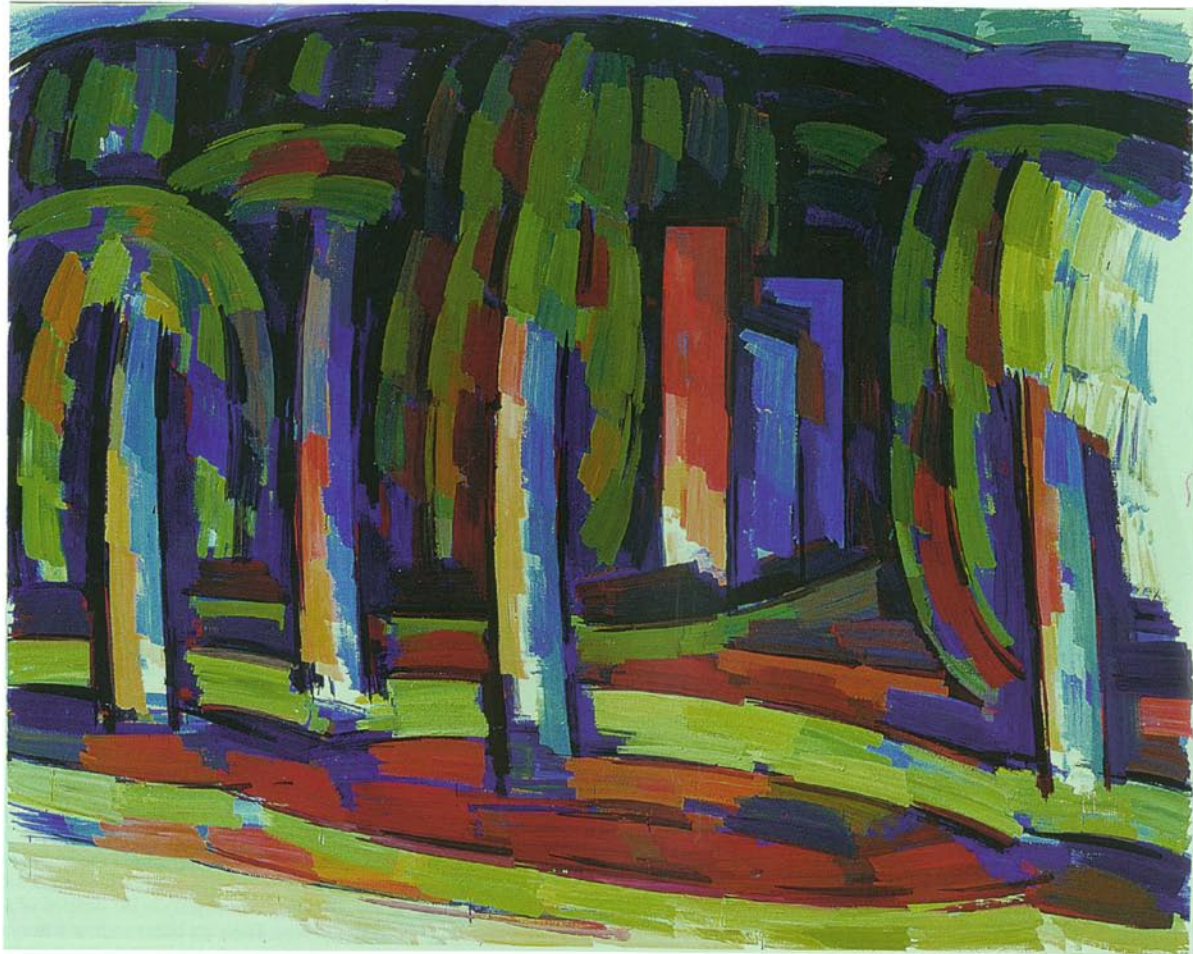
"My palette has always been just three colors; in the sixties I changed completely to primary colors, yellow, red and blue. Colors only meant space to me then. I usually worked wet into wet, putting one color over another (e.g., blue over yellow to get green), just pushing things in and out with color."

In many ways, Niewald's painterly search for unity, and his spareness of form at this time, resonates with the zeitgeist of Minimalism, a movement that came into its own in the 1960s. In its pursuit of the absolute, even the sublime, Minimalism struck some critics as peculiarly American, linking it with Transcendentalism, the important spiritual movement of 19th century America. Transcendentalism, in turn, was rooted in an almost mystical sense of oneness with the natural world, which relates back to Niewald's encounters in Mexico.

Yet another travel experience moved Niewald in the direction he follows today. In 1965 Niewald traveled to Florence, where he was struck by "the wonderful harmony of the trees with the buildings. Before this, I couldn't paint the city because it didn't have that oneness. All of a sudden, trees, chimneys and buildings started to appear in my paintings.

"Instead of just pushing things in and out with color, I asked myself 'why am I painting indirectly; why don't I just paint what I see?'"

Niewald's art is now solidly representational, but in one major way his work will always be linked to Mondrian's. "I can't conceive of art not having equilibrium ... dynamic equilibrium — that's Mondrian's term. Dynamic and then balance — that's all I try to achieve."



Wilbur Niewald, *Mission Landscape II*, 1968, Oil on canvas, 50"x63".