

The Midwest came to the attention of the art world during the 1930s through the Regionalist school of Thomas Hart Benton, Stuart Curry, and Grant Wood. Based on, in Benton's words, a "country-wide revival of Americanism," the work made its appeal to the Depression public through a grandiose and sentimentalizing vision of American life. There was a painting of reaction: against modern life, against the cosmopolitan influence of European art. As painters, these Midwesterners proved to be the last stand of provincial America. By the time the Second World War was over, American painting

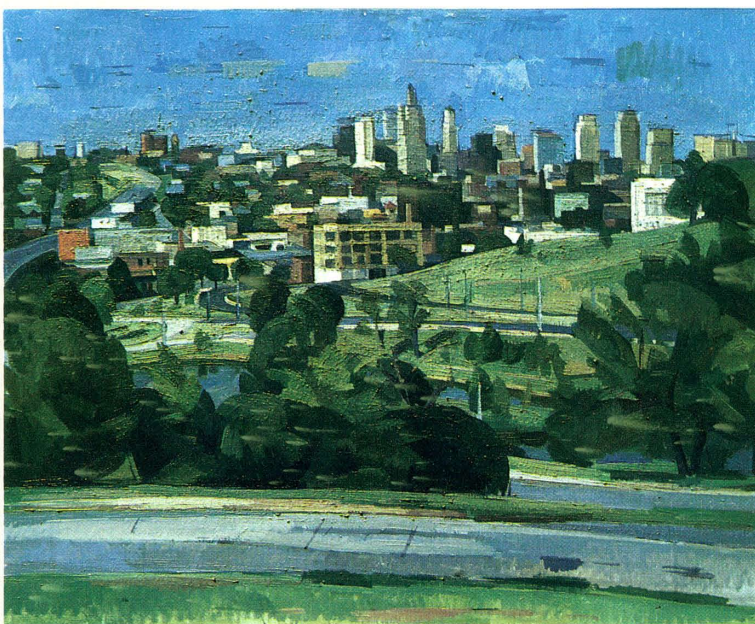
influence of that master, in the 1950s Niewald painted abstractions grounded in reference to nature or landscape. Gradually, through the experience of painting outdoors, he found himself increasingly fascinated by the specific qualities of things, by the variety, even the confusion of the world "out there." His landscapes became more traditionally constructed; finally he abandoned abstract composing in the plane altogether and devoted himself to perceptual painting: still life, landscape, and portraiture.

Niewald's recent show has him ranging among all three

road tracks, roads, and trees are placed and painted with a sense of what they are and how they have been altered or have themselves altered the scene over the years Niewald has been looking out over the city. His attention to construction and his direct painting evoke more feeling for the place than the Regionalists' nostalgia ever did. In looking around his native city, Niewald can paint it, as he did in *View From 23rd and Charlotte*, as a maze of small rectangular buildings and paths weaving up to three vertical skyscrapers dominating the horizon—the triumph of the new city—or, as in *View of Kansas*

flowerpot shapes resolving into an uncountable profusion of repeating leaf forms. But in traveling these larger paths, the eye takes in the deliberately painted variety of substance, the painted qualities of cloth, ceramic, onionskin. These rather formal still-life setups, rather than the landscapes, hold the most visible traces of Niewald's abstract years. Everything is real, solid, dense, but in sum the effects draw us away from the accidents of specific time and place. They are often sober, these still lifes, and their honest building through paint parallels the slow process of introspection. The thoughtful

## WILBUR NIEWALD



Wilbur Niewald, *View of Kansas City*, 1979. Oil on canvas, 29 x 32". Courtesy Ingber Gallery.

was thoroughly French, the lessons of Europe accepted throughout America. In the subsequent growth of modernist figurative painting here, 20th-century American painters have been turning a structural language learned from Europe to use in depicting a modern American scene.

Wilbur Niewald is one of those painters. His background is in the Regionalists' heartland—he has lived most of his life near Kansas City, Missouri, where Benton also lived—but in his painting he is always at home in the language of the great European achievements of this century and the last. Like other figurative painters of his generation, he was introduced to form via abstraction, in his case a major Mondrian he saw while still a student. Under the

modes. The landscapes, perhaps more properly called cityscapes, survey his home ground, Kansas City, where Niewald teaches at the Art Institute. In these compositions painted from atop a hill, the buildings of Kansas City are revealed as groups of rectangles among crisscrossing roads and clumps of greenery. A brushstroke picks out alternations of light and dark; dots and squares of bright color entice the eye through space. But the large, simple, pictorial strategies of these almost panoramic views engage more than Niewald's close study of landscape conventions or his powers of direct observation. The tying together of the motif involves Niewald's longstanding and loving familiarity with all its significant details. Skyscrapers, warehouses, rail-

City, divide it equally among greenery, small, shabbier buildings, and smaller skyscrapers seen at a distance, all glimpsed as if across a road.

Balancing Niewald's exploration outdoors around his city is his more intimate contemplation of still-life objects on a table in the corner of his studio. Whether elaborately crowded with arrays of fruit and glass against a richly decorated cloth, or simply posing a creamy white ceramic jar against a liquidly dark glass bottle, his still-life compositions embrace the painter's world with a long, concentrated gaze. In the traditions of Chardin, of Cézanne, the still lifes are plotted on large geometries: large ellipses of cloth encircling smaller rounds of fruit; three separate

look of his portrait subjects bespeaks the same unessential seeking out of essential qualities, here in the service of a psychological truth.

Wilbur Niewald inhabits the Midwest, but he has equally made his home in the painter's world that extends into the past and admits of no regional boundaries. It is his lifelong commitment to a structural language—to making paintings in which sentiment is truly conveyed by the vehicle of form—that convinces us to follow him into the Midwestern landscape, into the intricacies of still life, into the life of the friends and family he records. (Ingber, *September 6-27*)

Deborah Rosenthal