

Realist started in abstraction

Niewald retrospective shows maturing artist.

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Viewers who are familiar with the realist output of the Wilbur Niewald of today will be shocked by the abstract paintings of the Wilbur Niewald of yesterday.

Examples of both styles and of all steps in between are on view

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through April 19 in the artist's 40-year retrospective at the Charlotte Crosby Kemper Gallery at the Kansas City Art Institute.

To walk through this show is to trace the emergence of nascent proclivities and the suppression of others in the evolution of the mature painter and veteran instructor, who is retiring from teaching after 43 years at the school.

The early abstractions such as "Trees" (1951), in which somber and luminous patches of color submit to structuring black lines, or "City V" (1955), a cubistic, hivelike structure executed in blues and ochres, demonstrate the artist's immersion in the lessons and philosophy of the modernists.

The concerns here are to realize the vision seen in the mind's eye and to endow the painting with a pictorial life independent of observed reality.

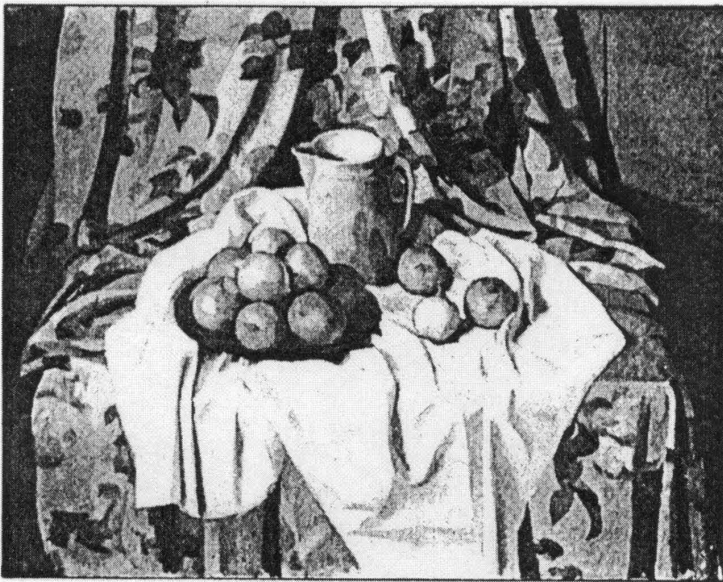
The sober and stable classicism of the earliest abstractions gives way in the 1960s to a lilting, bordering on expressionist, interpretation of landscape themes. In "Aspen" (1962), a joyous riot of patchy, advancing reds and oranges and retreating greens and blues, and "Penn Valley III" (1962), a bower of syncopated woody hues, Niewald employs color as a means of creating space.

It was only after some 20 years of painting that the artist allowed himself to revel in local color and the challenges of representation. "The Pink House" (1971), based on a view from his studio window, marks an important turning point.

For all the importance Niewald himself accords the moment of his conversion to descriptive painting, the differences in works executed before and after "The Pink House" are not so great as appearances would signify. An obvious constant in Niewald's work is his commitment to easel painting. The effect of this ensemble of smallish scaled works is to endow his endeavor with a winning modesty.

A fascinating revelation to emerge from this 40-year survey has to do with Niewald's choices of and relationship to subject matter.

His output may be divided into sustained explorations of three basic realms of existence: the public, the personal and the private. Those are represented, respectively, by his limpid Kansas City vistas, introspective portraits



'Still Life With Onions and Yellow Cloth,' a painting by Wilbur Niewald, at the Kansas City Art Institute

and quietly monumental still lifes.

Niewald's 1989 suite of four views of Kansas City, on loan from the collection of the Nelson Gallery, typifies the artist's treatment of the cityscape. He prefers to render it from a distance — so as to minimize the intrusion of incidental and changing elements — and to use an elevated perspective.

The latter enables Niewald to present the city ringed by the verdure of the prairie. Emblematic of the human impulse to create and construct, the red bricks of the buildings claim the focal point of the compositions under expanses of blue sky and foregrounds clotted with billowing protective trees.

Niewald's periodic engagement in portrait painting offers a window into the artist's personal world. In the context of his larger body of work, it is significant that the artist confines his portraiture to depictions of himself, his wife, daughter and close friends. As with his attraction to the city he has lived in all his life, clearly the artist prefers to paint subjects that he knows in depth.

Although his own discussions of his work tend to focus on his commitment to observation, the paintings suggest that the artist regards a certain degree of inner knowledge of a subject as a prerequisite to accurately capturing the facade.

Niewald's portraits, from the beginning, have tended to be somber, solitary and inward-looking. Over the years he has moved away from the use of props and draperies to focus exclusively on

the psychology of his subjects as revealed through their bearing, expression and clothing. A recent portrait of his wife, "Gerry in Blue Sweater" (1990), shows a woman of strength and sensitivity given to serious thoughtfulness.

Perhaps the most compelling world that the artist shares through his paintings is the private realm of the studio. His still lifes issue very much from the environment of the painter alone, an environment totally subject to the artist's arranging and one essentially unchanging.

If, for example, the apples Niewald was painting began to rot or the onions sprouted before he completed a composition, he would simply replace them.

In the studio the artist revisits his favorite mysteries to plumb, challenges to meet and objects to gaze at. The same draperies, bottles, pitchers and jars reappear in picture after picture.

Niewald's work celebrates the familiar. At the same time it argues that the familiar is not something to be taken for granted. To some his commitment to observation puts him at odds with the general drift of his time. Yet, in reviewing the history of 20th century art — one thinks of the late drawings of Picasso, or Duchamp's late masterwork "Etant donné" — it is clear that Niewald is not alone in finding abstraction inadequate to express an immersion and love of the physical world.

Niewald's modernism consists in paring to the essence of his subjects' spirit. His rebellion resides in respecting their material fullness of form.