

WILBUR NIEWALD

“Nature is a mutable cloud, which is always and never the same.” – Emerson

Wilbur Niewald is what the world identifies, without thought, as a realist painter because words can be given to the places he paints, to the objects in the still lifes, the figures and the portraits. By this ambiguous term, he himself means that he paints the world around him, and always from direct observation and never from memory.

Niewald arrived at his present style after passing through a number of stages. One of his teachers at the Kansas City Art Institute, Vincent Campanella, had an important influence on him. In the Campanella studio the students worked with a low-key palette consisting of yellow ochre, earth red, ivory black, and white. Even more significantly, he pointed Niewald in the direction of modernism, making him familiar with concepts absent from the training he had hitherto experienced.

About this time Niewald discovered Cézanne’s great painting of *Mont Sainte-Victoire* and Rembrandt’s *Portrait of a Young Boy*, both in the collection of Kansas City’s Nelson-Atkins Museum. Niewald says, “Cézanne became my teacher - my constant source of inspiration.”

In 1950, the Art Institute was host to a touring exhibition entitled *The City* on loan from New York’s Museum of Modern Art. There were the usual paintings by Edward Hopper, Isabel Bishop, Reginald Marsh and many other Americans. But only one work, a charcoal drawing by Mondrian, one of his drawings of building facades from the period between 1912 and 1914, left any kind of permanent impression on Niewald. The intensity of Mondrian’s drawing dimmed the realism of the paintings. This was Niewald’s introduction to abstraction. The impression it made was evidently a response to inner needs until then not fully realized.

After the paintings and drawings of Paris facades and churches, Mondrian made a series of drawings, always from direct observation, of the sea. He was teaching himself how to refine a language for representing exactly what is only vaguely perceptible in nature. He reduced and destroyed the concreteness of physical appearance by a process of simplification. In 1942, describing the development of his work, Mondrian wrote: “Observing sea, sky and stars, I sought to indicate their plastic function through a multiplicity of crossing verticals and horizontals. Impressed by the vastness of nature, I was trying to express its expansion, rest and unity.” Niewald was deeply affected by this series and for a time the influence showed in his work.

Abstract is not the same as abstraction, and the impression left upon Niewald, albeit an unconscious one, seems to have been both permanent and profound. There followed a period of abstraction. One work, *Aspen*, 1962 in the Nelson-Atkins Museum Collection, has both an inner as well as an outer force. An onrushing of clay-colored orange, red and grey tile-like forms thrust upward from a similarly shaped and colored ground. I was reminded as I pondered this fascinating work of the theory that life on earth began in clay rather than in the sea since clay has the ability to act as a catalyst in important chemical reactions and could be capable of such life-like attributes as self-replication. This theory recalls the second chapter of the Book of Genesis where the Lord God makes man from a pinch of dirt from the ground.

After the abstract phase, Niewald moved into a period of making drawings and paintings combining abstraction with aspects of natural appearance. A breakthrough to his most recent work occurred in 1971 with a painting called *The Pink House*, now in the collection of the Kansas City Art Institute. One day while working in his studio, making paintings based upon drawings, he happened to glance out the window at a neighbor's house. He thought, why not just take a hold of this moment and paint exactly what he saw. Since completing this work Niewald states that he is entirely convinced as to the value of painting from direct observation. He says: "All I want to do is paint what I see."

Having selected a subject - it might be a place outdoors, or a still life or figure - he begins each painting without a plan, working out from a spot, gradually spreading, and constantly working back into the parts already painted, always trying to find the key to the painting as a whole. Whereas another painter might find freedom in painting without the need to represent anything, with Niewald the act of perception leads directly to the unconscious - to the wellspring of all creation. It is not "copying," nor is it "rendering." There is no thought of trompe-l'oeil. For him the art of painting is the act of penetrating a nature that spreads itself before him like the glittering veil of Maya. He says: "In recent years I have brought the focus in. I want to get closer to what I see. I feel there has been progress, but there is so much yet to do."

There are other significant aspects of Niewald's paintings. First, his reliance upon the true size of things - what is sometimes called sight size, more or less in the spirit of the English, Richard Sickert, who was influenced by Degas. Second, a reliance upon a strictly limited palette of colors. His primaries are flake white, cadmium yellow light, cadmium yellow deep, cadmium red light, alizarin crimson and ultramarine blue. The absence of any greens or oranges may result in a loss of chroma or brightness, yet the faintly subdued colors, resulting from mixing his primaries, furnish an elusive charm and muted inwardness especially true of his landscapes.

In his still lifes and portraits Niewald takes the viewer into his studio. The still lifes are classic studio arrangements, and he repeatedly uses the table, the cloths, the pitcher, the onions and apples, the mason jar. In the most recent work he is tending to center the composition. In his portraits Niewald reveals a kinship with North European romanticism. This is especially true of the portraits in which the subject confronts the spectator with a hypnotic, wide-eyed gaze.

Niewald is today master of the semi-industrial suburb traversed by thruways, with clumps of shrubberies and trees and houses, industrial parks, factories, and these without any trace of social commentary. There is something heroic in the scene, reminding me of the distant views of Zenith in books by Sinclair Lewis. He captures a quality of hazy light in the way that Marquet captures the light of Paris reflecting into the murky waters of the Seine. This thought reminds me of one of Niewald's earlier paintings of the Seine, *Pont Louis Phillippe*, 1973.

Some of his strongest paintings of the industrial suburb are watercolors. Niewald is something of a classicist in his handling of the medium. He does not mix any of his colors with white, but relies on the paper to give light to the colors so that the marks of the brush resemble shards of colored glass. Niewald's watercolors have a smoky mystery and reveal energies concealed beneath the surface of a materialistic world.

Although Mondrian may have influenced him strongly at one time, there is a residue of Mondrian still, at least in my thinking.

Lawrence Campbell