

Not-So-Still Life

The sight of **Wilbur Niewald** painting in Loose Park always cheers me. Even on the most brutal summer afternoon, he's there at 5 p.m., absorbed in the landscape. Knowing I'll see that painting later, in an exhibition, lets me

**BY
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SELF**

feel part of his artistic process. In Niewald's exhibition at Dolphin, 25 paintings and watercolors — most of them from 2007 — demonstrate not just his prowess but also his devotion to landscape, still life and figure painting. A professor emeritus of painting at the Kansas City Art Institute and a Guggenheim fellow, Niewald embodies the work ethic I've seen in so many successful artists: devotion to an idea and a consuming vision. Niewald has remained steadfast to painting from observation in an abstracted realist style, perfecting it over the course of his long career.

And even though Niewald's swath of trees in Loose Park and his views from Penn Valley Park or of the 12th Street viaduct reaffirm his devotion to this city's visual and painterly pleasures, images of Santa Fe, New Mexico, afford further satisfaction. "Santa Fe, Helena's House" (from 2006) is particularly appealing, with its darkish palette and the longer, looser brush strokes that Niewald uses for the trees (as opposed to the more compact and blocky brush strokes in the dark thicket of Loose Park trees). It's always thrilling to see how abstract brush strokes can create a startlingly recognizable and naturalistic scene. Those Santa Fe trees navigate us through the dense middle ground to the upper third of the painting, where the adobe house emerges, tightly painted in comparison with the loose and luxurious open strokes of the trees. Shooting upward, the vertical strokes lend the painting a dynamic movement that is atypical of Niewald's work.

His paintings are characterized by absolute compositional balance; they never seem unstable, about to shift or even move in the slightest. True to form, "Kelly" is a placid nude. Sitting

squarely — or terrifically roundly in her case — in the middle of the canvas, the subject reminds me of an Alice Neel nude without the drama, energy or frisson of danger. In her frontal pose, with ankles demurely crossed, the model stabilizes herself by holding on to each side of the chair's seat. Her centeredness is further grounded by the small platform on which she sits, positioned in the middle of the canvas in front of a neutral backdrop. There is absolutely no emotional content



here. There is nothing vulnerable, confrontational, emotional or sexual about this nude. She is simply an object of interesting angles, light and painterly opportunity; essentially, she's one of Niewald's still lifes. Niewald's attention to her round thighs, abdomen and breasts is matter-of-fact and filled with the subtleties of skin, shadow and texture.

As in all of his paintings, Kelly's body is yet another ordinary place — made visual and visible, endlessly interesting and worthy of a lifetime of study.

Wilbur Niewald
Recent Paintings
Through November 17 at
Dolphin, 1901 Baltimore,
816-842-5877