

LAWRENCEVILLE, N.J.

Wilbur Niewald at Rider University Art Gallery

Wilbur Niewald has been painting for over five decades. In the 1960s, he moved out of his early Mondrian-inspired abstraction into representation, and began drawing and painting from the figure, still life and landscape.



Wilbur Niewald: *Pines in Loose Park I*, 2003, oil on canvas, 29 by 36 inches; at Rider University Art Gallery.

The artist's subject matter—self-portraits and portraits of his family, Kansas City parks and cityscapes, still lifes and his studio at the Kansas City Art Institute (where Niewald taught for over 40 years)—is familiar to anyone who has followed his career. Not only are his painted forms consistently solid and clear—seemingly chiseled and polished until they feel crystalline—they also convey a sense of the familial, as if they had been nurtured rather than brushed into fruition. Present also in the work is Niewald's ongoing dialogue

with other artists, especially Cézanne, Corot and Chardin.

Organized by the Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art in St. Joseph, Mo., this traveling retrospective of more than 50 paintings and drawings from 1951 to 2004 proved how much Niewald's devotion to painting and to the artists and motifs he adores has yielded. But the works completed in the past five years convey a newfound light and life, an urgency and presence.

The violet-gray, brown and other *Still Life with Gourds and Green Bottle II* (2002) is humble yet majestic. The painting's plump forms seem to expand in defiance of the subdued color range. *Still Life with Apples and Clay Pot* (2004), in rich browns, reds and purples, its forms scattered like classical ruins, feels bruised, melancholic and vulnerable. *Self Portrait with Red Scarf* (1998), a painting of the artist's wife, *Gerry* (2001), and the seated nude *Leslie* (2003) are all frontal and straightforward, rock-solid and penetrating, yet have an ethereal quality.

In Niewald's most recent landscapes, rocks and foliage seem to twist and shimmer, as in *Pines in Loose Park I* (2003) and *Rocks at Cambridge Circle V* (2001). In his light-dappled watercolors, such as *Kansas City* (2003) and *Rocks* (2001), the forms feel ecstatic. The reaching leaves, flowers and white cloth, which spreads from behind the terra-cotta pot in *Geranium* (2003), begin to gloriously levitate the plant off the table, as if the scene were not an arrangement of everyday objects on a table but instead an Assumption or a Resurrection.

—Lance Esplund