



Painter and teacher Wilbur Niewald in his studio (staff photo by Luci Williams)

## Seeing the world anew each day

By Donald Hoffmann

The Star's art and architecture critic

**O**ne thing about the painter Wilbur Niewald is that he stays put.

He was born in Kansas City and he's here 63 years later. He started taking classes at the Kansas City Art Institute at 9 years old and he's teaching at the same school today.

Quiet and polite, his hair all white, Niewald looks like an artist and of course is an artist. By all signs, too, he is a happy man. He goes to work each day eager to see what he hasn't seen before.

Last month he won the College Art Association's 1988 distinguished teaching of art award, an honor that placed him in the company of such past winners as Josef Albers, Tony Smith, Philip Guston, Wayne Thie-

### Observation is key to the painting of Art Institute's Wilbur Niewald

baud, Elmer Bischoff and Leon Golub.

"What has been beautiful for me through the years," Niewald said the other day, taking time off from a painting in progress, "is that what I'm doing is the same as what I'm teaching."

"This seemed the best and most logical way for me to develop as a painter, to combine the teaching and the painting. Of course, it does take some time away from one's work, but—and even more as the years have gone by—I've realized how it's a reciprocal thing.

"I regard myself as a painter first, then as a teacher. It's a day-to-day experience that I'm sharing with the

students. What I've learned in my own work I bring to class. As you gain some little understanding, you pass that on."

Niewald sees painting as an activity grounded in continuous and direct experience, and he thinks that concepts and theory develop from that activity, not the other way around.

"The physical part of painting isn't just incidental," he said, setting down a cup of coffee. "It's what you're really doing. The act of painting is a physical thing.

"Watercolor has its own pleasure: the transparencies of color, and the lightness. But oils . . . even the smell of oil painting is a certain thing. You

don't think about it, but it's part of the physical pleasure.

"I like both mediums, and I've worked in them all my life. But oil is more tactile, more physical. So if I work in watercolor for two or three weeks, I can hardly wait to get back to the oil painting. There's a certain sensual pleasure in laying on paint."

In the studios of an art school, Niewald said, academic freedom means that each teacher can teach what he or she knows best; students who elect to work with Niewald know they'll be painting pictures from real and closely observed subjects.

"All of my teaching is done from direct observation," Niewald explained. "I have to share those things that I know. When I believe in it so deeply, I have to share the importance

See Niewald, pg. 8E, col. 1



# Niewald

continued from pg. 1E

of looking at nature, of studying nature."

Niewald bases his classes on the study of color relationships. He teaches that composing in colors is the same as drawing, and that what's important is to see the relationships as a totality with the kind of equilibrium comparable to the balance observed in nature.

"My whole attitude about teaching," he said, "is that it's a triangle. There's the object and the student and the teacher. That's the beauty of working from observation; it leaves both of us free to that object. We're looking, and sharing the idea of looking.

"It's just beautiful, for me, to have the freedom to look and to try to realize what's there. I don't feel that I'm teaching art; I don't know that anyone really does teach art.

"What I feel that I am doing is developing—or being a part of the development of—their ability to see. In my opinion, the development of this vision, this ability to see, has an effect on all parts of their lives. It's based on their ability to see relationships. It comes from years and years of experience in looking."

One of the great phases of art history, to Niewald's way of thinking, occurred in the 19th century at the *Academie Suisse*, in Paris.

An informal studio where aspiring artists paid a small fee to use the space and share in working from a model, the *Academie Suisse* charged no tuition and held no examinations. Among those who attended were such lights as Gustave Courbet, Edouard Manet, Camille Pissarro, Claude Monet and—most important to Niewald—Paul Cezanne.

Niewald was a student at the Art Institute when one day he looked at Cezanne's landscape of "Mont Ste.-Victoire" in the Nelson Gallery and saw things he hadn't seen before.

"For the first time, I saw what volume it had," Niewald recalls. "I experienced this enormous feeling of space. That was an

awakening. It opened up a world of form to me, not just a world of description."

Niewald delved into what he calls the formal issues of painting, and into Erle Loran's book titled *Cezanne's Composition*, an analytical study. Today, he thinks Loran distorted what Cezanne was all about. He doesn't recommend the book.

"Cezanne was a direct and passionate painter of nature," Niewald said. "I feel that Cezanne was very true to what he saw."

Niewald also admires the art of Henri Matisse and Alberto Giacometti—believing both to be excellent students of nature—and remembers being deeply moved by a charcoal drawing by Piet Mondrian that he saw in the early 1950s.

"I wanted to be an abstract painter," Niewald recalls, "but I could never take it back so far as to eliminate the illusion of space; and the illusion of space is what kept me in contact with the world.

"There were early years in my teaching when my work was more abstract... I was teaching from observation, but my concerns were more conceptual—spatial concerns, for example, and the idea of color rather than just the sensation of what we see.

"One day, I looked out my studio window and said, 'I'm just going to put down what I see—and try to not use some kind of

color theory or spatial concerns.' Naturally, I carry with me all my previous experiences."

If his paintings sold for high prices, would he give up teaching?

"As much as teaching means to me and has always meant to me," Niewald answered, "I suppose that I always thought, in the back of my mind, that if I sold more, I would give up teaching. Now, I am close to that stage, regardless. But I think teaching is a very noble thing."

Would an artist be too lonely, too isolated, if he painted alone and didn't teach?

"Painting—at least for me—is a solitary experience," Niewald said, "and I have the temperament to function easily in that way. I don't mind. When summer comes and I'm able to devote my time completely to my work, there's a wonderful kind of freeing of the mind."

"Painting is a very personal expression. My orientation is toward observation, and I think it will continue to be. I want to understand, and to realize something. I obviously need to do it; if I miss a day or two, it affects me.

"There's no question that when I'm painting I'm feeling things. It's never routine. It's always exciting. I just have to look, and then I'm started. Seeing is the stimulus."