

HAW/CONTEMPORARY

Different views of local sights at Haw Contemporary

Neil Thrun, Kansas City Star, April 3, 2014

Two exhibitions at Haw Contemporary — “Friendly Stranger” by Ahram Park and “Still Life-Figure-Landscape” by Wilbur Niewald — explore local sights and scenes through very different methods.

Enormous black and white photographs by Park hang in the first two galleries. Depicting rural roads, fields of weeds and ancient twisted trees, the photographs have a particularly Midwestern feel.

One photograph, which shares the exhibition’s title, “Friendly Stranger,” shows a hazy scene of trees obscured by a cloud of dust. The thick cloud is illuminated by a bright sky above the tree line, giving the image a hot choking feeling.



In another photograph, Park aims his lens down a gravel road. Thick dust rises from the road, and near the top of the black and white image, visibility of the road becomes almost obscured, turning the image to a solid matte gray. Aptly titled, “Cough” relates to both a literal choking on dust, but also a metaphorical sense of the word gravel, as in having a gravelly voice.

Continuing this theme of dust, “Tallgrass Road” shows another gravel road, with tree limbs arching over from both sides of the road. Filling this archway of tree limbs,

dust billows around, illuminated by sunlight. The cloud of dust and point of view of the lens gives the impression that you might be looking out the back of a pickup truck.

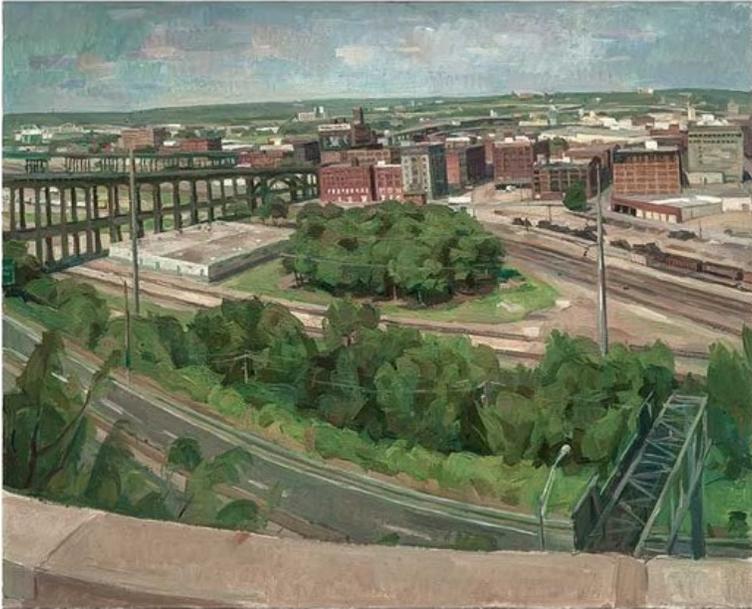
But Park’s technique for creating these sandstorms is much more deliberate. Using a camera in one hand and a leaf blower in the other, Park captures these rural scenes with dexterous skill. While the scenes are extremely eerie, quiet, even desolate, the image of a man in the middle of nowhere with a leaf blower, an apparatus so closely associated with urban and suburban lawn care, becomes slightly comical. But knowledge of the leaf blower remains secondary, out of sight of the camera, just one more tool of illusion in Park’s artistic tool box.

Further into the gallery are a couple dozen oil paintings by Niewald, a veteran Kansas City artist. With the fluorescent lighting turned off, the landscapes, still lifes and portraits are individually lit with soft spot lighting. While it is a simple change in lighting, it quickly changes the tenor of Haw Contemporary from a sleek super-modern gallery into a quieter space of more classical values.

And Niewald’s paintings are classical. Works like “Still Life With Onions and Green Bottle” depicts a bowl of onions and a green bottle nestled amid fabric on a table. Niewald’s masterful use of brush work is neither photorealistic nor a loose expressionist style, but a perfect place in-between. In all of his still

lives, you can see this best in his handling of the thick, folded, floral fabrics — the kind you might use for curtains or upholstery. The complex floral prints are rendered in an entirely believable manner, but a close inspection reveals the expertly mixed paints are put down in large broad strokes, abstracting the folds and prints in very subtle ways.

Between the still lifes of fruit and skulls are landscape paintings of Kansas City. Works like “Kansas City, View of the River” and “View of Roundhouse from Cambridge Circle II” (2013) will be familiar vistas for many Kansas City residents.



“Kansas City, View of 12th Street Viaduct” is maybe the most striking of Niewald’s landscapes. Overlooking the West Bottoms from a park cliff above Interstate 35, the painting shows a vast area of Kansas City stretching off into the western horizon. The large red brick warehouses of the West Bottoms are nestled between railway yards and the historic 12th Street Viaduct, a double-decker bridge that joins the hill tops of downtown with the low-lying industrial district.

Among three portraits in the exhibition is Niewald’s “Self-Portrait.” Against a warm gray background, the artist stares back at the viewer. Wearing a dark sweater and

blue shirt, the octogenarian looks calm and happy. The first thing that you notice is the oily varnish sheen over the face. On his cheeks and in the folds of his face, you can see actual ridges and valleys of thick oil paint. When viewed from particular angles these wrinkles look utterly lifelike, but as one shifts around the painting, the illusion breaks down and the shiny surface glistens brightly.

Although separated by a couple generations, Park and Niewald tap into a very romantic sensibility. Park’s desolate country scenes have a timeless feeling, amplified by the black and white photography, that do not connote a particular era. Similarly, Niewald’s traditional still lifes and portraits are firmly within centuries of oil painting tradition.

And while the exhibitions complement each other in this manner, both are worthy of notice for their own merits.