

HAW/CONTEMPORARY

Ahram Park and Wilbur Niewald show their patience at Haw

Liz Cook, Pitch Magazine, March 11, 2014

As anyone can attest who has sat and watched dust particles spiral and spark in a slant of afternoon light, romance can emerge from the most ordinary subjects. At Haw Contemporary, two new solo exhibitions invite us to contemplate the vibrancy and mystery of straightforward scenes.

The dramatic black-and-white photographs that make up Ahram Park's *Friendly Stranger* sweep us into mundane settings made strange. The title image is among the most striking in this collection. "Friendly Stranger" masks roadside vegetation in chalky clouds of kicked-up gravel dust. Park has captured movement in the shifting shadows, overlaying the landscape with new patterns and textures that bloom like Rorschach blots from the light-dappled fog.

"Century Wood" swaps romance for rigor in a cleaner, more clinical presentation of its rural landscape. Park's technical skill is on full display here, capturing a shot of an aging tree at a crossroad in rich contrast and crystalline definition. You feel as though you could lean in and count the dimples in the tree bark. Park finds drama in the wind-carved countryside as well, complicating the scene with the bold shock of stripes from a sign on a guardrail. The gravel here is shadow-smudged and travel-worn, and its smooth presentation marks a departure from Park's other images.

"Tallgrass Road" anchors the exhibition with a synthesis of elements that other photographs explore individually. Dust clouds swirl hypnotically again, but they only partly mask a frame of rich vegetation that curls protectively over the road. Here, Park achieves balance in theme as well as in composition, allowing us a naked glimpse of branches in the upper-left corner that softens as hazy dust sweeps up from the road like a hand.

Down the hall, the representational paintings of Wilbur Niewald's *Still Life • Figure • Landscape* soak iconic Kansas City views with color. Paintings such as "Kansas City, View of the 12th Street Viaduct" have an almost nostalgic feel, suffusing scenes with faded golden light filtered through graying skies. The vegetable matter is suggested in looser, fuller brushstrokes, setting cuddly clusters of verdant greens against the precise angles and tight lines of man-made structures. Niewald's pieces are set in simple, recessed wooden frames that leave the edges of the canvas exposed. That choice allows us to glimpse process in these paintings and appreciate the layered oils as they build up and feather at the corners.

Color relationships are crucial to Niewald's works, and each still life is tonally distinct. "Three Skulls" is an exhibition highlight, capturing the play of light and shadow on the concave curves and grim hollows of the skulls. "Still Life With Apples and Grey Pitcher" employs a moodier palette than some of his other works, draping the scene with the soft folds and variegated colors of a bold printed fabric.

Niewald's exhibition includes only three figures, but these are some of the most arresting pieces on display, and they loom in your imagination long after you leave the gallery. "Pam" reveals Niewald's

observational acuity: His exacting attention to his subject's sallow complexion and the gentle purple bruise of dark circles under her eyes don't judge her but instead lend her dignity. Each of Niewald's figures gazes at us straight on, and their lives seem anything but still. "Gerry" challenges us with a wry look, an expression that threatens to disrupt the painting's somber stability. Niewald's self-portrait is no less energetic; it all but vibrates off the canvas, powered by textured, speckled brushstrokes.

Both solo exhibitions offer us still images that seem on the verge of motion, their pregnant moments held but not quite frozen. In their careful observations of light and shadow, color and composition, Park and Niewald reveal a shared appreciation for the wonder just under the surface of humble subjects.