

***Kansas City artists interpret their immediate environs in 'Surroundings'***,  
Theresa Bembnister, Special to The Star, 2010-02-25

Composed almost exclusively of landscapes by local artists, "Surroundings" at the Dolphin gives viewers a chance to reflect on how the Kansas City region shapes artists who call it home.

The exhibition also provides an opportunity to see how, as viewers, our relationship to our habitat affects the way we see things.

Names of familiar places and nearby natural landmarks appear again and again in the titles of the 32 paintings, photographs and prints in this exhibition — Loose Park, Brookside, Quality Hill, Cedar Creek, Wakarusa. Some of the works on display feel less like landscapes and more like portraits of friends.

A quick glance at the resumes of participating artists demonstrates the effect area institutions have on Kansas City's art scene. Most of the artists involved studied or taught (or both) at the Kansas City Art Institute or the University of Kansas. Others had stints at Hallmark before leaving to focus on their fine art careers.

Visitors to the exhibition come across artworks with views similar to those surrounding them on their drive down the 12th Street Bridge and through the nearly deserted streets of the West Bottoms. The Dolphin Gallery relocated to that neighborhood from the Crossroads Arts District in August 2008. Both the venerable Kansas City painter and printmaker Wilbur Niewald and John Ferry, a perennial audience favorite appearing here courtesy of Jan Weiner, contribute Bottoms scenes.

Although the two artists draw inspiration from the same Kansas City locale, their work is very different. Niewald paints panoramas overlooking Interstate 35 and the gritty neighborhood of brick warehouses from direct observation. The curves of bridges, overpasses and railroad tracks guide the viewer's eye through the composition.

Ferry, on the other hand, crops his images so tightly that the structures depicted become abstract shapes. Although his landscapes' locations are not immediately recognizable, Ferry captures the neighborhood's empty feeling.

Niewald also contributes views of Loose Park, a scene he has painted again and again. The familiar boughs of his pine trees appear in six works in this exhibition, rendered in printing ink, watercolor and oil. The catalog of a 2006 exhibition of Niewald's paintings from the 1960s, on display in the gallery, shows that the artist has been working with the same subject matter for decades. Niewald's 1960s paintings are even more abstract than Ferry's — they feature brushy-edged blocks of vibrant primary colors arranged in the same curves and arcs found in his more natural landscapes.

In a single painting appearing courtesy of Unit 5 Gallery, Richard Mattsson depicts a tree-lined Brookside street with the kind of bold saturation typical of a painter from Miami or Los Angeles. Mattsson forgoes atmospheric perspective — his palette maintains the same intensity in the grassy lawn that makes up the painting's foreground as in the trees and house of the mid-ground and the sky of the background. Mattsson's "Brookside With Red House" stands out because of its unexpected flatness and vividness.

Lawrence-based artist Lisa Grossman finds inspiration not in city scenes but in the region's natural landmarks. She displays four oil paintings of aerial views of the Kansas River. In

each painting the sun sits low on the horizon while the river's wide expanse cuts through the geometric swaths and crisscrossing lines of farmland.

Jane Voorhees' enigmatic landscapes seem to depict a mood rather than a specific location. She paints sky and earth, or maybe water, at an ambiguous moment of the day resembling both dawn and dusk. In each of her 16 acrylic-on-paper paintings, the horizon line divides a flat, black expanse from the glowing oranges, pinks and blues of the sky.

Lawrence-based photographer Philip Heying takes pictures of local vegetation in different seasons. His close cropping flattens the intimately sized photographs into small fields of patterns and colors — branches, grasses and brush become repeating designs.

Jon Scott Anderson's "book of grass: grass #2" has a similar effect. In this large-scale photograph, the sharp, yellow horizontal lines of the blades of grass resemble hatching or expressionist mark-making found in abstract painting.

In this economy, mounting a landscape exhibition is a smart business move. More than a third of the artworks in this show have sold. "Surroundings" gives Kansas Citians a chance to make a real-estate investment in the form of local landscapes and landmarks filtered through the eyes and minds of artists.