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## Midwest Paint Group work on display at the Swope

By Steve Kash

People who like powerfully expressive, boldly colored, abstractly composed paintings using as their visual cornerstones figurative images like people, still-life images of fruit and bottles — even highly recognizable local building images such as Terre Haute's Indiana Theatre — will find a dazzling kaleidoscopic cornucopia of 50 powerful paintings by 10 of the Midwest's most noted professional artists at the Swope Art Museum's upcoming "Works from Perception: Recent Paintings from the Midwest Paint Group" display today through March 14.

Wabash Valley residents already are familiar with the work of one MPG member, Michael Neary, who has become a virtual icon of downtown Terre Haute's rebirth during the past few years by standing at his easel at many sites in the vicinity of the city's Arts Corridor trying to brush onto canvas the spirit of neighborhoods containing historic buildings as diverse as the Vigo County Courthouse, St. Benedict's and the Copper Bar.

"The Midwest Paint Group does work based on looking at the real world with our own eyes," said Neary.

"I try to stay close to the facts, kind of the Joe Friday approach." (Friday was a 1950s superstar detective on the popular TV series, "Dragnet."), Neary said. "For others in our group, objective reality is more a point of departure. I think we all have ideas about abstraction and use them to try to get at the essence of our perceptual experience."

Neary, who will exhibit large canvases of his recent downtown Terre Haute work at the Swope exhibit, said that he has matured as an artist since he began setting his easel up around downtown Terre Haute, painting the same scenes over and over at different times of the day and in different weather conditions (a technique known as plein-air painting that was made famous 100 years ago by French Impressionists).

"My midday scenes have a flatter feel because of the brighter light," said Neary. "As the sun moves, and its light shifts, I put my midday canvas back in the truck to work on it again the next day. Then I begin painting on an afternoon canvas I have already in progress. The lower positions of the late afternoon sun create more depth and more dramatic atmospheric effects. With diminishing light, buildings begin casting longer shadows."

"The more I look, the more I see. I had been working on two canvases by the railroad crossing on Wabash for a couple of weeks before noticing a small red cross just across the tracks. Having seen it, the cross became a crucial part of the picture — part of my story."

MPG formed 10 years ago in the Chicago-area home of Walter King as several early members of the group, including Neary, met to discuss their common cause — the abstraction in their art and its interplay with everyday figuration, which informs and directs their energy.

Nearly all MPG's members live in the Midwest and have had formal schooling in art. Six of the 10 have a connection with the Kansas City Art Institute. Some have ties to Indiana. Nearly all have won awards for their art and teach art at the university level.

In addition to Neary, MPG member Phil Hale, who divides his time between Wilmington, Ohio; and Colima de Tibas, Costa Rica, has made a name for himself in Terre Haute over the years by setting up his easel in the parking lot on South Ninth Street across from St. Benedict's Cathedral — as well as setting up along the banks of the Wabash River between the Dresser and Dreiser bridges.

According to art critic and New York painter Gabriel Laderman, the recipient of several grants by the National Endowment for the Arts and a prominent exponent of the figurative painting revival of the '50s and '60s, the MPG artists, unlike other American figurative painters, are not involved in ironic comments about art or life. They believe in the forms and motifs, which they deal with daily, and wish to give the observer the same intense, felt emotion that they experience in the process of making their paintings.

Swope Art Museum curator Lisa Petrulis said that the Swope is the first art museum to display simultaneously works by all of the members of the Midwest Paint Group. Each of the group's 10 members will show several paintings in the three upstairs gallery rooms the Swope is devoting to the show.

"Our museum has a history of displaying Regionalist paintings, such as original works in our collection by internationally famous Midwestern painters like Edward Hopper, Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton," said Petrulis. "The MPG show sits well with our mission."

One of the functions the MPG serves for its members is to enable them to share insights with one another.

"We all are fascinated with light," said Chicago MPG member Megan Williamson. "Every place in the world has its own light. The light character of the Midwest infuses our art."

"All of the artists in our group work from observation with the knowledge of abstraction. The concepts we've learned about art or the techniques are in service to the image we want to create when we paint a canvass."

Williamson said that when she starts working on a piece of art, she hopes that maybe her art will in some way unjangle the minds of people who come to view it, better enabling them to appreciate passing beauty they come across in their lives.

"My first level of satisfaction when I finish my work is to like the feel of what I have created," said Williamson. "I love getting a momentary sense that my paintbrush has the magic of an alchemist's wand transforming a raw substance into gold."

"One of my great moments as an artist came when a lady who had purchased a piece of my artwork told me afterwards that the piece now hangs in her kitchen and that every morning before she goes to work she finds herself studying the painting while drinking her cup of coffee. 'It's just like a good friend,' the woman told me. 'The painting helps get me to get ready for my day.'"

Perhaps before "Works from Perception ..." comes to its conclusion in March, area residents will find new lifelong friends at the Swope show.

For more information, visit [Midwest-Paint-Group.org](http://Midwest-Paint-Group.org).