Krause & Spellmann
scenes from a lost america
This cold winter
Moon spills the inhuman fire
Of jewels
Into my hands.

Dead riches, dead hands, the moon
Darks,
And I am lost in the beautiful white ruins
Of America.

from Having Lost My Sons,
I Confront the Wreckage of the Moon:
Christmas, 1960
by James Wright
IF YOU EVER GO to visit Jo Neace Krause or Charles Spellmann, you might think you're driving to the end of nowhere. Jo lives on 240 beautiful acres along a dirt road overlooking the Duck River in south central Tennessee (Warning! Do not listen to your GPS no matter what sweet and encouraging words she uses). Charles lives in a rambling former bed and breakfast seated above the backwaters of the White River in the Arkansas Delta, the least populated place in the American south. If you recall, in 2004 some folks claimed to see the Ivory-billed Woodpecker amid the White River’s vast swamps creating an international sensation, but it hasn’t been seen since.

Jo and Charles make paintings that are markedly different from the other’s work. However, we have chosen to present them together. Their paintings complement each other almost perfectly. Jo paints landscapes and portraits, particularly women’s portraits. Her subject matter is often dominated by her childhood experiences in Breathitt County, Kentucky during the final years of the Great Depression. There are scenes of people she knew, her mother, the childhood friend who became a “bag lady,” the girls smiling at a funeral. Looking at Jo’s paintings can be like hearing music being played at a distance. You may think that the tune is familiar, but the wind and the sounds of dusk create enough obfuscation to keep it a mystery. Charles, on the other hand, paints clear scenes of southern life. These are character studies of people around kitchen tables, in honky-tonks, amid conversations. Looking at Charles’ work you can feel like you’re intruding on a conversation that you’re not supposed to be a part of. It’s that moment when you walk into a room and everyone stops talking, that moment just before they look up at you.

People who live in cities think that everything important happens there, and this belief has become predominant as America has become increasingly urban and suburban over recent decades. It’s a view that has come to dominate our news and entertainment media. It wasn’t that long ago that more American’s lived in rural areas, but it seems that rural America has increasingly less place in our national conversation, even though millions of Americans still live in places like the hollers of eastern Kentucky, the ridges just beyond Centerville, Tennessee, or the low bluffs of the Arkansas Delta.

Like the poems of James Wright, the paintings of Jo Neace Krause and Charles Spellmann invite us to reconsider forgotten American times and places before they are gone for good. Just because that tune is drifting on the wind beyond our easy understanding, it doesn’t mean that we, all of us, should not pause to listen.

~ Matt Collinsworth
November, 2011
Keeping Up with Grandma, Charles Spellmann, 2009, acrylics, 24 x 18

Bird Watching, Jo Neace Krause, 2002, oils, 40 x 30, KFAC Permanent Collection
THE PAINTINGS of Jo Neace Krause and Charles Spellmann are contemplative. Without reference to personal visions, folk tradition, art history, or coded religious iconography, these two artists create works that inspire insights into aspects of the broader American experience that are otherwise largely obscured from view. Ironically, their work emerges within a society that responds most intently to the squeaky wheel of popular culture as it is served up to us through the modern mass media. These artists’ paintings lead us elsewhere. They ask us to slow down, to observe, to pay attention. They encourage us to explore the nuanced expressions of the real people we encounter in daily life.

Krause & Spellmann: Scenes from a Lost America is an exhibition that showcases two quite different bodies of work and includes over 50 paintings produced since 1998. Displaying the work of Jo Neace Krause alongside paintings by Charles Spellmann seemed an obvious choice. Museums and galleries frequently show the work of two or more artists together in an exhibition, but there should be a compelling reason to group those works together. The idea for this exhibition was intuitive, based on our familiarity with the artists and our appreciation for their work. But, gut feelings are not enough. Kentucky Folk Art Center focuses by design, overwhelmingly, on the work of self-taught artists from Kentucky but neither Krause nor Spellmann live here. What justifies showing these works together? Why does it make sense?

Certainly there are similarities between them. Both are college educated. They are both in their 70s and have been widowed. Both are self-taught and became artists later in life. Both have lived in a variety of different states, and Jo spent two years in England. Both focus heavily on the human figure in their work. Neither depends for their livelihood on the sale of their paintings, which allows a freedom of exploration through their art that is not really subject to the influence, tastes or preferences of the marketplace. And, for each of them, painting seems to have become integrated into their lives, as much a necessary routine as taking in the air that keeps their hearts pumping.
Jo Neace (Krause) was born in Kentucky, in Breathitt County in 1935. Her family left Kentucky in 1949 and relocated to Milford, Ohio, near Cincinnati. She remained there until she finished high school and left for college in Columbus, at Ohio State. Their move northward following World War II was part of a massive out-migration from Kentucky, especially from that eastern region of the state, for the better economic opportunity in the industrial Midwest.

At Ohio State, Jo Neace took a history class under John Thomas Krause, with whom she engaged in spirited, sometimes contentious debate. John married Jo in 1957. In 1959 he was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship, and they moved to England, living in Putney in west London. In 1962 they returned to Columbus and Ohio State. In 1964 John was hired by Rutgers University and they moved to East Brunswick, New Jersey, where they remained until he took a job at the State University of New York in Buffalo in 1968.

The Krauses had three boys, born 1959, 1967 and 1968. The second son, Thomas, was born with a heart defect and needed corrective surgery. Jo was enthusiastic about the move to Buffalo where a noted heart surgeon was also located. Thomas did have surgery but eventually died when he was three years old. John Krause died in 1976 at the age of 53. Widowed at 40, Jo returned with her two boys to live with her mother in Milford, Ohio, remaining there after Lilie Neace passed away in 1991.

In 1995 Jo purchased a former strip mine site of over 500 acres in northern West Virginia and made her home there. She sold that property in 2006 and moved to an isolated 240 acre farm overlooking the Duck River in Tennessee with her partner Robert Douglas Baker, a former national chess champion. Behind the farmhouse, across the gravel road, through a gate, and on top of the hill is a small studio building with windows on one side that look out at a pond and horses in the pasture. This is where she paints.
Charles Spellmann was born in 1938, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the first of three children. His father was a civil engineer, so the family moved around quite frequently following jobs that became available to him. When Charles was 12, his father died, and his mother moved the family to the town of Cuero, between San Antonio and the Gulf of Mexico, where they could be closer to members of her family. Graduating high school in Cuero, Charles attended Southwest University in Georgetown, Texas on a basketball scholarship.

Charles Spellmann married Ellen Ellis in 1959, and they had three sons and one daughter. With a BA in Sociology from Southwestern, Charles went on to the University of Texas in Austin. After completing an MA and PhD in Psychology, he was recruited by the Oklahoma State Childhood Guidance System and went to work in community mental health centers. In 1974 he switched jobs and moved to Arkansas. Ellen Spellmann was a pilot, owned a flying service, and decided to follow her dream as a stunt pilot. In 1976 she was flying a stunt plane, crashed and was killed. In 1977 Charles went into private practice and has remained there ever since. In 1998 he married Jane Cross, and they remained together until her death in 2008.

Charles continues to work full time in mental health, dealing mostly with court and custody evaluations, although some of his time is still taken up with school testing. He typically goes to work five days a week. An experienced professional, now in his early 70s, he says that he still enjoys the work. When asked how he maintains personal equilibrium, faced with all the accumulated distress in clients’ lives, his answer was simple and illuminating: “I try to think like an engineer. Something has gone wrong. I try to find out what I can do to make it right, to put lives back together again. The emphasis is on what needs to be done to make things better.”

These are the basic biographical backgrounds of each of these artists. But, a person’s biographical background is mostly a matter of detail, shaped by specific circumstances and family experiences, colored by where and when they lived, and by individual personality.
Most people do not make art, and biography tells us very little about why certain people find a voice for themselves in making art while others do not. For those who do set out to make art, engagement in the creative process and the opportunity to interpret the world in their own way can be rewarding on a personal level. However, not everyone who makes a mark (on paper, with paint, with wood, stone, plastic, metal, or discarded junk) is fortunate enough to find the physical means—the right media, techniques, and style of execution appropriate to their muse—or the elusive, broader metaphor that propels their art beyond self-exploration to connect in a broader world, to stir or jolt the imagination of other people.

After her mother died in 1991 and with her sons grown and out on their own, Jo Neace Krause was no longer obligated to anyone for the first time since she got married in 1957. It was during this period that she experienced a growing sense of freedom that she could not recall having felt since very early in her life. It was in the mid 1990s after she moved to West Virginia that Jo began both writing and painting.

**The Snake’s Delight**, Jo Neace Krause, 2011, oils on sheet metal, 27 x 41

**The Nude**, Jo Neace Krause, 2002, oils, 24 x 18, KFAC Permanent Collection
South Carolina Marsh, Jo Neace Krause, 2005, oils, 24 x 30, Private collection

Sublett, Kentucky, Jo Neace Krause, 2004, oils, 30 x 40

South Carolina Marsh, Jo Neace Krause, 2005, oils, 20 x 24

Ohio River and Oil Refinery, Jo Neace Krause, 2006, oils, 24 x 30
As a writer, Krause has earned accolades. A collection of short stories titled *The Last Game We Played* earned her the 2006 Hudson Prize and publication by Black Lawrence Press. On the liner notes, celebrated novelist Joyce Carol Oates describes *The Last Game We Played* as “strange and compelling.” Her stories, which are told with a lively wit and demonstrate a strong sense of character, appear not to reference her personal experience so much as they offer broader, offbeat insights into life in rural America.

By contrast, most of her paintings are clearly rooted in the exploration of early childhood memories. But, these are not genre paintings. There is an individual narrative that runs through each. Unlike sentimental Bluegrass songs that satisfy a nostalgic yearning for days gone by, each painting stands in its own right as a gritty recollection of a specific time and place, imbedded in the artist’s mind. Each painting becomes its own truth, regardless of whether or not Krause’s personal recollections tally with what was objective reality in Shoulderblade in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Some of her paintings were inspired by events that happened and people she encountered during her adult life, but there is an overwhelming emphasis in her work on the exploration of those early days. This includes specific people featured in portraits and the depiction of scenes such as *Write When You Find Work*, which references that out-migration of which her own family later became a part. This inevitably leads one to ask, “Why?” Is Jo Neace Krause striving, through her art, to recapture something remembered but out of reach? Was something essential or important to her buried or left behind in that distant early time of her life? Does reconnecting with her early life hold for her some redemptive, healing power?

When asked, she thought awhile before answering. She had begun her education at the only available school at the Dessie Scott Children’s Home, a nearby orphanage. But her family had left Shoulderblade and moved to the town of Hazard when she was just 6 years old. Less than 35 miles apart by road today (approximately 45 minutes), the two locations would have seemed to Jo like different planets, a difference that would be magnified as it was recalled from childhood memory. Hazard was a busy coal town with railroads, paved streets, and a bustle of dusty activity. Shoulderblade was an isolated crossroads. She remembers Shoulderblade as a small, close-knit community that enabled a carefree child to roam the hilly countryside in the company of friends, feeling totally secure.
People were poor in Jo’s memory of Shoulderblade, but it seemed not to matter (She was, of course, a child at the time). In the waning days of the Great Depression, the absence of money was a minor hindrance in a region where survival had been a skill learned out of necessity early in life. Jo’s father, Henry Neace, was a lighthearted man who survived off his military pension from World War I. Her mother, by contrast, was a serious-minded woman. Lilie Strong Neace had witnessed the murder of her own father, Brown Strong, a successful moonshiner who had been shot dead right in front of her. That traumatic experience may account for why Lilie always carried a pearl-handled revolver tucked inside her purse.2

As the site of her emergence as a conscious human being, Shoulderblade conjures up for her memories of wellbeing, of belonging, and of communal identity, feelings that were lost as her childhood and youth unfolded elsewhere. Her childhood also provided a strong sense of personal freedom that was overwhelmed with the move, and disappeared, not to re-emerge until she moved to West Virginia around the age of 60. Reflecting on how her childhood memories have influenced her art, Jo wrote:

I don’t consciously explore those memories any more than I consciously dream. Never did it occur to me why I have obsessed so deeply over my early life in Breathitt County. It was the sudden move away from the place, the voices, the relationships, the separation, being suddenly jerked away from “my place” which set up the strange longing.

...[O]thers who have lived in that region feel the same way about it. There is this site on the internet called The People of Little... meaning John Little’s Creek...which is where the Dessie Scott Children Home was located, and these people who log into it seem ecstatic with a collective memory.3

Shoulderblade, Jo Neace Krause, 2002, oils, 24 x 30, KFAC Permanent Collection

Portait of Lilie Strong, Jo Neace Krause, 2002, oils, 24 x 18

Portrait of Ann, Jo Neace Krause, 2004, oils, 20 x 16

Portrait of Ann, Jo Neace Krause, 2004, oils, 20 x 16
Woman with Dog, Jo Neace Krause, 2007, oils, 20 x 16

Woman in the Park, Jo Neace Krause, 2009, oils, 24 x 30

Blonde with Hat, Jo Neace Krause, 2010, oils, 24 x 18

Art Show, Jo Neace Krause, 1998, oils, 24 x 18

Annie Napier, Jo Neace Krause, 2000, oils, 20 x 16

The Countess, Jo Neace Krause, 2008, oils, 16 x 20

Art Show, Jo Neace Krause, 1998, oils, 24 x 18

Woman with Dog, Jo Neace Krause, 2007, oils, 20 x 16
Many of Krause’s subjects stem from those memories of early childhood life. Portraits of specific individuals, mostly women, and scenes depicting commonplace events such as *Write When You Find Work*, in which a woman is saying goodbye to a man who is about to leave on the L & N railroad in search of a job. Many of the characters portrayed in her paintings are depictions of people she knew during that time: a quirky neighbor who drank too much and chased children (*Aunt Elvie*), that woman’s daughter (*Annie Napier*) or a deceased friend laid out for viewing before her funeral, (*My Friend Merlene*). But knowing the identity of these figures is anecdotal. The work transcends the personal. As Krause states:

> I connect things, things that I see or have in my mind. Often, a painting starts out as one thing and then ends up as another. You might paint a bug, but it ends up as a turtle... Someone asks me, ‘Why do you paint? Why do you write?’ My answer is ‘Why do I yell out in my sleep? Why must I sleep? Dream! Wake up!’ I think art comes out of a combination of love, fear, loneliness and, in my own case, the courage to be idle."}

![Aunt Elvie](image1)

*Aunt Elvie*, Jo Neace Krause, 2011, oils, 18 x 14

![My Friend Merlene](image2)

*My Friend Merlene*, Jo Neace Krause, 2011, oils, 30 x 40
Charles Spellmann recalls that from an early age he always liked to draw, but there were no art classes in the schools he attended in Texas in the 1940s and 50s. Someone did give him paints and brushes when he graduated high school, and he maintained an interest in art over the next 30 years. He painted only intermittently until he was in his late 40s, when he began to paint with regularity. Fortunately, his wife Jane encouraged him, making it easier for him to set aside time. This would have been in the mid- to late-1980s, and his fascination with art took a firm hold. Today, despite still working full days as a psychologist, he typically spends time in his home studio later in the day and most often on weekends.

Since Charles Spellmann has observed and studied human behavior all of his adult life and worked to find solutions to other people’s problems, it is natural to wonder whether his work as an artist has been at least in some way influenced by what he has seen, and learned in his professional life.

In a Minute, Charles Spellmann, 1997, acrylics, 35 x 24

The Arrival, Charles Spellmann, 2010, acrylics, 20 x16
As a psychologist, he said, people tell him a lot of very private things. This offers special insights that likely color his choice of subject matter. It is also a very interesting to him, enhancing his enjoyment as an artist. As to how he actually embarks on a painting, he rarely plans, preferring instead for the subject to emerge as he works.

Almost all of Charles Spellmann’s paintings include at least one human figure. The works for this exhibition were not consciously selected to illustrate this, but people and the interactions between them are at the center of Spellmann’s work. Only one of his paintings in the exhibition has no human figure in it. Good Light depicts a high-ceilinged room with a door and a tall window on the background wall. In front of the window two empty chairs face each across a bare table. While we may assume that this painting is set in a private home, we could as easily be looking in on a room where two people would meet for an interview or discussion in a workplace. The table and chairs define it as a human space, and the emptiness of the chairs only reinforces the human context.
Spellmann’s paintings more typically capture moments in the lives of ordinary people. They might be in a honky-tonk, dancing and groping, staring absently, or engaged in animated discussion as people do in bars all over America. They might be leaning over the engine compartment of a car with an open hood or standing in line on the sidewalk (Linewaiters), though there is no indication what they might be waiting for. He sees them in church (Rock of Ages and Hallelujah), looking expectantly through a screen door (The Arrival) or over a child’s shoulder (In a Minute), or caught midway in discussions that we can only speculate about (Conflict and Plenty). In 2008 Spellmann wrote:

There are two kinds of people in the world. There are those who believe the world is neatly divided into the dichotomies of light and dark, sinner and saint, friend and enemy, righteous and evil. And there are those who have come to believe that our grasp of the world is limited and that life is a great undulating mystery, which we chase with grasping hands, more often than not gaining only partial answers to the ultimate questions. We want a road map with all the helpful details, but get only hints.”
Rosie, Charles Spellmann, 2010, acrylics, 24 x 24

Mixed Feelings, Charles Spellmann, 2010, acrylics, 20 x 24

Getting to Know You, Charles Spellmann, 2010, acrylics, 16 x 28, Private collection
Part of Spellmann’s skill as an artist lies in his ability to capture the ambiguity of life’s experience in these intimate moments but leave them unresolved. Something is happening or about to take place, but we are left to wonder what it is, left individually to fill in the blank, over and again, perhaps with a different resolution each time we revisit one of these paintings. The facial expressions and physical posture of his characters further reinforce the uncertainty of casual observation.

Swingers, Charles Spellmann, 2010, acrylics, 24 x 24, Private collection

Fair Breeze, Charles Spellmann, 2011, acrylics, 24 x 24
Barn Dance, Charles Spellmann, 2005, acrylics, 36 x 48

Garage Guys, Charles Spellmann, 2008, acrylics, 18 x 24, Private collection

Camo Guys, Charles Spellmann, 2009, acrylics, 16 x 20

Nanny, Charles Spellmann, 2009, acrylics, 36 x 48

Garage Guys, Charles Spellmann, 2008, acrylics, 18 x 24, Private collection
The paintings of Charles Spellmann and Jo Neace Krause offer us alternative views of America, of life in small towns or on isolated farms. These people are neither more wholesome nor more righteous than their urban counterparts. This is not a competition. But, as our technology driven lives become ever more distanced from that other world, we should not forget that there are still about 50 million Americans who live there. They get married and have children and sometimes get divorced. They go to church, go to bars, fix cars, love, hate, yearn, take pride in success, and mourn loss like people everywhere. Some of them grow the food we eat. But, the lives of these people are equally as complex as the lives of Americans living in the ever expanding mainstream. Just different.

Understanding begins with a recognition that there are many different ways of living in America. Rural and small town residents are kept well informed about life in mainstream America by way of television and other mass media; however, the flow of information tends to move in only one direction. Less understood is that the technological revolution has come to dominate almost all aspects of life in America today. Anyone who has doubts about this should see how corn, potatoes or soybeans are now grown or how eggs are produced in vast factory farms before they arrive clean and packaged in the supermarket.

It is a fallacy to think that more is necessarily better. There is something about the outwardly less cluttered life of rural America that lays bare the experience and emotions lived out there, stripped down and raw, unobscured by the inevitable social, economic or logistical muddle of urban or suburban living. This is what we find in the work of Spellmann and Krause: two very different sets of observations on the human condition shaped by the parallel but very different life experiences of the artists. The art speaks for itself with infinitely more effect than mere written work could summon. Look to these paintings for human frailty, resilience, compassion, and fresh air.

~ Adrian Sauin
November, 2011
The preceding biographical information was compiled during telephone interviews with the artists conducted on November 4, 2011 and through exchanges of e-mail to clarify details following the interviews.

This was not unusual in rural America at the time, most everyone carried guns, and guns and shooting were a part of everyday life. But it was especially true of Breathitt County where a series of conflicts of the late 19th century unleashed five decades of bloody local confrontation. Returning after the Civil War, in 1865, Jo’s great-great grandfather, Captain Bill Strong (formerly of the Union Army) discovered that African-Americans were still being held as slaves in his native Breathitt County. Strong challenged slave owners, setting in motion the first of those violent conflicts. The violence that shook the county during that time resulted in the nickname “Bloody Breathitt”.

E-mail from Jo Neace Krause to Adrian Swain, November 5, 2011.

Telephone interview, November 4, 2011.

E-mail from Jo Neace Krause to Adrian Swain, September 24, 2011.

Excerpt from Artist’s Statement written by Charles Spellmann, May 2008, relating to his painting Rock of Ages, featured in Myth & Legend, a KFAC exhibition June thru September, 2008.

Linewaiters, Charles Spellmann, 1996, acrylics, 11 x 14