

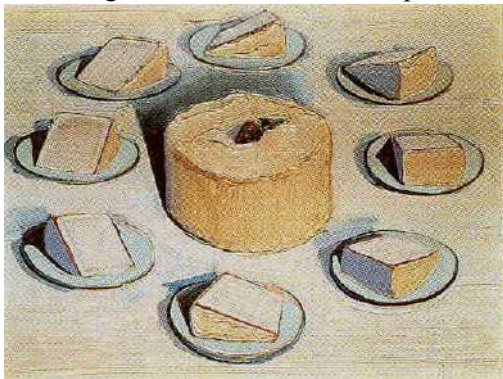
Wayne's World

From tasty still lifes to breathlessly pitched landscapes, Wayne Thiebaud's paintings body forth a realm of inexhaustible visual delight. A comprehensive retrospective followed the half-century career of this durable figure of American painting.

**BY EDWARD LEFFINGWELL, *Art in America*,
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Wayne Thiebaud started a lifelong romance with paint in the 1950s, revitalizing representational subject matter with a bold palette and the bravura brushwork of the Abstract Expressionists he most admired. The few paintings of that decade included in the Whitney Museum's hanging of a major retrospective organized by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco have much gesture and little of the raking light and deep shadow that would soon follow in Thiebaud's work. Cluttered and exuberant in their abstraction, these early paintings—a David Park-like beach scene, displays of cigar boxes and ribbons, an early pinball machine—scarcely propose the pared-down, nearly sculptural leap in technique he was poised to make.

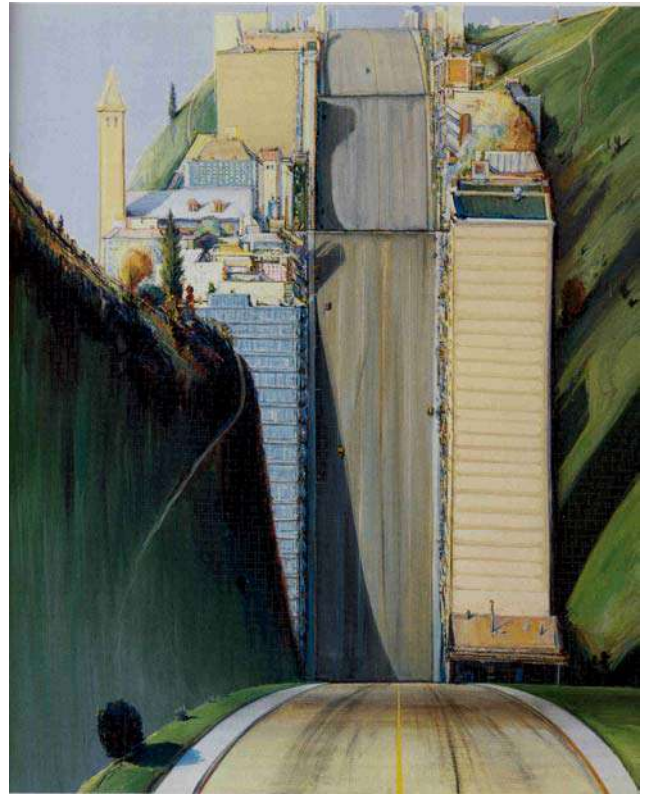
Thiebaud was born in Arizona in 1920 and has spent most of his life in California. Attracted to commercial art and illustration while still in high school, he apprenticed at the Walt Disney studios one summer and studied at an LA trade school the next. Odd jobs followed, as did graphic design and film projects for the Army, and postwar stints of freelancing in LA and New York. Teaching and commercial work supplemented his income as Thiebaud began to paint in earnest during the late 1940s. With a few exhibitions to his credit, he returned to New York in 1956. Among the artists and critics he met at the Cedar Bar and Eighth Street Club were Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Barnett Newman, Philip Pearlstein, Wolf Kahn, Harold Rosenberg and Thomas Hess.



Around the Cake, 1962, oil on canvas, 22 by 28 inches. Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence.

walls and floor.

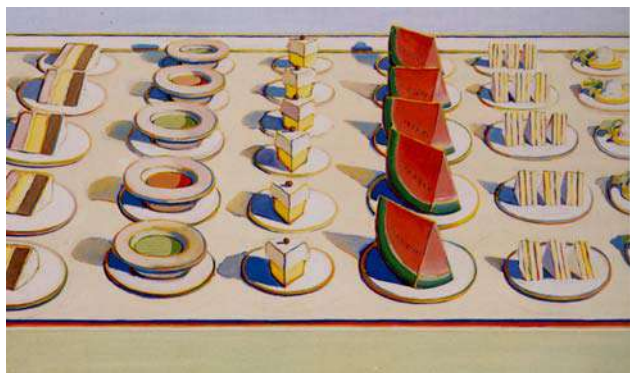
Thiebaud's depictions are believable in ways that have nothing whatever to do with the camera's truth. A shadow from a chair or a wheel of cheese is rendered in the dark blues and purples associated with the reductive conventions of winter scenes. Thiebaud has confronted baked goods with a singularity of purpose that recalls the seriality of Giorgio Morandi, and with an intense focus on the actual and tactile that evokes Claes Oldenburg's



Park Place, 1993, oil on canvas, 60 x 54 inches, Collection Steven and Mary Read.

celebration of materiality (both in Oldenburg's works and in his 1961 manifesto in which he declares, "I am for the art of crayons and weak gray pencil-lead, and grainy wash and sticky oil paint").

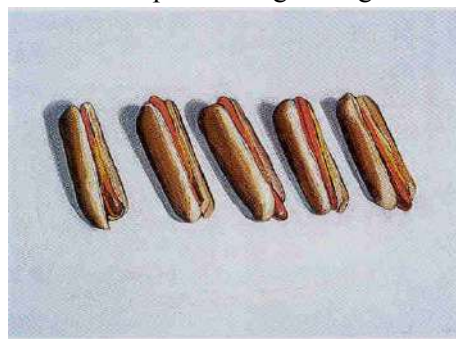
Thiebaud set out to recover the expressive possibilities of figurative art, which had been obscured by the dominance of Abstract Expressionism.



Lunch Table, 1964

mechanical techniques and ironic cool. But in 1992, Thiebaud was once again claimed for the vanguard of Pop, this time via the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art's revisionist exhibition "Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955-62," in which curators Paul Schimmel and Donna De Salvo isolated and investigated a prelapsarian moment, an edenic era of proto-Pop possibilities. The recent retrospective was clearly divided into three sections by subject matter—still lifes, figures or portraits, and cityscapes and landscapes—though a degree of overlap preempted too strict an allegiance to category.

The rank and file of *Five Hot Dogs* (1961) developed from Thiebaud's first ventures into a more celebratory still life and anticipate later, related formal excursions such as *Five Hammers* (1972). Like sunbathers by a pool, the frankfurters sit firmly but lightly on a white expanse of ground, each one edged by a shadow and marked by a perfect ribbon of mustard worthy of a vendor's expert touch. At the same time Thiebaud adopted grids plotted out like suburban tracts for the representation of a variety of pies and cakes, silent phalanxes of appetite and desire, imbued with the palpable silence of Hopper. The fields are lavishly painted in bold strokes, sufficient to establish a ground on which the objects seem to both rest and rise, at the pure pleasure of the painting. As though to accentuate the feat of legerdemain—paint that physically approximates the object or condition it is intended to represent—the title figures of *Cakes* (1963) are set on spikelike stands, thrust forward in supernumerary display yet each accorded a singular and individual presence.



Five Hot Dogs (1961) oil on canvas, 18 by 24 inches. Private collection.



Rabbit (1966) pastel on paper, 15 by 20 inches. Collection Lindy Bergman.

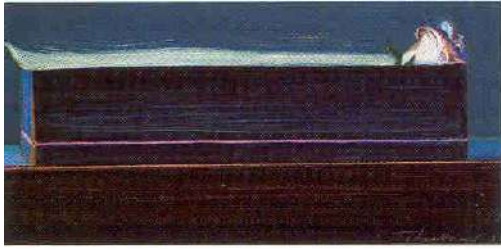
Thiebaud's ink drawings and pastels are rewarding works, and among the most amusing in the show. The assured pastel *Rabbit* (1966) recalls the hare of Albrecht Durer in its fidelity to nature. Several other graphic works relate to each other in the manner of the panels of a cartoon. The charcoal drawing *Two Bow Ties* (1972) is as much about the objects of its title as it is about the charged space between them. Shadows run from the ties, one in the

upper right hand corner and the other in the lower left, to set the objects forward from an



Two Bow Ties, 1972, charcoal on paper, 20 ½ by 16 inches. John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco.

unseen ground, and across this small expanse they seem to flirt with or confront each other in their gendered sameness. Comical, the drawing is fraught with the tension of role playing and posturing. Clarifying the matter, the New York installation featured, not far away, *Bow Tie, Pick and Shoe* (1972), in which a single bow tie is separated, by an ice pick, from a woman's high-heeled shoe below. The weapon seems to belong to neither, but lies between them, leaving unresolved what is, for Thiebaud, a narrative of social circumstance.



Boxed Rose, 1984, oil on wood, 8 ½ by 16 in. Thiebaud Family Collection.



The figure paintings included in the survey escalate from the small-scale to the monumental; related preparatory sketches were occasionally provided in other galleries. Thiebaud's study of a single white rose reclining in an old-fashioned florist's box hints at a reference to David's *Death of Marat*, which was made explicit later in the show with the appearance of his minimal *Woman in Tub* (1965). Gaze averted, *Girl in White Boots* (1965) is Courreges modern, down to the Sassoon bob. She is treated in the same pared-down manner with which the painter sets forth a pastry with only its own shadow for context. Among the many portraits, *Portrait of Sterling Holloway* (1965) (left) strongly asserts the subject's tousled singularity. The actor and collector's familiar face is turned to the viewer as to a camera's lens. His distinguishing cartoon voice (Mr. Stork in Disney's 1941 feature *Dumbo* marked his animation debut) is silent in Thiebaud's quiet world.



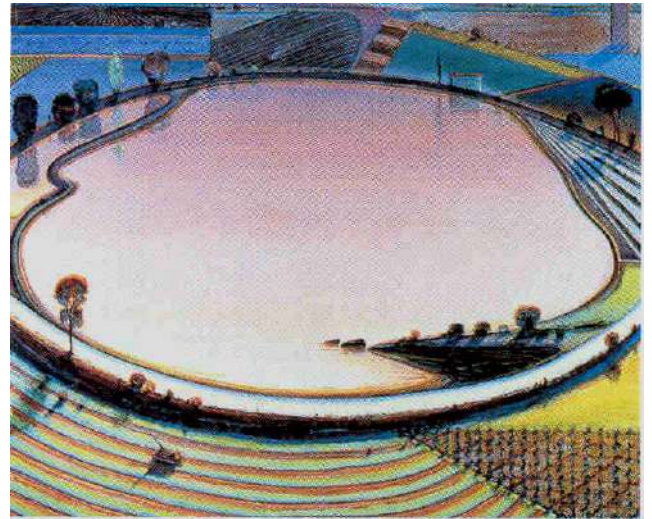
Girl in White Boots, 1965, oil on canvas, 72 by 60 inches. Collection Blair Sabot. Photo courtesy Lawrence Markey Gallery, New York.

Thiebaud has devoted much attention to landscape since his move to San Francisco in 1972, and this exhibition contained a generous share. For those most comfortable with his still lifes and intimidated by the objectification he extends to portraiture, Thiebaud's landscapes and cityscapes challenge and invite. An increasing emphasis on geometric form at times eclipses the subject altogether with the thrust of extreme diagonals and a giddy, vertiginous presentation of space. As in Chinese landscape painting, there is little attention to the conventions of perspective, although the smaller landscapes have a plein-air atmosphere to them, in some cases enhanced by the pastel medium.



Left: *Diagonal Ridge*, 1968, acrylic on canvas, 77 ¾ x 84 inches. Private collection.

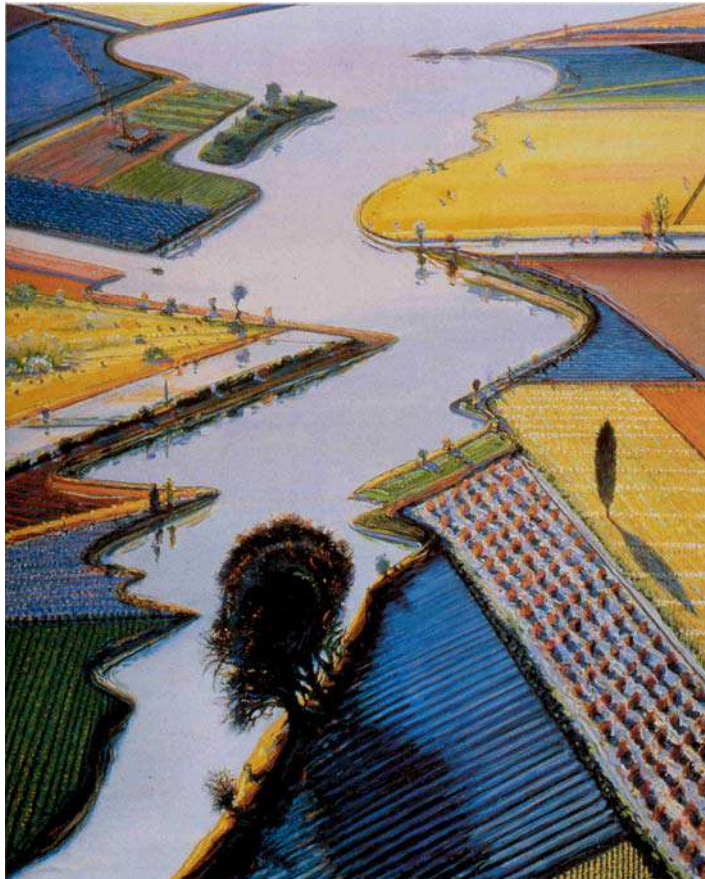
Right: *Reservoir*, 1999, oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Gary M. Summers.



An installation of small paintings on wood and wooden boxes seemed both desirable and twee [Russell note: “twee” = intentionally clever, dainty, cute, sweet]. The inclusion of the diminutive landscapes of the 1990s, though



they are refreshed in palette, signaled the nature of the exhibition's generosity to a fault. A more thoughtful, less linear conclusion might have invited a last look at a deceptively modest work in gouache and charcoal on paper, *Art Studio* (1982-91) (left). The raking light of the city enters from a rear window and reaches the surface of a foreground table, where there sits a clear glass jar containing a single flower poised to secure the pictorial center. Just beyond the blossom, one figure bends over a table, perhaps working on a lithograph stone, and another is visible off in shadow to the right. The scene is a tranquil, loving representation of those things that have guided and given pleasure to Thiebaud in a lifetime of work as an artist and teacher.



Above: *Art Studio*, 1982-91, gouache and charcoal on paper, 20 by 27 ½ inches. Thiebaud Family Collection.

Right: *River and Farms*, 1996, oil on canvas, 60 48 inches. Collection Nan Tucker McEvoy.

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