

Wayne Thiebaud: The Last Interview Jason Edward Kaufman

The following interview with Wayne Thiebaud was conducted via telephone on March 4, 2021. The artist was more than one hundred years old and the Covid pandemic was rampant. He informed me that he would be getting his second vaccine the next day, but he was still painting and venturing out of his house. I reached him at his studio in midtown Sacramento.

I have spoken with many contemporary artists, but I was aware that Thiebaud was, moreover, a historical figure. His more than seven-decade-long career extended from the heyday of Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art, Minimalism, Conceptualism, and on through the pluralistic flurry of trends and revivals that arose in the years approaching the millennium and persists into the twenty-first century. It seemed necessary to inquire about his work's relationship to that of his contemporaries, and to ask about earlier masters he admired. I was especially curious about his ideas concerning representation and abstraction and interested in the compositional strategies and distinctive use of color that mark his still lifes, figure paintings, and landscapes. Moreover, I wanted to understand the principles that guided his vocation, the place of humor in his art, the impact of Mormonism on his upbringing, his beliefs about the role of art in

society, and even his philosophy about life itself.

I feared that such an ambitious agenda would exhaust a centenarian, but it became immediately evident that age for Thiebaud was not an impediment to cogent and nuanced thought. Throughout our ninety-minute conversation, Thiebaud responded with intellectual acuity and wit, speaking with calm authority in the measured cadence of a lifelong teacher and master artist who had thought deeply about his craft and his place in art history. Our comprehensive interview would prove to be his last, for Thiebaud passed away the following Christmas.

Jason Edward Kaufman
New York City, October 2022

Jason Edward Kaufman

How does one master the craft of painting, the basics of looking and recording?

Wayne Thiebaud

Yes, the formal values and the basic tools. Since I didn't go to art school—I would have loved to have done so—I had a lot of wonderful people who helped me, and they gave me a critical premise for how you do things properly to achieve good effects. I owe a great debt to sign painters and graphic artists, and women fashion designers, graphic designers generally, and commercial art certainly.¹

JK

That sort of technical training seems to be less and less obligatory to enter the field as a fine artist these days.

WT

Yes, to our peril.

JK

Early in your career you painted with a loose touch related to Abstract Expressionism. But after your 1956–57 sabbatical in New York, where you met Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, and other established artists, you returned to California and began making straightforward still lifes, less Abstract Expressionist and more representational. Did de Kooning really offer you advice that led to the change? Where did you speak with him?

Portions of the present interview were previously published as "As American as Pie," *Luxury Magazine* (Spring/Summer 2021), pp. 190–201.

1
Thiebaud learned graphic clarity from the advertising tradespersons, sign painters, and cartoonists with whom he worked. Like many kids of his generation, Thiebaud loved "the funnies" and dreamed of being a cartoonist. As a teenager he briefly apprenticed as an animator for The Walt Disney Studios and took classes in commercial art at a trade school in Los Angeles. He interrupted his junior college studies to serve in the Army Air Forces (1942–45), where he hoped to be a pilot, but his artistic talent led to his designing posters and drawing cartoons for the newspaper of his base near Sacramento. After World War II, newly married, he tried unsuccessfully to sell his cartoons to New York magazines, then worked several years in advertising at Universal-International Pictures and the Rexall Drug Company, where an erudite colleague urged him to think of himself as an artist.

2

Thiebaud resigned from advertising in 1949 to pursue a teaching degree at San José State College (now San José State University), California, on the GI Bill and transferred to Sacramento State College (now California State University) in Sacramento, where he completed a B.A. and M.A. (1952) in art history and education. In graduate school he began an eight-year stint teaching art history, film, and television production at Sacramento Junior College (now Sacramento City College). His distinguished teaching career would include thirty-one years in the art department at the University of California, Davis, where he subsequently remained professor emeritus until his death.



1944
Wayne Thiebaud working on *Aleck* cartoons, Mather Field, California



1944
Sergeant Wayne Thiebaud painting on a B-29 aircraft at Mather Field, California

WT

In his Tenth Street studio. I went because another instructor from Sacramento [Paul Beckman] and I had been taking students on holiday field trips to artists' studios and museums in New York.² I asked de Kooning if he would let us come to his studio. I knew he didn't want to have anything to do with it, but he was a kind of saint in terms of approachability, just kind and good to every painter. So, I had some meetings with de Kooning by myself at his studio.

He was working on his own art and I watched him. At one point, he made me tea, and we were sitting and talking. Suddenly he jumped up and tore off a piece of newspaper, maybe a comic-strip page. And he looked at the painting, then he pressed this big piece of newspaper onto the upper righthand corner and flattened it out. He came back and sat down. That gave me a lesson on the amazing power of the plane in painting—the invention of collage that establishes planimetric picture-plane power—at which he was so good.

JK

And he gave you some advice?

WT

He was forthcoming in the following way: he said that he thought I was a pretty good painter, but that my work lacked any kind of focus in a way that

was important. He said, like so many young painters, you're focusing on what I call "the signs of art." In other words, someone suddenly becomes famous, and everybody looks at what the signs of that particular painter are—brushstrokes, drips, whatever. So, you think, maybe that's what I should get into my work. He said, that's not the way to go about it. "Why are you painting anyway?" That was a question that stopped me. I just said, "Well, I love doing it." He said, that's not enough. He said, you have to find something you really know something about and that you are really interested in, and just do that. Don't spend so much time looking at what you think will make you successful.

That was a rude series of thoughts I had not even considered. I was just going along, trying anything that might work. And that's when I came back to Sacramento and sat down and thought about what he said. I said to myself, well, I've never been to art school. I know a little bit about art history. What has my life been? I grew up a Mormon boy in America. I worked in restaurants and helped cook hamburgers, washed dishes, was a busboy. What is that world? Is there anything in that world? So, I said, I'm going to just start as directly as I can. And I took the canvas and made some ovals, thinking about Cézanne—the cube, the

cone, and the sphere—and put some triangles over them and thought, well, that maybe could represent a pie on a plate. I had seen them laid out in restaurants and I was always kind of interested in the way in which they formed these nice patterns. I said, alright, I'll go ahead with this and I'll make them into pies. I was really enjoying myself . . . and as I finished, I looked at it, and said, my God, I just painted a bunch of pies. That's going to be the end of me as a serious painter.

But I just could not leave it alone. It was so entrancing. I painted another one of a different kind of pies, and I made some little cakes, and I said, well, I'm out of the art world and in a way, good riddance. Because I had also experienced in New York how desperate all of us young painters were to get our paintings *into* the art world. I've got a teaching job so I'm okay. These [paintings] certainly don't belong in the art world, so I'm really kind of back to commercial art. I just enjoy doing them and that's what I'm doing. I'd painted some gum-ball machines very early on, all tricked up with silver paint like Jackson Pollock. Again, all the signs of art. I decided I'll just paint a damned gum-ball machine and that's the way it's going to happen. I can't take a lot of credit for any intellectual insight into it. There were lots of accidents.



n.d.

Wayne Thiebaud (center) illustrating posters for the US Army Air Forces



1961

Thiebaud teaching an evening class at Sacramento Junior College



ca. 1961

Thiebaud (back row, 2nd from right) with the Sacramento State College tennis team

3

Thiebaud's primary dealer was Allan Stone from 1962 until the dealer's death, in 2006. More recently, his work has been represented by the Paul Thiebaud Gallery, founded by the artist's late son in San Francisco, and the Acquavella Galleries in New York and Palm Beach.

4

Thiebaud never considered himself part of the Pop Art movement, but his realistic paintings of sweets, sandwiches, clothing, cosmetics, and other humble items coincided with Warhol, Lichtenstein, and others depicting mass-produced products from Campbell's soup cans to Mickey Mouse. Their work was critical of consumerism, but Thiebaud's celebrated the abundant pleasures of postwar American middle-class life.

JK

Your food still lifes turned out to be a great success when you showed them in 1962 at the Allan Stone Gallery in New York.³ They sold out, and museums including the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired works. That same year, you were included in two seminal exhibitions that consolidated the Pop Art phenomenon: *New Realists* at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York and *New Painting of Common Objects* at the Pasadena Art Museum, and you were given a solo show at the de Young Museum in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park.⁴ You were in your early forties and had received favorable reviews in art periodicals as well as *The New York Times*, *Time* magazine, and *Newsweek*. But then your focus shifted to figure painting. Whether working with a sitter or from your imagination, you seemed to treat figures much as you treated still life objects. They are typically seen in isolation with no dramatic action and no clues about their state of mind. What were you trying to achieve in painting figures?

WT

It is the most difficult subject matter of all, in my opinion. I tried to paint some figures from memory and ran smack up against my limitation of awareness of anatomy and of the conditions that make figure painting

work. So, I went to work and did academic drawings weekly for about seven and a half years. I wanted to make a decent figure painting, in proportion and space, so that it looks like almost a piece of sculpture existing in a little fictive three-dimensional world. But, also not to have any kind of expression, to be expressionless, not to denote any narrative—just to be presented as straightforwardly unencumbered as possible, as if you're sitting looking at someone across from you. You don't know them, they don't know you, you don't know what they're doing. You look at their clothing, you look at their shoes, they might have some type of dress, and you try and present that as clearly as possible, with a cast shadow.

JK

Do you think that approach corresponds with your personal sense of your place in society or your relation to other people?

WT

You know the work of August Sander? I admire his photographs because they're just plain presentations of a German cook, a German school-teacher, a butcher: this is some guy in his ordinary jacket and pants and shoes, or someone sitting in a chair with his back to you. That's what my paintings were. I'd have people come, usually friends, and ask them to take

a stance, turn around, sit down, stand up, sit down and read, until I finally get at a position that I would like [in order] to, as my wife described it, get them sort of frozen in time.

JK

Sander (1876–1964) was attempting to catalogue the various types of people in contemporary German society in the early twentieth century. Thomas Eakins's (1844–1916) portraits form a de facto survey of the citizens of Philadelphia. Are you trying to create a catalogue of American people of the 1960s and 1970s?

WT

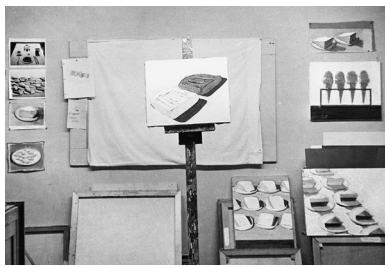
No. They are just different kinds of figure painting.

You know, when Eakins was studying in Paris—you may know this story—he wrote back to his father, saying, I've looked at Rubens paintings and I realize why I hate him so much. The damned guy, if he wants to paint something as simple as a man winding up his watch, he will only paint Hercules who can do it.

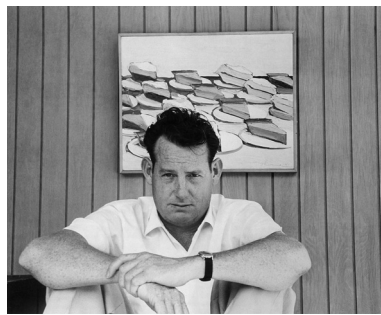
JK

After buying a house in San Francisco in 1972, you began an inventive series of cityscapes that exaggerate the vertiginous topography. Then in the mid-1990s you turned your focus to the rural landscape of the Sacramento River Delta. Those large canvases portray imagined vistas often with no

In the San Francisco cityscapes, streets rise vertically, parallel with the picture plane, dotted with cartoonish cars and flanked by buildings drawn in perspective that throw shadows across the pavement. The resulting distortion of space and height creates a roller coaster effect that conveys the chaos and instability of urban life. Related pictures of overlapping freeways thronged with traffic embody the density of California's networks. In the Sacramento River Delta pictures, cultivated fields are represented by intensely colored patterns that form a patchwork intersected by roads and reflective bodies of water punctuated by details such as trees and cattle. These abstract visions, and a series of mountain pictures Thiebaud began in the early 2000s, portray the American West as a Magic-Realist terrain of mesas, buttes, and solid clouds that calls to mind the setting of George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* comic strip and drew upon Thiebaud's memories of his family's ranch in Utah and his grandfather's California farm, where he spent time in his youth.



1961
Thiebaud's studio on Fifth Avenue in Sacramento



1961
Thiebaud at his house in Sacramento



1962
Thiebaud painting *Delicatessen Counter* (1962)

horizon or sky, as if from an aerial perspective and from more than one viewpoint.⁵ The San Francisco pictures and the Sacramento River Delta landscapes play with space in ways that are very different from the more straightforward still lifes and figures. Do you think that the landscapes marked a fundamental change in your work?

WT

I hope so. I believe very much in changing. I paint people, places, and things, which gives me the option of painting anything. I would like to believe I could paint anything, any day, any time, any way in which I would like to do. That's my particular approach. It's not a very good career move according to many of my fellow painters, but for me, that's the challenge and that's the charge, that's the joy and the agony. I've never required being successful. That's why I went into teaching—probably for all the wrong reasons—just to support my family. But it proved to be an enormous, wonderful challenge and I never did stop. And I still teach even today.

JK

Can you talk about color in your work?

WT

For my painting students, the palette has two yellows, a warm and a cool, two reds, two blues, and then black

and white, or tertiary colors of some measure. It's a Fauve-type palette, and it gives you the basis of being able to make not just any color, but the power of the color. That's the secret of painting: getting the value right. Then you can use the color in extraordinary ways. If the value is not right, then the painting will fall apart. So, it's a great lesson in so many ways. And that's the palette that I continue to use. I always try to get some of each color in as many different areas of the picture as I can, so there is a kind of aura, almost like sunshine or the rainbow effect.

JK

In your landscapes and still lifes the forms are edged in various colors that create the aura effect that you've called "halation." You juxtapose bands of complimentary colors—vibrant green, orange, blue, or red—that optically vibrate, most notably when set against the single-color backgrounds of your still lifes. The chromatic adjacencies along the outlines give objects an electric halo, a kind of quivering presence. It reminds me of the effect that occurs if you stare at something until it becomes fixed on your retina, then shift your gaze and look at the object from a slightly different angle. The shift results in a dislocation because the afterimage of the initial gaze is now superimposed on the new

view of the object, making the object appear unstable. That effect makes us think about the uncanny objecthood of the thing we are perceiving. Was that an effect that you devised deliberately, or did it just happen when you were outlining elements of your compositions?

WT

It happened that way. The big advantage is a white background because if you take anything out in the sunshine and put it on a white surface you get very clearly those auras and those vibrating halations. It comes with the fact that we're seeing [with our binocular vision] two views that are never quite coordinated. That makes a quiver.

Van Gogh painted under strong incandescent lights or out in the sunshine, and I think his [color juxtapositions] are of that nature. A beautiful orange line around one shoulder and a cadmium light blue around the other shoulder—it's based on that scientific set of principles.

JK

You were talking about de Kooning, who was emphatically an abstract artist, very much interested in touch and gesture more than realism or representation.

WT

I totally love the fact that he was academically trained for six solid years.



1962

Professor Paul Beckman from the art department at Sacramento State College visiting Wayne Thiebaud in Thiebaud's studio, Sacramento



1962

Thiebaud at his first exhibition in New York, presented at the Allan Stone Gallery

6

Thiebaud appears to be referring to a purported encounter in which Dalí pointed out to de Kooning the similarity of enlarged details of a Velázquez painting to Abstract Expressionist brushwork.

7

Thiebaud is likely referring here to the portrait *Infanta Margarita in a Pink Gown* (1654, Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Vienna).

8

The sensuality of Thiebaud's paint derived from the gestural brushwork of Old Masters and Abstract Expressionists. He thickly applied oil pigments to underscore their materiality and to replicate the things they represent—creamy white paint spread like buttercream frosting or daubed into puffs of meringue, or dense crimson paint that doubles as greasy lipstick.

JK

Yes, he was a talented draftsman. It goes back to what we were saying earlier about the importance of technical training.

WT

There's a wonderful insight. When they asked Salvador Dalí how he liked de Kooning, his answer was, well, it's all right if you like blown-up details of Velázquez's paintings.⁶ If you look at the *Infanta*,⁷ magnifying it, you'll see that it looks very much like de Kooning's brushstrokes.

JK

Fragonard's brushwork also can resemble de Kooning's.⁸ But I want to ask about the way you approach representation. Rather than represent every minute detail of a motif, you seem to try to get the essential contours and tonal changes. That reductive approach can tend toward abstraction, and if you look at details of some of your works, they begin to resemble the abstraction of the 1960s. In some cases, you even seem to include miniature Minimalist or hard-edge compositions. For example, in the upright panels of the *Four Pinball Machines* cat. p. 14, one of them looks like a Frank Stella and another one looks maybe like a Kenneth Noland or Jasper Johns target. Another one is a grid like Sol LeWitt. In the *Cupcake Window* painting cat. p. 121, the window above is a

colored-edged rectangle that looks like a Jo Baer painting. Were you deliberately quoting these contemporary modes of abstraction in your realist pictures, or was it simply the manner in which you were working?

WT

I'm sure it's a combination. I admire abstract painting very much, and I'm basically always convinced that my work is abstract. Brushstrokes are simply shorthand notations, like taking shorthand of writing. You learn to get what you hope will essentially denote something rather than rendering it. When there is too much [detail] that kind of rendering leads to a kind of taxidermy, a kind of death. It's like you're an accountant rather than a shorthand taker. There are wonderful combinations—sometimes unconscious, often accidental—that go into mixing and matching.

It is one of the most extraordinary miraculous things that we have these wonderful alternate painting worlds by Van Gogh and Rembrandt and on and on and on. They're their own little painted worlds. We wouldn't have had the worlds of Van Gogh without that extraordinary unique set of organized paintings that come from his taking from [Adolphe] Monticelli, French tapestries, and so on. Those influences are in there, but it still comes out Van Gogh.

JK

You've talked about yourself as a kind of "thief" of art history. I see relationships between your works and Manet, Matisse, Morandi, Hopper, Walt Kuhn, Richard Diebenkorn, Saul Steinberg, and many others.

WT

It's kind of unlimited. That's why I kept teaching. Having to teach art history, aesthetics, criticism became my education, since I had not had any. It was a great challenge to try to catch up on some deeper and more useful educational potential, coming into the world of ideas, poetry and great literature, and music, and so on. That's the code of honor, so to speak, about trying to make yourself an artist of some kind. That's one of the most difficult things to do, to try to find your own voice, to try and love tradition but not be overwhelmed by it. However tiny a contribution you can make, it doesn't matter so much as simply to take it on and contend with it.

JK

How would you describe your original contribution in that sense?

WT

I don't feel myself being particularly original. I love the idea of being in the tradition of bravura painting, starting with maybe Velázquez and coming down all the way to Manet through hundreds of wonderful

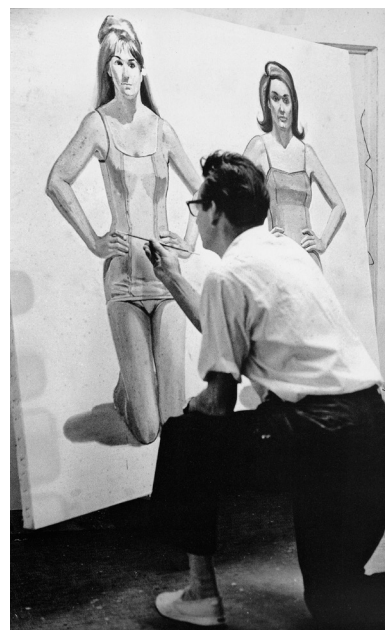
In addition to his fine art, Thiebaud made ten covers for *The New Yorker* and provided illustrations for two cookbooks.



1964
Thiebaud poses for *Time* magazine in New York



1965
The sculptor Robert Arneson and his wife, Jeanette, inspecting *Nude* (1963) during the opening of *Thiebaud: Figures* at Stanford Art Museum, Stanford University



1965
Thiebaud in his studio painting *Two Kneeling Figures* (1966), Sacramento

bravura painters. So, that certainly can't be counted as original. Who's to say about originality? I don't think Velázquez ever thought of that. I don't think he even knew what he was doing. He was just an extraordinary visual, very alive performer. You don't see a lot of drawings or preparations or schematics. He just did it.

JK

You have explained that making a successful artwork requires balancing the real world, the art world, and the personal world. The real world is the shared notion that we have about the things around us, as exemplified in photographic realism, that kind of accounting or taxidermy that you were talking about. The art world is art history, criticism, theory, and the tradition of painting and drawing. And the personal world is private perception and psychological experience, all the idiosyncrasies of self.

WT

I think that's a helpful outline of trying to keep things in balance. If you're going to be an art critic, you don't want to just talk to other art critics. You want to talk to literature and to other forms. The same in painting. You want to be sure you're not just a kind of megalomaniac, or you end up being someone like [Donald] Trump, in a total world of the self.

JK

Yes, an arrant narcissist. Do you think that nonobjective abstraction—abstraction that is entirely non-representational—is an example of that solipsism? Does nonobjective abstraction lack a shared consensus about the world?

WT

It depends upon the particular and unique painting. So long as you evaluate it in terms of color and design and signature [styles], it can be a legitimate form. Nonobjective abstraction relates a lot to graphic design and other categories, like illustration, an art form in itself.⁹ I think you just get the premise down of what it is you're talking about, and then determine what it is in terms of its own sets of conventions, limitations, and possibilities. Judgment—critical interrogation—is crucially important in the whole exercise of the arts.

JK

Ideally, the spectator brings that kind of critical frame of mind to interpretation. But can a nonobjective abstraction offer the spectator as rich a set of opportunities as a representational painting? It may be beautiful and even stimulate certain ideas, but within the "real world, art world, personal world" balance that you just described, nonobjective abstraction often lacks the first part: the shared

world and consensus. Of course, there are colors and shapes in the world, but that leaves out a great deal of what can be shared. Clement Greenberg devised an eschatological scheme in which painting increasingly focuses only on its own formal aspects. That seemed to jettison all of literature, drama, and a great deal of human experience.

WT

Yes, well, his categorical imperative thrust was such that it did not denote *what was happening*. In other words, for me there is a very important aspect in looking at a painting: I want to know where I am. I have to have a presence. If I look at a Joan Mitchell painting and am convinced that I'm in a garden, then I'm okay. But if I'm looking at a Frank Stella, I don't know where I am. I see that I'm looking at some stripes, and they're very beautifully done and have a powerful impact. They have exactly the kind of impact that we look for in commercial art when we're looking for design that captivates us. I spent years in commercial art with fellow designers worrying about a logo for a month until we got it to a point where we decide, yep, that's it! These refinements are terribly important, but they don't inquire after the human position and the concept of empathy, which for me is crucial.



1965
Wayne Thiebaud in front of *Five Seated Figures* (1965)



1960s
Wayne Thiebaud and the artist Elaine de Kooning at her studio in New York



ca. 1965
Gregory Kondos and Wayne Thiebaud painting in front of Thiebaud's Fifth Avenue residence, Sacramento

JK

Another question I have has to do with your source material. Other than portraits painted before the model, much of your work is based on memory. Can you talk about that?

WT

Memory is probably not the defining word. The *imagination* needs to confront the memory and to learn that the memory is not a fixed thing. It's not something you just have so much of. Rather, the memory is developed by confronting your lack of knowledge. So, while the memory is a great product of expression and awareness, it's essentially the imagination that you finally are able to use.

JK

When you first started painting the San Francisco scenes, you were painting outdoors at actual places. Then you began inventing. Are your compositions really purely from the imagination, or do you use reference images, maybe photographs?

WT

I have a very big aversion to photography as a thing to use or even as a habit or tradition of painting. It's a seductive medium and a wonderful medium and a great convention, but it's a separate convention from our two-eyed view as human beings. It is essentially and crucially different,

and I don't encourage its use at all as a painting premise.

JK

Some of the Pop artists transcribed photographs or used photomechanical means of getting the image onto the canvas. The results are very flat. But if you're not working from a photograph or from an actual thing in front of you, your head must be like a visual jukebox because your images look so tangible and real.

WT

I think they are not realistic. They are representational. And that means that I'm using some convention. If you look carefully at a tie or a sucker, that's such a basic shape that it doesn't require much memory. And the same is true of many of the object paintings. They're usually chosen for their pretty clear-headed simplicity. Or they are things that have become almost touchstones in our daily life.

JK

They're not highly complex forms.

WT

No. The complexity hopefully comes from figuring out compositionally what you might be able to develop. You try to look for ways of presenting them in which you haven't seen them presented. And sometimes to do things that you shouldn't do.

JK

What do you mean?

WT

To make a landscape composition where you simply go from one diagonal point [corner of the canvas] to the other. Or to overwhelm the weight distribution of the painting so that it is somewhat uncomfortable, its balance slightly tentative. This, of course, is a way of building tension. If we're using our bodies, and the plumb line, and are very much aware of the sense of balance, that's what we base these little rectangles and squares on. It's all about how they relate to the edges, and not just the four sides, but other vectors. They also must come outside toward us and recede inside away from us to infinity. Those are the options you have as a painter. Even though you're on this flat surface, the extraordinary, miraculous aspect of painting is fictive space. And getting yourself to make the leap to faith, that that space can be coherent and believable in your sensations, is a major and wonderful trick.

JK

You perform it wonderfully. The landscapes are particularly engrossing and fascinating.

WT

Thank you. They come quite simply from the use of various projective systems, or not being hesitant to use whatever extraordinary combinations you can come up with. And you're very influenced, of course, by cultural



n.d.
Thiebaud in front of *Girl with Blue Shoes* (1968) and *Green Dress* (1966)



1969
Professor Wayne Thiebaud watching a student painting a still life of a teapot and teacup, University of California, Davis



ca. 1975
Life drawing class in San Francisco with Mark Adams, Beth Van Hoesen, Wayne Thiebaud, William Theophilus Brown, and Gordon Cook (left to right)

variations [of landscape], whether it's Japanese, Chinese, Persian, any kind of other modalities that you can think of. And that's why art history is so crucially important to painters. It's not just our inspiration but our guidepost and our visual library.

JK

Can you speak about humor in your work?

WT

Humor has always been at the center, or certainly near it, in almost all of the work that I do. I really began as a cartoonist, or tried to, and I love that whole development. I collect original cartoons, and I have a great respect for them. In my own work I love it when people smile or when they are bemused. So, it is central to the work.

JK

I am reminded of the clown pictures that you've created in recent years. Some are genre scenes on stage, others are busts. Some remind me of those fantastic Bonnard self-portraits in old age . . .

WT

The Boxer [Le Boxeur]? Yes, he's a wonder, old Bonnard.

JK

. . . and they call to mind Hopper's last picture, the commedia dell'arte characters on stage, stand-ins for him and his wife, Jo. Walt Kuhn painted a number of clowns.

WT

He's the master of it, I think.

JK

Clowns can be funny, but their pratfalls remind me also of the comedy of aspiration and the futility of striving. A clown might be a metaphor for the artist as a public figure, as a kind of entertainer. You titled a work *100 Year-old Clown* (2020). Are your clowns somewhat autobiographical?

WT

Yes. I love humor. It's part of our visual art poetry, so it's a serious subject matter for me. When I was a young man, I worked briefly in the circus and became a great admirer of the clowns and carnival people that I sold newspapers to as a kid. So that world interested me, and I'd never done anything with it. When my wife passed away, five years after my son, I wanted something just to sort of be preoccupied with, so I concentrated and painted maybe fifty or sixty or seventy of those clowns in as interesting a way as I could manage.

JK

They depart from the earlier figure paintings not only because many of the clowns are in motion rather than still, but also because you paint them more freely.

WT

The sense of caricature is very much part of my interest in terms of style.

I think stylistic derivation and expansion and development is based on a kind of caricature, whether it's medieval caricature or the way that Goya uses caricature or the way the Persians caricature. All of those stylistic variations are based on a sense of caricature. And it's not just as simple as cartooning. It's much richer. There's a caricature of color, a caricature of space, like Cubism. There's a caricature of almost all the formal elements that you can use, in my opinion.

JK

I haven't heard the term "caricature" applied to the expressive expansion of formal properties of image making. It's an interesting way to think of it.

I would like to ask a question about your longevity. It's a truism that we grow wiser with age, yet it seems that we are never going to figure out exactly why we are here on Earth. Existence is an implacable enigma. How has your enormous reservoir of experience informed your outlook? And how has longevity impacted your work?

WT

I'll try to be thoughtful.

JK

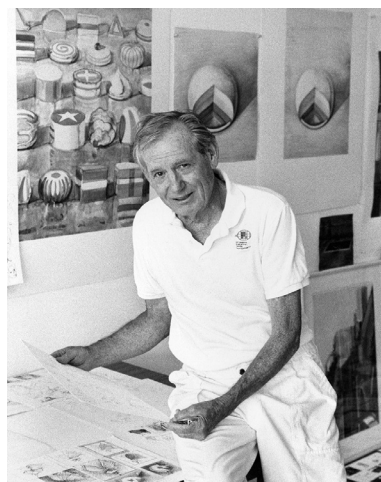
I don't think you can help it.

WT

I'm puzzled, as you are, about what's what. I have no idea. I guess I would say something like this: I think art is



ca. 1979-80
Thiebaud checking printing results



1990
Thiebaud in his studio

probably our saving grace. It almost can ignore our animal premise and spirits. It's worth investing in as many and as deeply involved people as we can muster, because I think that's where our hopes lie: in giving us a life of pleasure, challenge, comfort, joyousness—all of the things that make us human and make us able to relate kindly to each other.

JK

Can you talk about beauty?

WT

Ahh, beauty. The writer Dave Hickey once asked at a panel discussion what theme we should be focused on in coming years. Everybody gave interesting responses until he said the word "beauty." He said it emptied out the place.¹⁰ They were much more interested in social issues and God knows what? But beauty—yes, it's primary. It's what we search for.

JK

You were born in 1920 to a working-class Mormon family in Mesa, Arizona, and grew up mainly in Long Beach, California, where your father found work after a failed effort at sheep ranching in southern Utah. Your father was ordained as a Mormon bishop. Was Mormonism important to your upbringing and are you practicing today?

WT

They're interested in taking a leap to

faith. When I was about fifteen or sixteen and began to read more widely in school, it was very clear to me that I could not make that connection. I read the Mormon bible, called the Book of Mormon, and it was an awakening about what, at least from my standpoint, did not make it possible for me to have faith in any way. I talked to my father about it, and he was very generous and understanding. His father [who had emigrated from Switzerland to the US in the mid-nineteenth century] had been a schoolteacher and eventually superintendent of schools in Indiana. That intellectual tradition and his influence was very powerful, and I moved slowly away from the Church. It was never a dramatic thing. I still greatly loved and enjoyed my parents, who spoiled me and continued to support me in every way they could.

The power of the Mormon Church is wonderful in terms of nourishment. They take care of their own people. They are like the Jewish tradition, very cloistered and inbred. My experience was that I was spoiled rotten by my parents and by a big group of nourishing aunts and uncles. My grandfathers were bigamists, so I have all these relations. So, I'm one of the very lucky people who went through the Mormon tradition. They're very good about encouraging people, taking care

of their own people. So, it's a wonderful tradition in itself but lacks the interest and intellectual challenge that I was fascinated in, particularly in the arts.

JK

So, you didn't feel that it was a fertile tradition for you to immerse yourself in if you were interested in art and literature.

WT

Yes. I was never married in the church or interested in pursuing performance. I don't attend church. My sister was a committed Mormon. She was a wonderful sister, and she had two girls, who are still very much involved in the Mormon Church. They're both schoolteachers with six children each, so I have lots of nieces and nephews, but my children are not involved in the church.

JK

Can you give us a sense of your living situation and your daily routine?

WT

Well, I have families. Great numbers of us are scattered around Sacramento. I have stepchildren and wonderful daughters, grandchildren, wives of my sons. We all seem to get along, and I see them and talk with them often. We have a good family interchange, which I'm pleased to have.

My own life is quite simple. I live alone since my wife passed away,

11

The catalogue titled *Wayne Thiebaud, People: Figure Paintings 1936–2021*, with an introduction by Gene Cooper and essays by Julia Friedman and Karen Wilkin was published by the Wayne Thiebaud Foundation, Sacramento, in 2021.

12

Wayne Thiebaud: Clowns, with an essay by Julia Friedman and an interview with the artist by Janet Bishop, was published by the Wayne Thiebaud Foundation, Sacramento, in 2020, to accompany an exhibition at the Paul Thiebaud Gallery in San Francisco (December 7, 2019–March 28, 2020) and the Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, California (December 6, 2020–October 24, 2021). *Wayne Thiebaud: Monotypes*, with an introduction by Crown Point Press associate director Constance Lewallen (originally published in a brochure by Crown Point Press in 1991), was published by the Paul Thiebaud Gallery, San Francisco, to accompany an exhibition (December 1, 2018–March 2, 2019).

13

A complete catalogue would comprise Thiebaud's work in multiple media, including oil painting, graphite, charcoal, ink, pastel, watercolor, etching and aquatint, and lithography.

14

The Wayne Thiebaud Foundation has no plans to produce a catalogue raisonné of the artist's paintings but is considering launching work on a prints catalogue raisonné.



n.d.

Thiebaud giving a painting demonstration at the University of California, Davis



2002

Thiebaud painting *Jolly Cones*, for the cover of *The New Yorker*



2010

Thiebaud in Sacramento

now five years ago. So, I do my own laundry and cooking—I was once a kind of second-string cook. But the big life is in the studio. I get up almost every day, including holidays and weekends, and go to work.

I've lived at the same house for almost half a century. I have a studio on top of the house that my wife got me to create so I could go up there in my pajamas and work. My son, who passed away also eleven years ago [in 2010], became quite a good dealer in San Francisco and handled the work for me. He built this wonderful place for storage in midtown Sacramento and made me a nice little studio in that same building. It's called LeBaron's Fine Art, and that's where I am speaking from now.

JK

Do you still play tennis?

WT

I have a lifelong love of tennis, and I did play senior tournaments for a number of years with my wife and that was a great joy. I am still trying to get out and hit the ball once in a while. I'm just an old hit-and-giggle guy. My whole family plays. Some play tournaments and are quite serious. So, we have a good athletic program, and that's good for you, as you know: get out and move your body.

JK

What are you working on these days?

WT

I've gotten together all the figure paintings that I have kept around, about 150 of them: a number of self-portraits that I've never shown, some little narrative paintings that I've fooled around with, the portraits of the clowns. I am determined now to make a book of these, plus the ones that are in collections and museums. There will be a kind of catalogue raisonné of the figures. I had a very early show of figures at Stanford University, and Allan Stone might have had a figure show, but there's never been a comprehensive show. I'm going to call it "People: Figure Paintings, Portraits, Self-Portraits, and Clowns."¹¹

The book will reproduce the big figure paintings, little figure paintings, self-portraits, regular straight portraits. There are paintings of little figures on beaches, in shopping malls, on dance floors. I'm interested in combining those totally different kinds of working with the figure. I'm not interested in planning an exhibition. I just want to create a catalogue as I did of the clowns and of monotypes, so that it will be part of the archives of my foundation.¹² I'm reworking some of the paintings, changing them quite dramatically, which I also like doing. I know that conservators don't like this sort of thing—yeah, I'm a bit like Albert Pinkham Ryder—but I

don't give a damn as long as I can get it to look the way I want it to look.

JK

Are the ones you rework going to have multiple dates on them?

WT

Yes.

JK

Why is there no catalogue raisonné of your work?¹³

WT

I've resisted that. There have been a lot of proposals, but to tell you the truth, I don't quite believe in catalogues raisonnés. They can never be quite finished. They become a kind of—I don't know what to call it—a marketplace fixation, and people are terrified they are going to find that something is not included in the catalogue and that will cheapen its value. All that kind of nonsense. So, I am not a big fan of them.¹⁴

JK

You've had a remarkably singular life and career. Do you have any regrets, and what have been your greatest satisfactions?

WT

My greatest satisfaction is being the wonderful recipient of old age. That is a supreme gift for me, which I treasure and deeply appreciate. I have been one of the luckiest people that I know.