

FONDATION BEYELER

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WAYNE THIEBAUD

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29 January – 21 May 2023

Cover:

Wayne Thiebaud

Jackpot, 2005 (detail)

Oil on canvas, 122.6 × 91.4cm

Courtesy John and Patty McEnroe

INTRODUCTION

With Wayne Thiebaud (1920–2021), the Fondation Beyeler devotes a retrospective to an exceptional contemporary painter. Largely unknown in Europe, Thiebaud has long been popular in the United States.

Thiebaud's works repay close attention. At first glance, one notes the motifs lifted from everyday life such as cake displays or slot machines; in this sense, Thiebaud was an exponent of pop art. Yet looking more closely, every motif dissolves into a wide spectrum of countless colours and shades, which only taken as a whole produce a recognisable image. Thiebaud's art thus centres less on subject matter than on the manner of painting.

All his life, Thiebaud focussed mainly on three themes: things, people and landscapes. The exhibition showcases his oil and acrylic paintings as well as drawings. The boundaries between representation and abstraction are fluid: with his sophisticated use of colour, Thiebaud subjects all the elements in an image to a process of abstraction, generating a unique experience of colour.

The exhibition has been curated by Dr Ulf Küster, Senior Curator at the Fondation Beyeler.

Assistant Curator: Charlotte Sarrazin.

BIOGRAPHY

Wayne Thiebaud was born on 15 November 1920 in Mesa, Arizona (USA). He started out as a sign painter, graphic designer and cartoonist, among others at Walt Disney Studios. After graduating in fine arts in 1953, he taught drawing and painting first at Sacramento City College, then at the University of California in Davis. Thiebaud left his mark on generations of young artists. His most famous pupil was Bruce Nauman, who for a time also worked as his assistant. Next to his intense artistic practice, he was a passionate tennis player. Wayne Thiebaud at times lived and worked in San Francisco, but his life centred mainly in Sacramento, where he died on 25 December 2021.

ROOM 1

1 35 Cent Masterworks, 1970

Oil on canvas

Collection of the Wayne Thiebaud Foundation
Sacramento, California

The painting *35 Cent Masterworks* pays tribute to the history of art and to the painters who influenced Wayne Thiebaud. It shows something akin to a newspaper rack on which the “masterworks” are laid out in neat rows. Are we looking at the covers of art catalogues? Or are we to understand these images as painterly recreations of original artworks, which Thiebaud has adjusted in scale? In any case, all of them can be had on the cheap, for a mere 35 cents apiece. This can be understood as alluding ironically to the popularisation of images through their reproduction.

The works featured by Thiebaud take their inspiration from:
Thomas Eakins – Diego Velázquez – Henri Rousseau
Honoré Daumier – Paul Cézanne – Piet Mondrian
Claude Monet – Giorgio Morandi – Edgar Degas
Henri Matisse – Pablo Picasso – Giorgio de Chirico

ROOM 1

2 Mickey Mouse, 1988

Oil on board

Private collection

Courtesy Acquavella Galleries

Mickey Mouse shows Wayne Thiebaud's attachment to early American pop culture. As a fifteen-year-old, he briefly worked at the Walt Disney Studios in Los Angeles, and all his life he remained familiar with the ways and tricks to draw Mickey Mouse. Walt Disney's most popular creation, developed in the 1920s for animated cartoons, is one of the key protagonists of early film: in this painting, the figure casts a shadow reminiscent of the shape of a movie camera.

Mickey Mouse is truly "modern" because it has little to do with the Western canon of art and it is anything but elitist because it speaks to all and everyone: it is the very embodiment of "pop".

With this painted portrait, Thiebaud memorialised a figure that stands as an exemplary solution to a problem that had long preoccupied painters, namely the depiction of movement.

ROOM 1

3 Student, 1968

Oil on linen

The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection at the
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
San Francisco, California

A young blonde woman sits facing us on a chair with integrated desk, familiar from universities all over the world. Her intense gaze and her posture exude tense calmness, a gathered attentiveness that makes itself immediately felt. Her right hand is resting on a notepad, her left hand in her lap. Small inconsistencies in the figure's proportions do not hamper the painting's impact and emphasise the sitter's presence. And yet the young woman seems distant and aloof, an impression that increases as one draws closer to the picture. At this point, a typical Thiebaud effect sets in: the individuality of the depicted person dissolves into countless vibrant colour combinations that form the overall composition. The painting is experienced as the sum of the full spectrum of colours.

ROOM 2

4 Pie Rows, 1961

Oil on canvas

Collection of the Wayne Thiebaud Foundation
Sacramento, California

Pie Rows features a cropped detail of a counter lined with pie slices on plates, which could mentally be extended into infinity. It is one of the earliest examples of the still lifes that were to become emblematic of Wayne Thiebaud's work. Paintings of refrigerated display cases filled with pies and other treats would follow. These typically American food items interested him because they spoke of ritualised patterns of behaviour and cultural practices. In *Pie Rows*, Thiebaud uses pie wedges as a motif to explore the possibilities of composition, form, colour, light and texture. He repeatedly pointed out that they could also be seen simply as segments of a circle in perspectival foreshortening. The application of colour echoes the gesture of spreading frosting or glazing on a pie. In combining gestural traces and a rigid geometry of triangles, rhomboids and ovals, Thiebaud has created a work that is at once representational and abstract.

ROOM 2

5 Woman in Tub, 1965

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Courtesy Acquavella Galleries

Woman in Tub merges two fundamentally opposed conceptions of painting. A hyper-realistically rendered head has been inserted into the thoroughly flat arrangement of horizontal colour stripes in pastel hues and fine lines in vibrant, contrasting colours. The head combines meticulous detail and convincing three-dimensionality. In terms of subject matter and composition, the painting echoes notable art historical forebears such as Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat* and Ferdinand Hodler's *Valentine Godé-Darel on her Deathbed* (Rudolf Staechelin Collection). Unlike these earlier works, the highly vividly rendered head in Thiebaud's painting lacks all expression; the fact that no other part of the body can be seen gives the head an even more object-like appearance, turning it into a screen for our own projected thoughts. This connects it back to the radically reduced colour field painting that surrounds it.

ROOM 3

6 Two Jackpots, 2005

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Courtesy Acquavella Galleries

At first glance, this depiction of two slot machines seems to be challenging us to act: the lever is waiting to be pulled down – if only mentally. As so many of Wayne Thiebaud's works, *Two Jackpots* is making us an offer. Yet the promise of happiness is an empty one, for in the end the so-called one-armed bandits rob users of their money. While Thiebaud's interest lies in the everyday, his depictions are not strictly naturalistic: he uses painterly means to lift and heighten his motifs, here for example by emphasising the shimmering surfaces with calculated light and shadow effects. The close-up, frontal depiction as isolated objects both monumentalises and humanises the mechanical automats – *Two Jackpots* thus gives the impression of a double portrait.

ROOM 3

7 Two Kneeling Figures, 1966

Oil on canvas

Collection of the Wayne Thiebaud Foundation
Sacramento, California

The two life-size female figures are shown wearing 1960s California-style swimming costumes. The wide stripes and fine lines of assorted colours play with the effect of complementary contrast, which lingers in softened form in the horizontally tiered background colour fields. This reading as an abstract colour and field composition is easily overlooked in light of the two women's imposing presence. When depicting figures, Wayne Thiebaud often chose a combination of static pose, close-up view and front-facing orientation, largely abstaining from embedding them in a narrative context: as a result, the bodies appear stiff and object-like. The unconventional pose of the *Two Kneeling Figures* prompts conflicting associations: while their kneeling position suggests humility, the way they hold their arms conveys strength and unyieldingness.

ROOM 4

8 Ponds and Streams, 2001

Acrylic on canvas

Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco

Museum purchase, gift of Richard N. Goldman, 2001

San Francisco, California

Beginning in the 1990s, the expanses of intensively farmed land near his home in Sacramento inspired Wayne Thiebaud to produce a series of panorama-like landscape paintings. *Ponds and Streams* features a typical Northern Californian agrarian landscape, far removed from the region's better-known tourist spots. Yet the fields, the clusters of trees and the water reservoirs do not exactly replicate local topography. Rather, they combine to form a collage-like composition based on a wealth of recollections that attests to the artist's deep familiarity with this environment. As in Thiebaud's still lifes, light and shadow operate as key compositional features. Pronounced bluish shadows, as well as delicate reflections, loosen and soften the strict, man-made configuration of the landscape.

ROOM 5

9 Fruits, Vegetables, Melons, 2008

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Los Angeles, California

The upright composition *Fruits, Vegetables, Melons* features three shelves with fruits and vegetables neatly arranged by variety in different little cases and boxes. Only the bananas and the melons are presented uncrated. The exquisite painterly attention to detail invites us to take a closer look and identify each of the varieties on display. The meticulous depiction of fruits and vegetables has been a popular motif at the latest since 17th-century Dutch still life painting. While such images operate as symbols of wealth, the perishable nature of the food also always signals the transience of all living things. Unlike these historical precedents, Wayne Thiebaud features the food in a shop display. In doing so, he transposes a long-established, traditional motif into a contemporary commonplace context, in which food of any origin is always and anywhere available.

ROOM 6

10 Yosemite Ridge, 1975

Oil on canvas

Collection of Matt and Maria Bult

Sacramento, California

In the 1960s, Wayne Thiebaud began painting landscapes. He focussed first on dizzying views of San Francisco, imposing impressions of the peaks and mountain ranges of the Sierra Nevada, and later on flattened bird's-eye views of the Sacramento River Delta. In *Yosemite Ridge*, a mountainside drops sharply into the deep, wrenching our gaze along. There are no signs of human presence, only isolated trees on the sunlit hilltop defying gravity. The three-tiered colour palette of the bluff is equally dramatic, ranging from reddish brown in the foreground to a deep blue middle part and the ochre-yellow dome. The literal heightening of the motif in this image presents nature as mighty and majestic. Yet unlike traditional landscape painting, Thiebaud's surreal depiction of a mountain occupies a territory between representation and abstraction.

ROOM 6

11 Passing Cloud, 2014/2019

Oil on canvas

Collection of the Wayne Thiebaud Foundation
Sacramento, California

Unlike traditional paintings of landscapes with overcast skies, for *Passing Cloud* Wayne Thiebaud chose an upright format and focussed on depicting a single cloud. The horizon has been pushed down to the lower edge of the picture, creating space to depict the phenomena in between, where everything is dissolved in thick impasto and traces of energetic brushwork that make visible the rain lashing down onto the ground below. Akin to William Turner, the towering historical exponent of such atmospheric weather depictions, Thiebaud has probably not represented any specific location, drawing rather from experience, memory and imagination. This “passing cloud” thus joins the other clouds in his work, all of them oval shapes isolated at the very top near the edge of the picture, oftentimes rimmed by a line of colour, which in this case opens downward like an umbrella to unleash the rain.

ROOM 7

12 Betty Jean Thiebaud and Book, 1965–1969

Oil on canvas

Crocker Art Museum

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wayne Thiebaud, 1969

Sacramento, California

Following two successful exhibitions in New York and San Francisco in 1962, in which he had mostly shown still lifes, Wayne Thiebaud turned to a new and artistically challenging motif – the human figure. At first, friends and family posed for him, in this case his second wife Betty Jean. Lost in thought, she gazes past us, seemingly showing little interest in the book lying open in front of her. In this, the image differs from the many depictions of reading female figures in the history of art, who are usually shown in evocative interiors, deeply absorbed in their reading. Thiebaud however has placed his figure in an almost wholly neutral setting, allowing almost no inference as to the sitter's personality or a possible narrative.

ROOM 7

13 Toys, 1971

Charcoal on paper

Collection of the Wayne Thiebaud Foundation

Sacramento, California

Toys features an unusual composition with four objects, which are pushed so far to the very corners of the sheet that the objects themselves or their shadows are touching its edges. The drawing provides a close-up, almost parallel top view onto a table or a floor. The four toys are drawn in a highly traditional academic manner and their precise modelling in light and shadow gives them a strikingly three-dimensional appearance. The empty blank space in between, which takes up most of the sheet, appears all the more mysterious. While it remains clearly identifiable as a ground around the objects, as the gaze moves from one object to another it turns into an abstract expanse. This sheet of drawings can be linked to Wayne Thiebaud's teaching activity at the University of California in Davis, where he used such arrangements of objects in his drawing classes as practice material for his students. The virtuosity displayed here in rendering the objects and their surface qualities, as well as the play with picture plane, object and image boundaries, bear witness to his training as a graphic designer and cartoonist.

ROOM 8

14 Girl with Pink Hat, 1973

Oil on canvas

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Gift of Jeannette Powell

San Francisco, California

The relatively small painting *Girl with Pink Hat* produces a surprisingly strong impact. This may be to do with visual formulas inscribed onto our cultural memory, which Thiebaud takes up in this work: one is reminded of Renaissance bust portraits, here developed upon by the artist using modern means. The painting's strong presence is also due to the relation between flatness and spatiality within its composition. The corporeality of the figure and the volume of the hat stand in contrast with the flatness of the empty wall at the left of the painting. The greenish blue shadow of the hat also appears flat. The contours traced along the various shapes in strong, contrasting colours play a significant role in this context. They emphasise the figure while also encompassing the flat ellipse of the shadow on the wall, thereby establishing a restless balance between the two modes of representation within the image.

ROOM 8

15 Pastel Scatter, 1972

Pastel on paper

Collection of the Wayne Thiebaud Foundation

Sacramento, California

Pastel Scatter features the artist's pastel crayons – not neatly sorted by colour in a box but seemingly randomly scattered on an indeterminate white ground. This unconventional composition displays a multitude of vanishing points, perspectives and light effects. The crayons form an almost abstract configuration of blocks of colour, which can mentally be extended beyond the edges of the picture. The blank and empty areas underscore the vibrancy of the colours and create a stage-like setting. This finely balanced composition reflects Wayne Thiebaud's life-long fascination with everyday objects and his intense engagement with their characteristic features, here also manifested in the seamless relation between medium and subject matter – the crayons we see are those the artist used for their depiction.

ROOM 9

16 Diagonal Freeway, 1993

Acrylic on canvas

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Gift of Morgan Flagg in memory of his son,

Lawrence J. Flagg, 1998

San Francisco, California

In *Diagonal Freeway*, a few solitary vehicles are crawling up or hurtling down a steep motorway. Beyond, our gaze passes a barren hilltop before falling into a bottomless chasm, from whose depths tall buildings rise up and condense into an artificial mountain. With the image-filling diagonal of the motorway, Wayne Thiebaud defies a widely held artistic credo never to emphasise diagonals too strongly to avoid unsettling the composition. Here, Thiebaud deliberately harnesses this very effect: it seems far from certain that the cars can make it up the impossibly steep incline. Thiebaud has created a symbolic image of contemporary urban landscapes in the United States, with their dense road networks and conurbations in which even the most inhospitable natural environment is technologically conquered by humans and yet appears strangely deserted.

ROOM 9

17 Untitled (City View), 1993

Oil on canvas

Collection of the Wayne Thiebaud Foundation
Sacramento, California

In this relatively small-format composition, it seems someone has just gotten up from the table laid out with a meal. We are thereby invited to mentally step in and enjoy the view onto the vertically rising street, densely lined with houses despite its extreme incline. In 1972, Wayne Thiebaud bought a house in San Francisco. The novel impressions of the city's hilly setting inspired him to produce a number of urban landscapes that often merge several perspectives in a single image. The shapes in this painting are compounded from separate shimmering areas of impasto, animating us to consider the possibilities of painting itself – representation and abstraction, plane and space. The plate in the foreground suddenly appears more reminiscent of a painter's palette inviting us to keep adding to the view in our imagination.

INFORMATION

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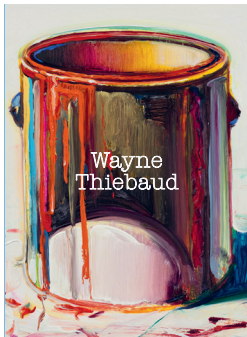
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We look forward to receiving your feedback on the
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CATALOGUE



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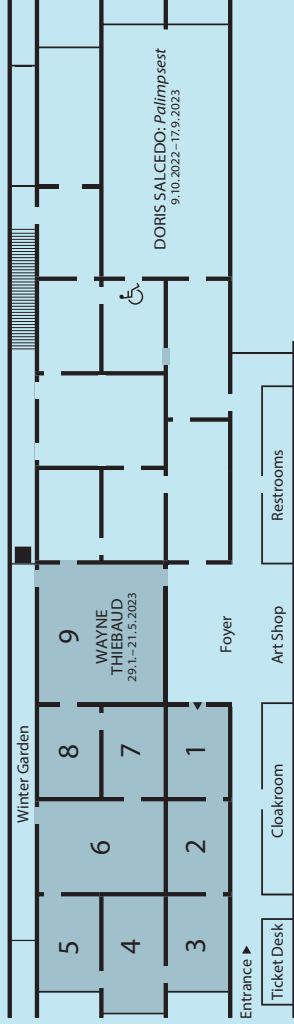
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Please do not touch the artworks!