

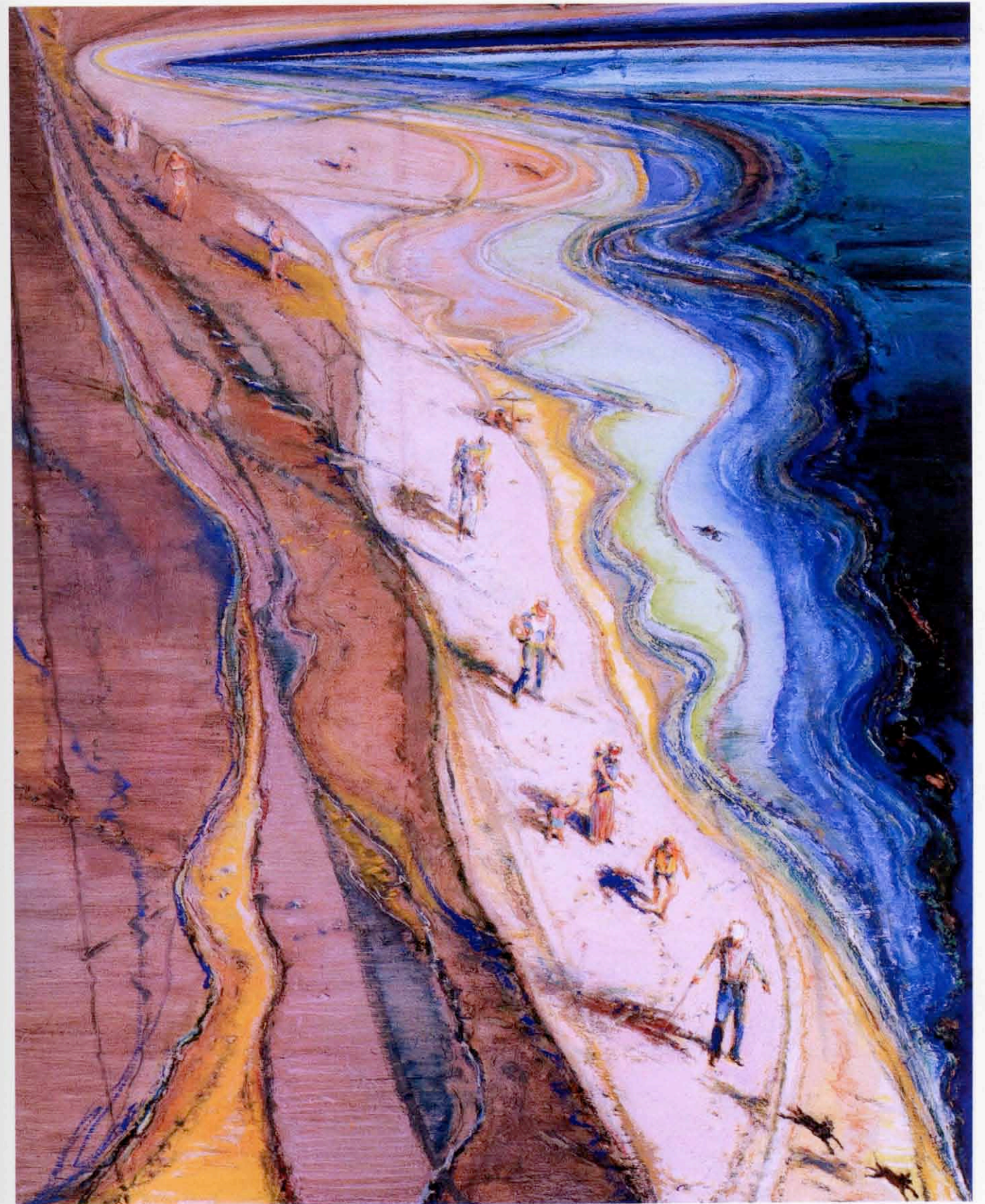
Wayne Thiebaud

by Amelia Guimarin

With titles like *Around the Cake* and *Pies, Pies*, you know the work of Wayne Thiebaud must be something sweet. But the octogenarian artist has more to offer than simple saccharine treats. His iconic repertoire includes girls in bathing suits (albeit one is eating an ice cream cone) and farms with rivers running through them. And while he may be best known for his images of pastries, all his paintings have a distinct Thiebaud style – colorful, linear, and sweet, in every sense of the word.

Thiebaud's work, or I should say paintings, as he fancies himself a painter more than anything else – and you would be hard pressed to find anything more than a few sketches in the numerous books and collections of his art – are light and playful though not deficient in any seriousness or lack of rigor for the discipline of art. Thiebaud is a studied artist and even in the look on his subjects' faces you can see his care and attention to detail as you puzzle their expressions for a sense of what is going on.

Though he was born in Mesa, Arizona, Thiebaud only spent the first six months of his life there and is firmly planted in the canon of California artists. He grew up in Long Beach and even became a part of the Hollywood scene when he worked as an 'in-betweener' for Walt Disney Studio, filling in all the action between the cartoon draw back and the cartoon punch. Thiebaud went to Sacramento State College and later taught at the University of California, Davis. A contemporary but not a conceptual artist, Thiebaud favors realism with some abstraction as it relates to lines and shapes, geometry. His adherence to repetition in many of his series and single images enunciates pop art yet he retains some roots in folk with his paintings of agriculture, hills, and valleys, as well as intimate portraits of his wife. ►



My experience with Thiebaud goes way back, or at least I think it does. I come from a family of artists, teachers, and art teachers. I grew up thinking it was quite normal to regularly visit art museums and read art history text books. From kindergarten through eighth grade, we lived in the sticks about an hour outside of Sacramento. I have fond memories of going into the big city, downtown, the state capital. My Mom would take my sister and me to the Crocker Art Museum. I believe we were even members. And my Dad, he would take me to his office at IBM. Sometimes we would eat at the corporate cafeteria there. On really special occasions (or at least they were really special to me), he would take me to the California State Capitol Building and we would eat in their brick basement cafeteria.

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These are early memories and they blend in with one another. So I cannot really say whether I did or did not see these cafeteria style images of Thiebaud there at the Crocker. He definitely has works there on permanent display and certainly had exhibitions come and go through the years – indeed, his first solo show was at the Crocker in 1951. But one thing is for certain, that in my memory, and surely in many others', cafeterias always have and always will look like Thiebaud paintings.

Even now, as an adult, the paint, the actual pigments on his canvas, seem to me like frosting, layered thick across the white prepped fabric, like smooth butter cream or dark chocolate ganache poured and spatulaed over angel foods and red velvets. Makes me hungry just thinking about it. Indeed, a friend of mine remarked on a Thiebaud show he saw in New York, "It all looks like sterile cafeteria food, but still made me hungry." Hungry for more. For more rich colors and tacky layers. I know I am not allowed, but may I please touch the paintings? Take a bite? ■

The San Jose Museum of Art will trace the career of American artist Wayne Thiebaud in the retrospective exhibition Wayne Thiebaud: Seventy Years of Painting, on view February 16 through July 4, 2010. For more information, call 408-294-2787 or visit www.SanJoseMuseumofArt.org

