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OLDIES BUT GOODIES

BY IAN PARKER



Wayne Thiebaud, the painter, who lives in Sacramento and who, at ninety-three, plays tennis for at least an hour and a half most mornings, was on his way to the Frick the other day, when he stopped for a coffee at Lady M, on East Seventy-eighth Street, a minimally decorated boutique-y place selling “confectionary delights”—or, to use Thiebaud’s phrase, on his arrival, “un-American cakes.” Thiebaud was wearing a blue windbreaker from which he had not yet removed day-old proof-of-payment stickers from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney—Thiebaud’s work is in both collections—and he looked like a high-school athletic coach a week or two into retirement.

He took a seat by the door. Seventy-five- and eighty-dollar confections—including a checkerboard chocolate-and-vanilla sponge cake, a strawberry shortcake, something lemony—were lined up in a low white case, in a white room.

That morning, some Lady M customers began to take photographs the moment they walked in, before the door had closed behind them; their avidity was perhaps connected to the work of Thiebaud, who in his first, hit New York show, in 1962, arranged sequences of stoical cakes and pies in brightly lit, unpeopled space, to make paintings that were warily respectful of American baking, and of America. He subsequently found other subjects—city streets, melons—but his current show, at Acquavella Galleries, includes new work on the old theme. As Thiebaud put it, there are still days that start with the thought: This morning, I’d like to paint a pie.

Thiebaud was born in Arizona and grew up in Southern California. His first experience of New York was in the mid-forties, when he stayed a year and worked as a freelance cartoonist. At Solomon Guggenheim’s Museum of Non-Objective Painting, on East Fifty-fourth Street, he was distracted from the art by Greta Garbo: “I just followed her around and watched her looking at paintings. And then I saw Salvador Dali, about two hours later. I could see why people lived in New York.” He returned to the city ten years later, having committed to a career in painting and teaching. “That’s when I met my heroes”—Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and others—“and I changed my whole program.” He was struck by their seriousness about the history of painting—“They were interested as much in Rembrandt as in Soutine and Picasso”—and by their advice: “If you’re going to paint, you’d better find out why you’re doing it, and you should do something that you know about, that you’re infatuated with.”

Until then, he said, “I’d been painting like de Kooning and Pollock, and trying to make it look like art. You develop these convenient signs of art—the drip, or whatever those things are.” He returned to California and made the decision “to sit down and think out this thing. Well, I’d worked in restaurants, washing dishes, worked in theatres, as an usher. I was interested in the Americanism of gumball machines. And up in Nevada I’d gamble, play blackjack—I had a system for a while.” On long Western drives, he’d been struck by sameness, brightness, and a kind of bravado: “You’re going across the country, and in Reno, in the desert, there’s a little hamburger place, and it says ‘The Best Hamburgers in the World.’” He laughed. “It’s the hope! That guy.”

Working from memory, he made a painting of meringues and pumpkin pies. “I got the structure of the painting to operate—the ovals. It was very simple to get it to come together.” When he had finished, he said to himself, “Look, a row of pies—that’ll be the end of me trying to be a serious artist. But I couldn’t leave it alone. It meant something to me.” (When he later turned to landscapes, his New York dealer was supportive, but only after saying, “Jesus Christ, I’ve just got people used to those damn pies.”)

Thiebaud’s new images include a display cabinet of baked goods, and a heart-shaped cake, in a dark setting; he deliberately deprived himself of the “support system” of a white background. He also painted crudités, fanned out on a plate, such as “you see over and over and over at everything you go to, that same stuff, in a circle—a Kenneth Noland abstraction.”

Lady M’s cakes were, he said, “too beautiful,” and he contrasted a “European-based, Viennese, fancy” tradition with American cakes from “basic neighborhood bakeries” that were guided by a principle of “slathering on.”

On the table in front of him, there was a slice of a Lady M cake made of many thin layers of crêpes and cream.

“Let’s try some,” Thiebaud said, and took a mouthful. “It’s like eating a cloud, right? That’s terrific.”

At the counter, a woman used the tone of someone choosing between careers to ask for help deciding between a strawberry cake and a banana cake. “It depends on whether you like strawberries or bananas,” the sales assistant replied.