

Slices, and Scoops, of Life

"Wayne Thiebaud: A Retrospective," at Acquavella Galleries, reminds you that artists often keep their best works for themselves, and that their in-the-moment instincts are as valuable as any later assessment by a curator. This concise survey of the art of Mr. Thiebaud, one of the

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greatest living American painters, includes a surprising number of objects drawn from his personal holdings and dating from every stage of his six-decade career. These are works that are as modest as a cigar box decorated with a single ice cream cone and as grand as a painting of two life-size women in striped bathing suits.

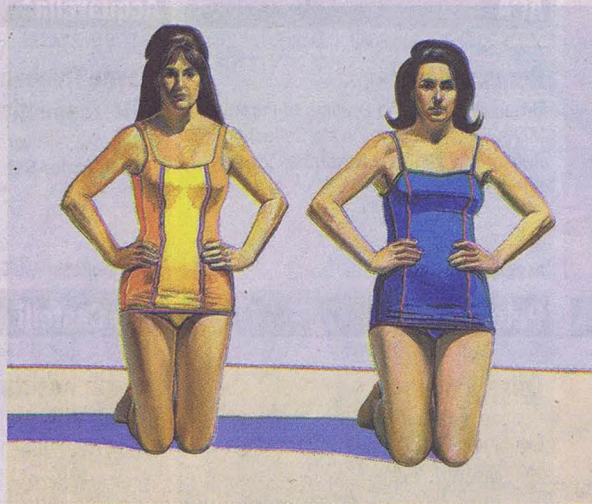
Among them are many of the medium-size still lifes of food that made Mr. Thiebaud famous, paintings like 1963's "Peppermint Counter," with its inviting piles of red-and-white candies labeled for sale (5 to 25 cents a pound), as well as singular and surprising works like the small 1967 painting of an American flag hanging from a schoolhouse wall.

These artist-owned works (which, by the way, are not for sale) make up their own mini-retrospective, proving that Mr. Thiebaud possesses, in addition to wit, tactility and a kind of halo vision, a strong editorial eye.

They also help distinguish this exhibition, organized by the scholar John Wilmerding, from Mr. Thiebaud's last New York survey, at the Whitney in 2000; the precedent here is, rather, his intimate 90th-birthday show at the Crocker Museum in Sacramento in 2010, which also featured his personal collection. East Coast museumgoers, using the Whitney show as a benchmark, won't have too much déjà vu, apart from a few museum loans, including "Yo-Yos" from the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, and "Girl With Ice Cream Cone," from the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

Another difference, this one not entirely to Mr. Thiebaud's benefit: the works at Acquavella are sorted by genre, with figure paintings, landscapes and still

"Wayne Thiebaud: A Retrospective" continues through Nov. 30 at Acquavella Galleries, 18 East 79th Street, Manhattan; (212) 734-6300, acquavellagalleries.com.



Wayne Thiebaud: A Retrospective, consisting of works painted over several decades, including, above, "Two Kneeling Figures" (1966) and, below, "Tulip Sundae" (2010), is at Acquavella Galleries.



IMAGES FROM THE COLLECTIONS OF BETTY JEAN THIEBAUD, TOP, AND WAYNE AND BETTY JEAN THIEBAUD; WAYNE THIEBAUD/LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK, N.Y.

lives — or, as the artist calls them, "people, places and things" — assigned to separate rooms. This insistence on subject matter brings Mr. Thiebaud closer to Pop, especially where the still lifes are concerned, undercutting recent arguments that he is more of a classicist in the tradition of Morandi and Chardin.

Those painter's-painter references are still there, but you'll have to hunt for them: in the creamy vanilla background of "Four Ice Cream Cones" (1964) or the fathomless violet shadows of "Candy Bag" (2009).

The landscapes, as usual, align Mr. Thiebaud with Richard Die-

benkorn and, more broadly, with West Coast variants of Abstract Expressionism. Although I admire the sense of place in these works, I've always found them to be a little too whimsical and impulsive, with their Fauvist palettes and roller-coaster shifts in perspective; most of the examples here don't change that, although a few fresh-from-the-studio paintings of tall, squared-off mountains groomed by wide brushes signal a new direction.

The single gallery of figurative works, upstairs, holds further surprises. Alongside lone, Hopper-esque figures like "Girl in White" (1979-96) are group por-

traits evincing a more theatrical sense of alienation; in "Five Seated Figures" (1966), three suited men and two women in sundresses studiously avoid eye contact with one another and with the viewer. It almost doesn't matter that they are not painted particularly well, at least by the standard of Mr. Thiebaud's still lifes.

Here, too, are strangely asocial paintings of Mr. Thiebaud's bouffanted brunet wife, Betty Jean, who manages to keep a poker face while eating ice cream, and his longtime friend Richard Wollheim, a philosopher who shows us his bald pate as he leans over a simple white lectern.

In a wide-ranging catalog essay titled "The Lonely Crowd," Pepe Karmel, an associate professor of art history at New York University, offers other explanations for the anomie of Mr. Thiebaud's figure paintings, invoking Degas and Mantegna, alongside more contemporary references, like Alice Neel and Alex Katz.

He also finds new bridges between the figure paintings and the still lifes, which have to do with color and Minimalism. These connections are important, and you won't find many of them in the show's installation. "Landscape, figure and still life — there isn't any hierarchy or emphasis as far as I'm concerned," Mr. Thiebaud has said.

He sometimes seems to be cycling around those categories without pushing himself into any single one. (Just try to guess the dates on the works in the second gallery of still lifes, where 1962's "Boston Creams" hangs next to 2010's "Tulip Sundae.")

But in a few of the show's more recent paintings, he combines them into something new.

"Dressing Room Figure" (1994), of a woman standing at her vanity table in an open gown, includes a small tableau of perfume and cosmetics along its bottom edge. And the new large-scale painting "Hot Dog Stand" (2004-12) seems to sample from Mr. Thiebaud's early-1960s still lifes, with its giant image of a frankfurter on a sign above the stand, but the dotted horizon could have come from landscapes like "Winter Ridge" (2010).

You can tell that Mr. Thiebaud knows exactly where his strengths lie, and what, from his vast catalog of pies and cakes and other ephemeral pleasures, will hold up in the long run.