ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Wayne Thiebaud and the Art of Longevity

How the 93-year-old California painter stays at the top of his game: "I want to be as good as I can and keep going, keep trying"

By ALEXANDRA WOLFE

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Photos: The Work of Wayne Thiebaud

'Cold Case,' 2010/2011/2013Pop painter Wayne Thiebaud's retrospective at Acquavella opens Oct. 23 © *Wayne Thiebaud, Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY*

Wayne Thiebaud, the American artist best known for his lifelike, almost edible paintings of cafeteria foods, has a new favorite word: "humblebrag." "It's like when all these people are honored at the Academy Awards they all get up and try to out-humble each other, " he says, sitting in his airy studio in Sacramento, Calif.

Mr. Thiebaud's paintings have sold in the midseven figures and he is firmly ensconced in the canon of contemporary American greats, with a new solo show opening at New York's Acquavella Galleries on Oct. 1. Still, he says he "can't endure" his own work and he's not "humble-bragging." "I really am not

satisfied with my work," he says. "People view that as sort of humility but it's not. It's reality."

Nattily dressed in a crisp white shirt, white slacks and gray moccasins, Mr. Thiebaud is a fit 93-year-old. He plays tennis every morning before working in his studio.

Most of his friends and contemporaries whose art hangs on the walls of his small suburban house, such as Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, have died. But Mr. Thiebaud's career is far from over. He's painting a series of women in front of objects such as hats and lipsticks, inspired by his wife, Betty Jean, who once loved to dress up and is now suffering from Izheimer's disease. "I want to be as good as I can and keep going, keep trying…and keep enjoying what I'm doing," he says.

Mr. Thiebaud is trying to create a "new species of art," at a time when he feels the art world has been overrun by "artists" versus painters. Throughout his career, he has continued to paint in a representational style through periods when abstract art was far more popular. Gretchen Berggruen, co-owner of the John Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco, where his work has been exhibited, calls him "unabashedly American and unabashed about not pandering to abstract expressionism."

He puts quotation marks around the kind of "artists" that pander to the taste of the day versus "tradesmen" who try to improve the quality of their paintings. "At a certain point artists who were craftsmen who took great pride in craft and trade got a little uppity and suddenly decided they wanted to go in the front door … and get in with the higher echelon, so they became 'artists,'" he says. He's referring in part to the group of op artists he's often included in, much to his chagrin.

"I don't care for pop art at all," he says, adding that he doesn't find work by Andy Warhol or Roy Lichtenstein interesting. "Pop artists just appropriated. They steal too much for me." He admires Jasper Johns's paintings and Claes Oldenburg's "sense of intelligence," but most of all loves traditional paintings by his idols such as Henri Matisse, Pierre Bonnard and Edward Hopper.

It's why, looking back over his career, he thinks becoming a painter was "foolhardy." "How audacious of me to pick up a brush when Velázquez did what he did," he says.

Growing up in Long Beach, Calif., Mr. Thiebaud submitted his early cartoons to a Disney program when he was 16. The movie studio used to hire young people as "in-betweeners," who draw the animation steps between a character's movements. He got fired after three months for trying to form an animators' union, and didn't draw professionally again until he was working as an Air Force mechanic at age 20. One cold morning at 4:30 a.m. at the Mather Air Force Base just outside Sacramento, he saw military personnel in public relations making posters inside a building on the base and asked how he could get into their business instead. They asked if he could draw so he sketched Mickey Mouse. He was transferred right away. "It saved my life," he remembers.

After serving in the war, Mr. Thiebaud created illustrations for fashion magazines and ad agencies. He started teaching art in Sacramento in 1950, and 10 years later became a professor at the University of California, Davis. He says he began painting desserts and other everyday indulgences by accident. He'd originally been interested in cubism but conversations with his friends Franz Kline and de Kooning in New York led him to realize he had to do something different than what other artists were doing.

He thought back to his youth working in restaurants and realized no one was painting the images that came to mind. "Memory is very, very important to me," he says. He says he didn't pick pies and hamburgers for their substance but for their shapes. "I had a bunch of pies on plates, and then I thought,

'Well, that'll do me in as a serious painter right there,' but I couldn't leave it there."

Painting these objects began to jog other memories of being a young American growing up selling papers, working on live bait boats, and attending carnivals. He recalls selling hamburgers for a man who had him combine the meat with pancake mix to make it last longer. "I thought, 'He's cheating!'" exclaims Mr. Thiebaud. He started thinking of gumball machines as a vase of flowers and rows of pies as a geometric design. "I just decided this is what I want to do and I love it and I'm interested in it," he says. He kept his day job as a teacher and assumed no one would notice his artwork. "It was a big shock that they began to pay attention to it," he says.

Mr. Thiebaud stopped teaching full-time in 1990. He's critical of the way artists are trained today, and thinks art schools aren't educating the "physicality of the mind-body complex" or the empathy a viewer experiences when they're looking at artwork. "The biggest achievement and richest gift of drawing is not the drawing, but the new eyes that it gives you because it teaches you how to see in a way you can't see otherwise," he says.

These days, his artwork has become "more focused and cranky," Mr. Thiebaud says. "In a way since you've elevated this arrogance to the fact that you want to do really terrific work that you can't even imagine. It makes it very difficult for you to keep going on."