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It's hard to stop looking at Wayne Thiebaud's "Girl with Ice Cream Cone," a 1963 work in the new exhibition.

Food as philosophy

Early Thiebaud paintings continue to confound critics

By Charles Desmarais

Something about the early paintings of food by Wayne Thiebaud — as visually stunning, sensually appealing as they are — has resisted interpretation since their debut, half a century ago.

The work was an instant smash hit in its first New York show at the Allan Stone Gallery in 1962. Paintings were sold to prominent collectors and, right out of the gallery, entered the permanent collections of both the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum.

Later that year, San Francisco's de Young presented the first museum exhibition of the work. It had the remarkable effect of striking Alfred Frankenstein, The Chronicle's great art commentator of the day, critically dumb.

"Wayne Thiebaud: 1958-1968": Noon-6 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday; noon-9 p.m. Thursday; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Through May 13. Free. Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art, UC Davis, 254 Old Davis Road, Davis. (530) 752-8500. <https://manettishremmuseum.ucdavis.edu>

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Thiebaud's confounding food paintings

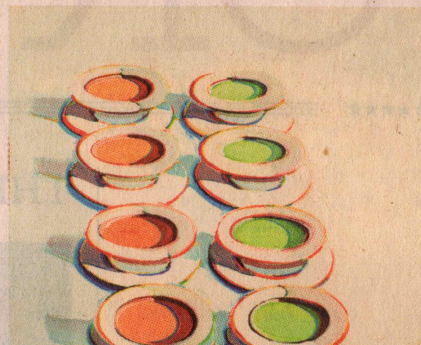
Thiebaud from page E1

He wrote, "We asked Wayne Thiebaud for a statement about his pies and cakes and pinball machines ... to use as an aid in our review of his exhibition. The artist replied with the subjoined statement, which is so interesting and so inclusive that we publish it in full and dispense with the review." A long article, "Is a Lollipop Tree Worth Painting?" followed under the artist's byline.

That text — brilliantly self-aware, lucid about art and its place in society — is the intellectual linchpin of a new exhibition, "Wayne Thiebaud: 1958-1968," at the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis through May 13.

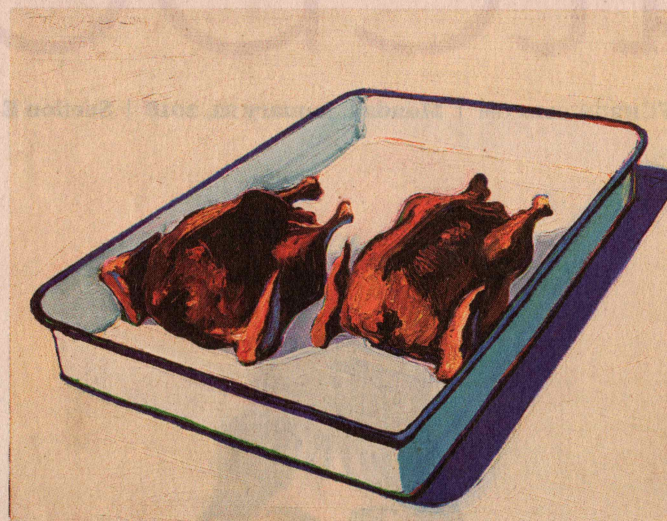
The show was organized by museum director Rachel Teagle. Crisply professional and no larger than it needs to be at 36 paintings, a smattering of prints and an engaging supplemental gallery, it is an extraordinary opportunity to see original works from Thiebaud's breakout period, together in one place. Crucial in securing loans from major museums across the U.S., surely, was the engagement of the artist himself, now 97, who taught at Davis from 1959 to 2002 and holds the title of professor emeritus at the school.

Thiebaud's essay, originally prepared for the Museum of Modern Art, is provided as an exhibition brochure and excerpted in signage on the walls. It shares keen insights a critic might have thought it was their duty to provide. The sculptural qualities of impasto, "white, gooey, shiny, sticky oil paint spread out on the top of a painted cake to 'become' frosting." The connection to his first career as an art director and



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Among the works on view at the UC Davis show are 1963's "Cream Soups," above, and "Barbecued Chickens," right, from 1961. The exhibition runs through May 13.



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illustrator, "partly responsible for the look of some of the things." Aspects of space, color and the depiction of light, all key to the success of the paintings.

He even supplies his own "philosophic viewpoint," describing pastries in strict rows as references to mechanization, mass production and conformity, and "some surprising things which are also present. ... How alone these endless rows can be ... each piece of pie has a heightened loneliness of its very own ... giving it a uniqueness and specialness in spite of its regimentation."

Yet, for all the charm and accuracy of his words, there is no substitute for the experience of the paintings themselves. You think you know these pictures, so frequently have you seen them in reproduction (or in simulation: Thiebaud's attention to the commonplace has spawned uncouted imitators, and has come full circle to influence commercial illustration).

Then, you are confronted by the very first painting in the

show.

A 1962 work titled "Candy Counter" is 6 feet wide — roughly Actual Size, as the ads used to say. For all its clarity of description, however, you wouldn't mistake it for an actual candy counter. It is flat. Hung high on the wall, like art. The colors, at first acceptable, turn out to be somehow wrong, with greens and reds and pinks leaking though at the edges.

Long, broad brushstrokes define shapes less by outline than by obliteration, negating background the way a handyman paints out graffiti. Thick channels of paint drag your eye not into the picture, but on a slow meander across its surface.

It is the most artificial of concoctions. Yet it glows and shimmers: It's not a view, but a vision. Thiebaud doesn't describe objects, nor does he construct them — it's a process more organic, as if they were grown from a core of color outward. The picture convinces you that you are experiencing something real, not merely realistic. Though it has little to

do with food, it is something essential, bearing the full weight of that word.

Other works in the exhibition reinforce the notion that you are experiencing the thing, and at high intensity. In a 1961 painting, a white-enamel steel pan, the classic kind with the blue edge, holds a pair of "Barbecued Chickens." You wouldn't think they were delicious — or even edible, really. They are consumed in the looking.

Often, a nominal subject adds a touch of irony to the

narrative. The 1963 "Delicatessen Counter" is more an architectural study than a food display. "Half Cakes" (1961) is a foreboding wall.

There are, of course, pictures that are not unalloyed successes. "Trucker's Supper" (1961), for example, leans a bit too much on an unearned, Edward Hopperesque pathos. And I am not a fan of all Thiebaud's paintings of people, some of which are more glum than tragic.

But then you are hit with a picture like "Girl with Ice Cream Cone" (1963), and you can hardly stop looking. A solid woman in a bathing suit, legs splayed more for stability than seduction, is an inventory of particularized features: Teased hairdo. Tweezed eyebrows (one quizzical, one reproachful) over soulful eyes. Fulsome mouth gorged with tongue.

The cone is not for eating. It is a microphone, amplifying a moment now gone. A scepter, symbol of the power of the image.

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Online

► To read Wayne Thiebaud's original 1962 Chronicle article: www.sfchronicle.com

