



Paul Thiebaud Gallery photos

“Clown Rescue” from 2014 is one of several Wayne Thiebaud works that depict a figure at the edge of a circle.

This time, Thiebaud sends in the clowns

At 99, artist unveils new collection with a circus theme

By Charles Desmarais

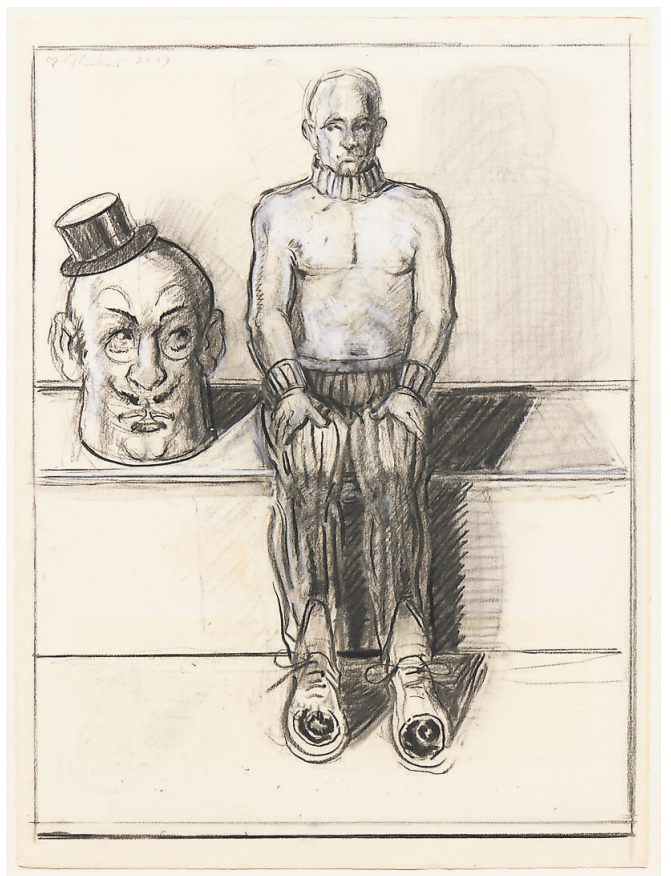
Nobody needs a clown painting explained. The clown has American culture firmly in the grasp of his white-gloved hand. (There are female clowns, and clowns who don’t wear gloves, but we are dealing in stereotypes here.)

The successful clown is the hysterical clown, which is to say he is a figure shocking in his knowledge of our silliest, most intimate selves, as menacing as the unguarded expression of our emotional instabilities. All this we learn from TV and childhood birthday parties, reinforced by popular culture, from the Sunday funnies to horror movies.

Wayne Thiebaud, doyen of Northern California artists and, at 99, one of the most respected and beloved painters alive, has never shied away from the colors of the circus. His rows upon rows of pies and parfaits have always had about them a scent of the absurd, his vertiginous San Francisco street-scapes a hearty whack of slapstick. Now, in an exhibition on view through March 28 at the Paul Thiebaud Gallery, the artist has unveiled a series of 44 paintings and works on paper, all made in recent years, all depicting clowns. (The gallery will reopen Tuesday, Jan. 7, after a holiday break.)

Art historian and critic Julia Friedman previewed the show in the December issue of the New Criterion magazine. The article is

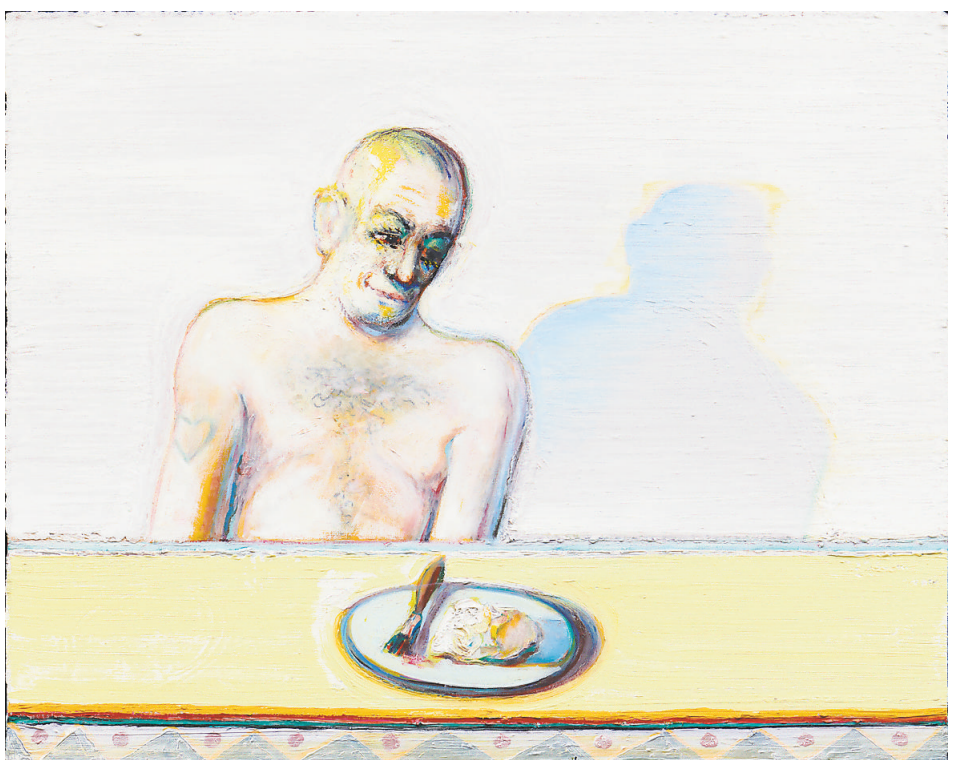
Thiebaud continues on E2



Thiebaud’s “Clown and Oversized Mask” from last year is done with charcoal and chalk on paper.

“Wayne Thiebaud: Clowns”: 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Tuesday-Saturday (closed through Monday, Jan. 6). Through March 28. Free. Paul Thiebaud Gallery, 645 Chestnut St., S.F. 415-434-3055. www.paulthiebaudgallery.com

The plate in 2016’s “Clown and Makeup” holds a brush that can also be seen as a tool of the artist.



ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Paul Thiebaud Gallery photos

Wayne Thiebaud’s “Beast and Clown,” depicting a clown who has been set upon by a tiger, could also be about a celebrated artist pinned down by an adoring fan.

Thiebaud clowns around in exhibit

Thiebaud from page E1

worth a read for background on the pictures. She tracked the development of the series in interviews and visits to Thiebaud’s studio over nearly three years.

Thiebaud apprenticed as an animator at Walt Disney Studios even before he went to art school, and he worked as a cartoonist in the Air Force. He is a dedicated follower of the George Herriman comic strip “Krazy Kat” and painted sets for the 1990 San Francisco Ballet adaptation of the strip. He’s also a fan of the Sacramento theme diner Pancake Circus.

The exhibition fills the comfortable North Beach gallery, founded by his late son, that the artist has often favored over international marquee-brand spaces that would be thrilled to show his art. It opens with “Beast and Clown,” a bang-up metaphor of the fool taken down by a tiger that seems less threatening than over-eager. It’s hard not to read the image of the beast’s slathering embrace, wet with frothy brush-loads of white impasto, as a story about a celebrated artist pinned down by the adoring — um, lionizing — fan.

Several works depict a figure at the edge of a circle. A clown in the spotlight, of course, but just as surely a man at the brink of an abyss. “Clown Rescue” shows one joker clinging to another as



Thiebaud’s “Clown Spirit” from last year is among the 44 new works in the exhibition.

he is dragged from the lime-light to the safety of the darkened stage. It’s an exhibition kids would enjoy, with witty permutations of the clown idea throughout. “Clown Disintegrating” is a character reduced to his component atoms. A “Clown Cloud” rains only on one forlorn soul. Illustration can do that to a viewer: It can shackle the

infinite complexity of the visual to an unyielding chain of words. Which is why any reproduction, but particularly of a painting by Wayne Thiebaud, can be impossible to read for its full meaning. That red form across the “background” of “Clown Rescue” might well stand for a curtain, but it is also a serrated edge in motion. Another picture, “Clown and Makeup,”

glows with the pastel undertones and primary-color boundary lines that Thiebaud seems uniquely capable of reconciling. Each major element — figure, shadow, table, plate — declares its boldly outlined independence, even as it quivers, spins, takes its symmetrical place in the harmonious whole. Still, that dish of makeup (so the title says) holds a



“Boxed Clown (with Flag)” is among the whimsical works.

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brush we might associate with artist as well as clown, and a fluff that, in a Thiebaud, we want to call meringue.

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