

Wayne Thiebaud

An Appreciation

by Michael Klein





Wayne Thiebaud Student, 1968. Oil on linen (1920-2021)
Fisher Collection. SFMOMA - courtesy Rocor via Flickr

Wayne Thiebaud died today at the age of 101 one of America's most celebrated artists. I first became familiar with his work back in the 1970s, how I don't remember but there were a group of realists that caught my eye: John Koch, Edward Hopper, Alex Katz and of course Thiebaud, While the art world, centered in New York in 1955, remained focused on the painters and ideas associated with Abstract Expressionism, a young painter named Wayne Thiebaud out West was making paintings that explored and expressed the material world around him. His work would not be discovered until ten years later when he joined forces with a young art dealer named Allan Stone new to the art scene in New York. Stone championed Thiebaud's work for the next four decades through sales and exhibitions and a strong friendship. And though was a devotee of Willem de Kooning; Franz Kline and Barnett Newman, Thiebaud was that unique talent that set his realist style very much apart and on its own.

Within the next decade that followed- while Pop art came into view changing and challenging view points in what was acceptable subject matter and how his vision of such subjects, that is the seemingly endless expansion of post war American life and culture, was different from and at the same time akin to generations of painters before him. For Thiebaud painting and life are very much intertwined. (Ironically Grace Hartigan too saw the intersection between art and life particularly in her paintings of shop windows) His themes if you will define the nature and character of what we know to be modern America: rows of ready to eat hamburgers, double scoop ice cream cones, imposing skyscrapers and multi lane highways teeming with traffic. Artistically speaking he travels from the microcosm to the macrocosm

from a humble slice of meringue pie on a plate to the formidable mountains, clouds and rivers of his native West coast landscape. As if he were choosing from a universe of ready mades

There is a deadpan honesty in the work but at the same time a remarkable sense of an exquisitely drawn line and palettes of vibrant color that transforms the ordinary into something special even unexpectedly rare. To view all seven decades of Thiebaud's outstanding career is to see an inventory of all things contemporary. This expansive subject matter includes charcoal drawings of tools or television sets; colorful pastels of sweet desserts; black and white etchings of apartment buildings or a farmer's view of landscape and finally paintings of extraordinary skill and reserve that depict the things closest to his heart, friends, family and the tools of his trade. And this is what makes Thiebaud so interesting he focuses on the drink not the drinker; the dinner plate not the diner; the apartment building but not the dweller. With realists like Katz or Hopper for that matter there is a narrative at work shot though it may be but a story line none the less. No such narrative for Thiebaud instead it is a study of the shapes, forms and colors of those things which fill our lives whether it is a pile of books or the display case in a bakery. He is sublime editor using as much or as little as is necessary to hold his attention and ours too.

There is in Thiebaud both intimacy and objectivity. His subjects tend to be isolated, removed from their day-to-day function and then examined and represented as a small icon of life, very much Morandi like Thiebaud's astute observations focus on both man made objects and objects drawn from nature. There is no hierarchy in Thiebaud's mind, eve-

-ything has a purpose and reason, a defined shape and a characteristic color or hue and therefore everything is a potential subject for exploration. Thiebaud's genres are equals be it a yellow daffodil, a metal wrench or the family dog. This is part of their charm and appeal they are humble : lollipops , bow ties or a bowl of cherries.

Thiebaud has never rebelled against the principles of paintings. In fact he has used the tradition of painting and drawing to his advantage making from both skill and talent a body of work that explores his vision of his time and place and at the same time demonstrates the character and quality of the mediums he chooses for his ideas. Thiebaud has mastered more than drawing- a skill he honed over his early years as a graphic designer. He began to turn his ideas into prints in the 50s and has continued printmaking as an important aspect to his artistic output. Along side prints come ink and graphite drawings, pastels and charcoals a variety of works on paper in which Thiebaud's hand identifies the subjects that attract him and find their way into paintings.

Thiebaud's effect is a nonchalant composition when subjects portrayed do not appear composed but as if they were just left out on a table. In other ways his imagery appear where groups of his favorite things like pies or cakes sit in neat rows as if on the assembly line. To my mind less a comment on the ways and means of mass production and more of an observation on how we live, how we shop and how we see.

Here are three wonderful of examples of Thiebaud's visual thinking?: a portrait a still life and a city scene.

The first a portrait of his wife from 1968-69 At first glance it is " en grisaille" in grays emphasized by the b/w illustrations in the book she is sat beside. Yet

after looking a bit longer the grays and blacks reveal a beautiful painted face in natural colors. As if a product of the digital age no instead it is the intelligence and skill of the painter exploring color. Color is the prize that leads us to her face which is Thiebaud's true love.

The phone rings; the cook steps away from the counter where he or she is working and Thiebaud picks that moment to capture this random still life. His delight are the yet to be ambled parts; the random shapes and colors the look of something of the moment. Just compare it to the Tony Cragg work made in the 80s. Balanced and organized like a good soldier , a perfect still life, collected and assembled from used plastic bottles.

Thiebaud's city scenes are similarly assembled cluster of buildings rising along the hilly streets of San Francisco. Not concerned or interested in a specific address or building style ,Thiebaud is absorbed in he contrasts of forms of building against sky, roads built into hills and the unique character of this town sitting of the edge of a giant bay . Perspective is flattened mimicking 19h century Japanese print techniques so the blue background could be either sky or bay as suggested in this print, Hill Street, made in 1989 .

Painting for Thiebaud as a way of life, dozens of solo shows, numerous museum shows even special covers of The New Yorker Magazine, Thiebaud was ubiquitous and extraordinary; inspiring and enjoyable. He will be missed and hopefully in the ranks of other American painters new and not so new talent will fill his shoes.

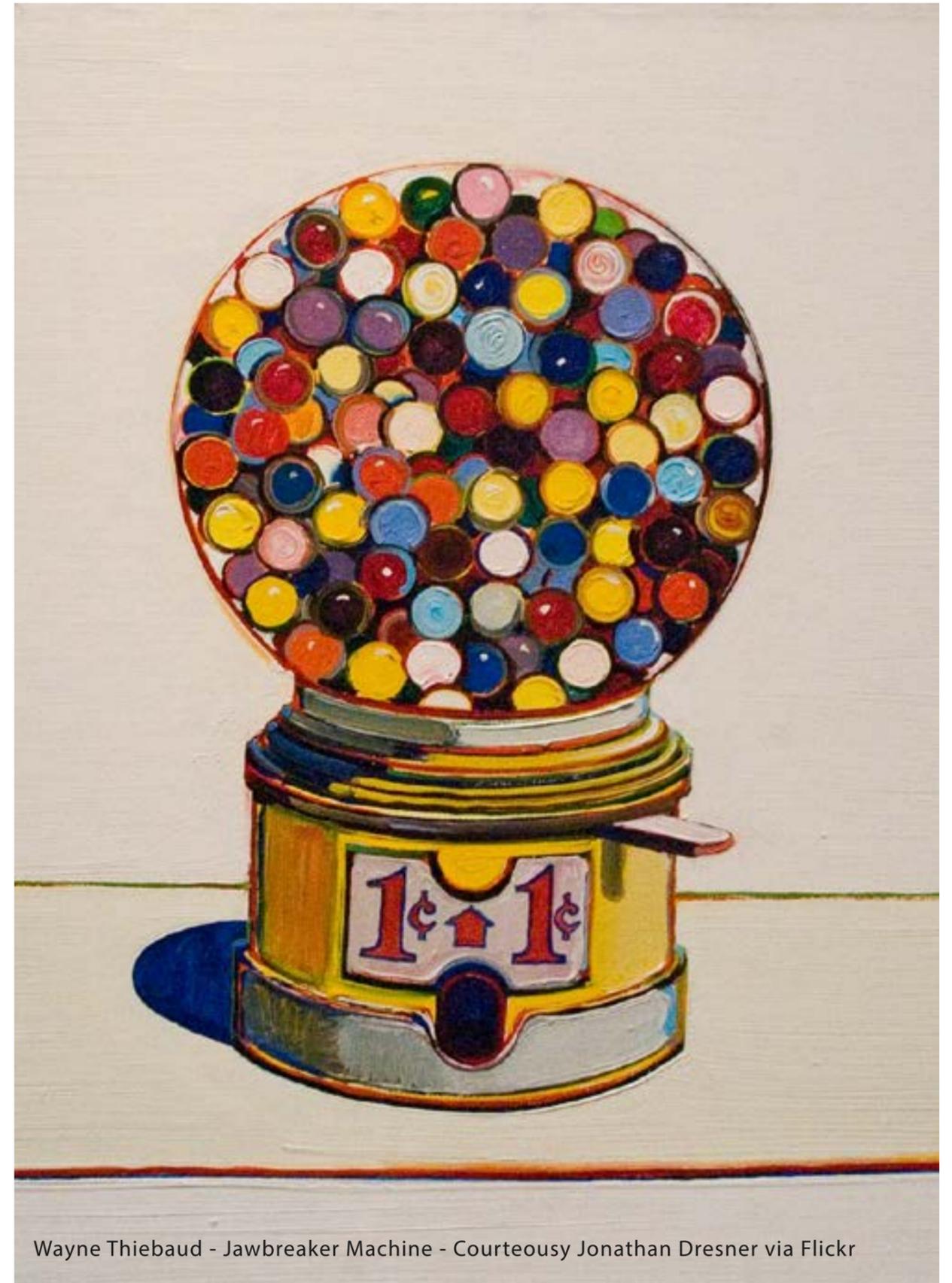
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Wayne Thiebaud - Betty Jean and Book, 1969. Oil on canvas (1920-2021) Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento - courtesy Rocor via



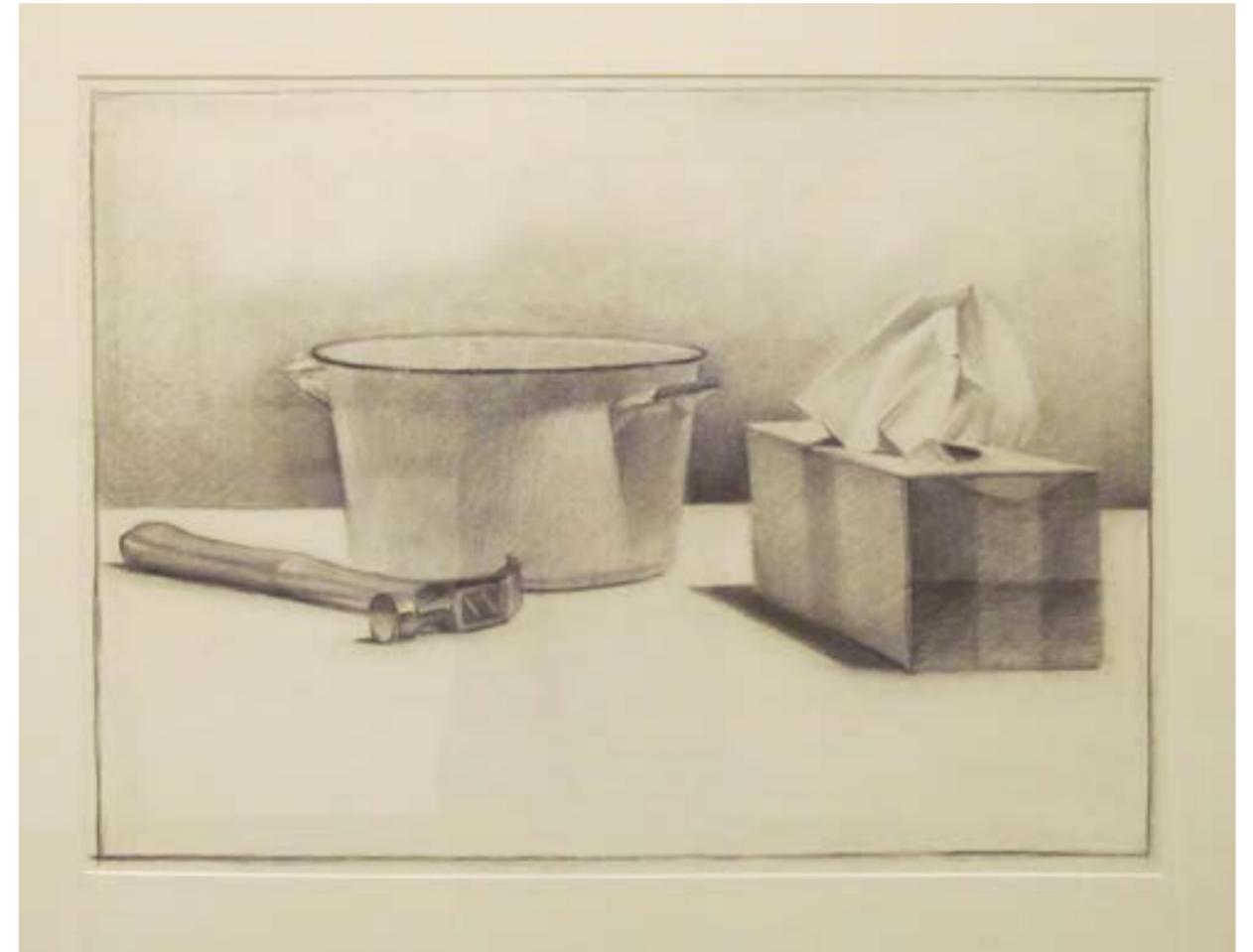
Wayne Thiebaud - (detail) Girl with Ice Cream Cone, 1963. Oil on canvas (1920-2021) Hirshhorn Museum. UC Davis - Courtesy Rocor via Flickr



Wayne Thiebaud - Jawbreaker Machine - Courtesy Jonathan Dresner via Flickr



Wayne Thiebaud - Freeway Curve, 1979. Drypoint and aquatint (1920-2021)
Crown Point Press. Legion of Honor - Courtesy Rocor via Flickr



Wayne Thiebaud - Still Life with Kleenex, 1969. Charcoal on paper (1920-2021)
UC Davis - Courtesy Rocor via Flickr