

Overview

Wayne Thiebaud

Wayne Thiebaud was the first artist I invited to work at Crown Point Press with the intention of publishing his prints. Richard Diebenkorn had been working with me since I started the press in 1962, and in 1964 I asked him if I could publish some of the etchings he was doing. That same year, I invited Thiebaud. Diebenkorn's portfolio-book, *41 Etchings Drypoints*, and Thiebaud's *Delights*, which contains seventeen etchings, both came out in 1965.

Being a publisher is different from being a printer. A publisher initiates and manages projects—and managing includes selling.

In trying to be both printer and publisher, I did a poor job of selling. Both Diebenkorn and Thiebaud had New York dealers who seemed interested in the prints, but their clients apparently were not. I remember I offered all seventeen *Delights* etchings to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1965 for \$300.

The acquisitions committee declined the work, because a member convinced the group that since I had printed for Thiebaud, the prints were not authentically his. *Delights* was sold at auction in the mid 1980s for close to \$100,000, laying that concern to rest, at least in terms of the market. Nevertheless, the larger question remains: What makes a work of art authentically that of the artist?

In 1964, on the first day Thiebaud

worked at Crown Point Press, I faced a dilemma concerning authenticity.

Thiebaud had asked me to prepare a few small etching plates. When I gave them to him, he pulled a stack of snapshots of his paintings out of his pocket and arranged them on the table. Then he began to copy on one of the little plates a picture of a piece of lemon meringue pie. I went upstairs to fix lunch. I became more and more distressed as I made sandwiches, and as soon as I got back to the basement I poured out my criticism. "Printmaking should be original," I said. "What's the point of copying yourself, of redoing something that's already been done?"

Thiebaud didn't say anything but

"has the same composition as the painting."

"What interests me about it," he answered slowly, "is that the etching has exactly the same composition as the painting." A piece of pie on a china plate is a triangular shape on a round shape. It makes a classic composition, he explained. But as an object it is luscious, light-reflecting, and tempting. "It calls up associations," he added, "from mom's home cooking to pie in the sky." He went on to say he had done it in paint as well as he could. But it was large in paint, and full of color and texture. He had visualized it very differently in etching. Would the same composition work in fine lines, black and white, and in a small size? Was "it" in the composition? Or was "it" in the paint, the color, the surface? He had accepted my invitation, he said, so he could try to find out.

I learned from Thiebaud that artists are in lifelong pursuit of "it," one baby step at a time. Lightning bolts seldom come down from the sky, he said, but one thing does lead to another, so ideas re-occur, and changing anything changes everything. In a 1987 lecture Thiebaud told his audience that printmaking has made "an important difference" in his "inquiry into how form evolves." Making a print, he said, is "an orchestration between what you think you know and what you're surprised to learn."

What makes a work of art authentically an artist's is that the artist intends to do original (rather than reproductive) work and, when the work is completed, acknowledges that original work has been done. An artist who feels his work depends on the touch of his own hand will not ask the printer to do any plate work, and if he feels this extremely, he will print his own

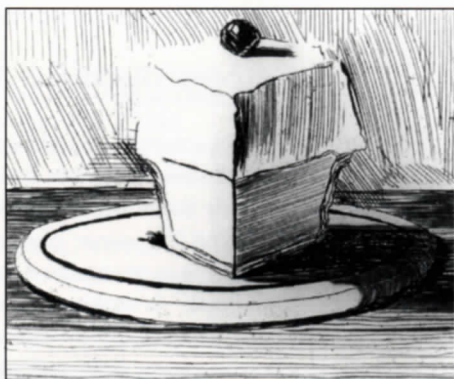
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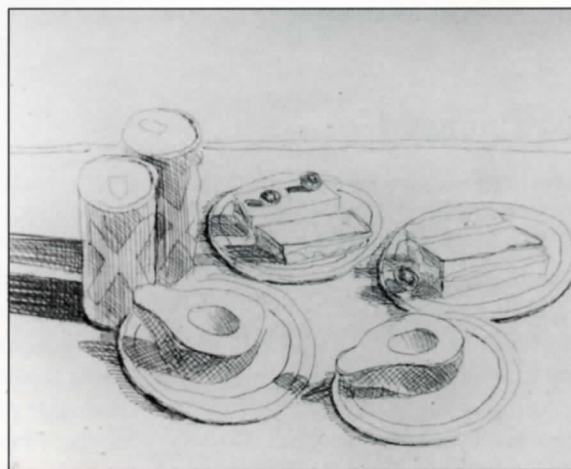
Wayne Thiebaud in the Crown Point Press Studio, Berkeley, 1964.

Patrick Dullanty, photo.

he picked up another etching plate and drew the lunch—two cans of beer, two sandwiches and two avocado halves. He drew the sandwiches without crusts, and added some olives as a garnish. Then, as we ate, he talked. He said that although he had made paintings, drawings, even prints of many pieces of pie, he didn't think he was finished with the subject. "But this," I said, indicating the drawing he had just made on the etching plate,



Lemon Meringue (Delights), 1964, hard ground etching with drypoint; paper size: 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 10 $\frac{7}{8}$ ”; image size: 4 x 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ ”, edition 100.



Lunch (Delights), 1964, hard ground etching; paper size: 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 10 $\frac{7}{8}$ ”; image size: 5 x 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ ”, edition 100.

prints. Printing for oneself on principle, however, seems to me to be somewhat self-protective.

Thiebaud often argues against self-protection in art. In 1972, he told a group of students not to worry about “creativity and emotion and individualism. You’ve all got your driver’s licenses already. You’re already individuals, you’re already creative. All you have to worry about is being good at something.” What Thiebaud is trying to become good at is drawing, not printing. He prefers to have someone who has become good at printing do that for him. Of course, he retains control, and gives his approval to each print by signing it.

“But what if an artist isn’t a responsible type?” one of my Crown Point printers asked. “Once I printed in another shop for an artist who told the chief printer to change anything in the print if he thought the change would make it sell better.” The name of the artist she mentioned is a familiar one in the commercial (as opposed to fine art) print market. There is a world of printmaking out there that is different from the world Crown Point is in. Salvador Dali, for example, often signed the paper before his prints were put on it.

Artists in the fine art world are in it for the long run, and most of them see everything they do as part of a lifetime body of work. They won’t sign prints which they don’t think are good. Commercial print artists are interested in the short run—in immediate, large volume sales. Their work is rarely collected by museums, sold at auction, or expected to increase in value over time except by salespeople, who often are forced by dealers to use high-pressure sales tactics.

If you have doubts about the authenticity of a purchase you’re about to make, I suggest calling a museum and asking someone in the print department about it. If you decided to

donate it to the museum later, would that staff member be pleased? You won’t find enthusiasm from museum staff members if you’ve stumbled into the commercial market—people in the field know which galleries, publishers and artists are suspect. If you are dealing with a good artist and a good publisher, if you like the print, and if you think the way it was done makes sense for the artist who did it, then take the artist’s word for it (indicated by the signature) that this art is authentic. Otherwise, who is responsible for the rules?

Thiebaud, who was born in Arizona in 1920, came to art from an interest in cartoons and caricature, and, in fact, he briefly worked as an animator when he was young. He has said that caricature influenced him to reduce his work, as a sauce is reduced in cooking. This, along with his choice of common objects as subject matter, led in the early 1960s to his being grouped with Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol and others called Pop artists. Movements in art, however, don’t spring up full-blown but gradually form out of previous art ideas partly used and partly subverted. By the time someone defines what a movement is, it’s usually over. As it turned out, Thiebaud was not really interested in standardization as Lichtenstein was, or in undermining values with ironic comments as Warhol was. Within a few years, it became clear that he is closer to being a Realist than to being a Pop artist.

He is not, however, the kind of Realist whose greatest pleasure is in piling up details. In an interview with Richard Wollheim published in *Modern Painters* in 1991, Thiebaud says Realist painting can be “a kind of taxidermy,” and goes on to talk about the nineteenth century painter Ingres who avoids taxidermy with “magical transformations, when you would think that he had everything going against him: those careful notations of everything, working for hours, almost

like making up the flesh—but when you look at the Turkish bath figure, it nullifies all the resistance we might have.”

Thiebaud often works for hours even on a small etching, but the time is not spent in accumulating detail. In refining a print, sometimes he makes seemingly miniscule changes, sometimes he simply draws and re-draws. He made forty-seven etchings in the early sixties for *Delights*, but only used seventeen. He looks long and hard at a subject and makes very specific observations.

By the end of the first day of our 1994 project with Thiebaud, a studio table was full of sunglasses and reading glasses borrowed from our staff members. Thiebaud drew some of the glasses in rows, as if they were on a glass shelf at the optometrists, with reflections. He added some aquatint, took it away, made colored shadows, removed them, and eventually ended up with the small print, *Eyeglasses*, printed in black with a touch of blue. At the same time he was working on another very similar plate, which he finally scrapped.

Two pair of the sunglasses in the array on our worktable found their place in *Beach Glasses*, where glare and an expansive space isolate them. As Thiebaud's work progresses,

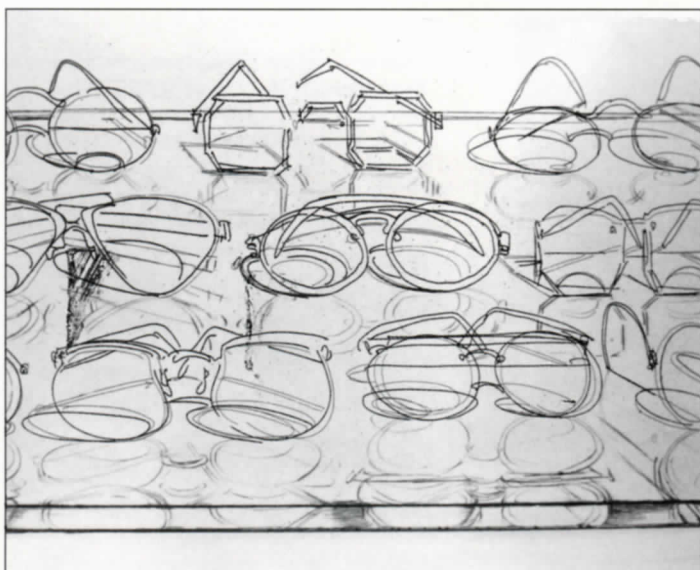
form supersedes what he sees. Back in 1964, when he drew our lunchtime sandwiches, they were without crust so they would be more defined—and also more extreme, more evocative. In *Beach Glasses* the forms sit solidly in limitless space, evoking the feeling of sun and heat. Besides the color print, there are two other versions of *Beach Glasses*, both black and white, which are printed in small editions. They satisfy Thiebaud's desire to use a compositional idea in several different ways.

Thiebaud has lived in California most of his life, although he spent one year in New York in the 1950s. There he met Willem deKooning, Franz Kline and other Abstract Expressionists. He returned to Northern California at about the same time Richard Diebenkorn switched from Abstract Expressionist work to what has become known as Bay Area Figurative painting.

Diebenkorn was turning to Matisse while Thiebaud was studying Spanish painters: Velazquez, Goya and the more obscure Joaquin Sorolla, whose painting style Thiebaud calls “fluid bravura.” Thiebaud also was studying Diebenkorn's figurative work, the opposite of bravura. “I went to an exhibition of Diebenkorn's figures and interiors in the 1950s,”



Beach Glasses, 1994, soap ground aquatint, spitbite aquatint with drypoint; 24 x 34"; image size: 15½ x 27", edition 50.



Eyeglasses, 1994, hard ground etching with drypoint, printed in blue and black ink; paper size: 15¼ x 17½"; image size: 8½ x 11", edition 50.

Thiebaud told Wollheim. "I sat for quite a few hours and made diagrammatic, rather careful, analytic schematic drawings of the work, and learned a great deal about its character."

Diebenkorn and Thiebaud did not meet until they ran into each other at Crown Point Press in 1965. A year later Diebenkorn moved to Los Angeles. Thiebaud has made his home in Northern California since 1957.

After Thiebaud's *Delights* was published by Crown Point in 1965, he continued to work on small prints from time to time. We printed tiny editions, or none at all—just a few proof impressions exist of several of the prints of that time. I still had no idea how to sell prints, and I had gotten a part-time teaching position at the San Francisco Art Institute to support myself, my young son, and the press. Publishing seemed a losing proposition, and in 1970 I was pleased to accept a paying job to produce two rather large color etchings for a portfolio Thiebaud had agreed to do for Parasol Press in New York.

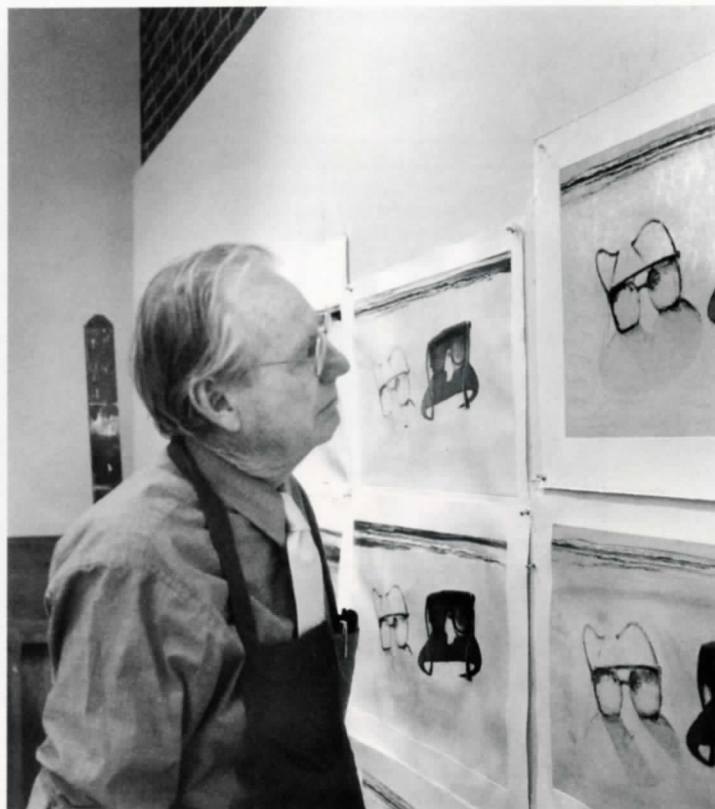
The owner of Parasol Press, Robert Feldman, at the time thought etchings had to be made of little scratchy lines. Feldman tried to discourage Thiebaud from making etchings, and asked instead for lithographs or silkscreen prints, but Thiebaud insisted that at least two prints in the portfolio be etchings. Feldman wanted the work to be in color, and that pushed Thiebaud into color aquatint. Although the prints were a struggle for both Thiebaud and me, Feldman was delighted. He even said the etchings were the best things in the portfolio.

That was the beginning of seven years in which I worked

almost entirely for Parasol Press. I learned a lot about the print world and about the New York art world. Feldman and the New York artists he sent to work with me in California were enthusiastic about Crown Point Press, and eventually I slipped into a position from which I could begin publishing again. In 1977, I embarked on a publishing program, and Diebenkorn and three other artists did projects for Crown Point, while we continued to work for Parasol. In 1982 we published Thiebaud again, and since then have published nearly all his prints. The main exception is a group of lithographs, published by his son Paul, part-owner of the Campbell-Thiebaud Gallery in San Francisco. Thiebaud is an engaged printmaker but not a prolific one. In the twelve years between 1982 and 1994 we have produced eleven projects together.

— Kathan Brown

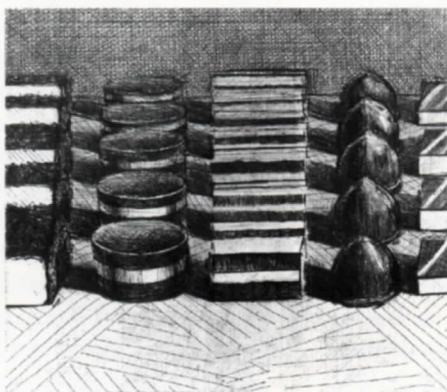
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Wayne Thiebaud in the Crown Point Press studio, San Francisco, 1994.

Wayne Thiebaud Still Lives

A Few Prints From The Past 30 Years



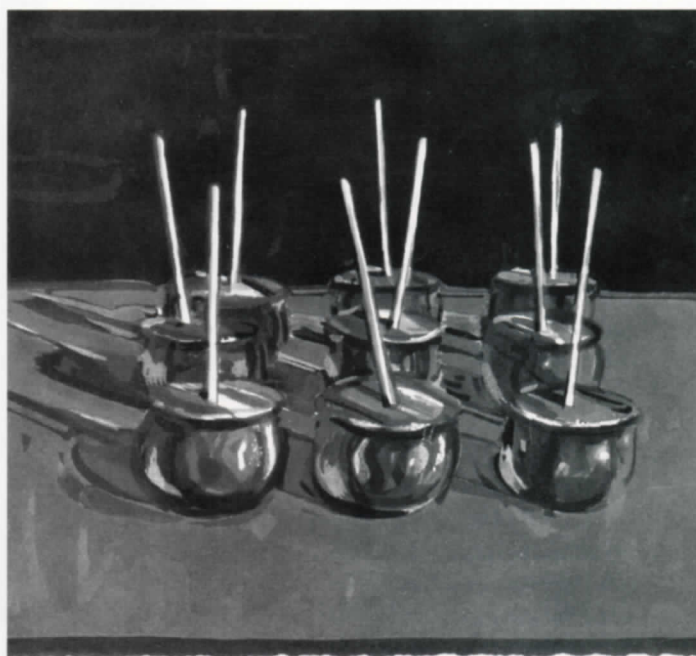
Chocolates, 1993, hard ground etching with drypoint, printed in three colors; paper size: 15¼ x 16"; image size: 9 x 10½", edition 50.



Candy Apples, (Delights), 1964, hard ground etching; paper size: 15 x 11"; image size: 5 x 5", edition 100.



Lipsticks—Black, 1988, drypoint; paper size: 14 x 12"; image size: 7 x 6", edition 15.



Candy Apples, 1987, color woodcut; paper size: 23½ x 24¾"; image size: 15¼ x 16½", edition 200.

Notes

Chris Burden is showing sculpture at the Gagosian Gallery, New York, through April 26, 1994.

Sherrie Levine is showing sculpture and collage at the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, through April 2, 1994.

Judy Pfaff will be showing at the Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York, April 21 through May 27 1994.

INK, PAPER, METAL, WOOD: How to Recognize Contemporary Artist's Prints

Tour Schedule

January 29 - March 27, 1994

Akron Art Museum

Akron, Ohio

April 23 - June 5, 1994

David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University
Providence, Rhode Island

July 2 - August 14, 1994

Columbia Museum of Art
Columbia, South Carolina

September 10 - October 23, 1994

Bayly Art Museum of
the University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia

November 19 - January 15, 1995

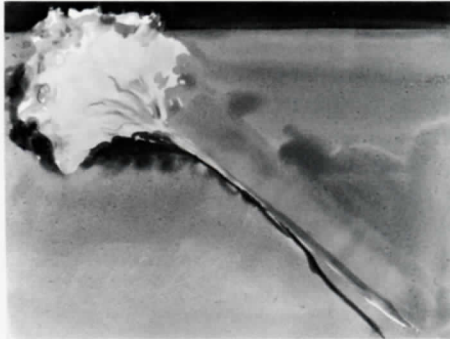
Georgia Museum of Art
Athens, Georgia

February 4 - March 19, 1995

Utah Museum of Fine Arts
Salt Lake City, Utah

April 15 - June 6, 1995

The Middlebury Museum of Art
Middlebury, Vermont



Untitled (Larry's Larkspur), 1991, watercolor monotype;
paper size: 26 x 31½"; image size: 18 x 24".



Cigars (Recent Etchings I), 1979, color aquatint with soft ground;
paper size: 22¼ x 29¾"; image size: 15¼ x 19¾", edition 50.

Calendar of Exhibitions

San Francisco:

March 22 - April 24

Wayne Thiebaud

New York:

March 23 - April 24

The Still Life: Three Perspectives;
Tony Cragg, José Maria Sicilia, Wayne
Thiebaud

April 23 & 24

Baltimore Fine Print Fair

Baltimore, Maryland

New York:

May 21

International Fine Print Dealers Association
Print Symposium. **Kathan Brown** will speak
on how **John Cage** approached printmaking.

San Francisco:

April 28 - May 28

Robert Kushner

New York:

April 29 - June 18

Opening April 29, 5-8pm

John Cage: On the Surface

In conjunction with Rolywholyover, A Circus,
at the Guggenheim Museum, SoHo.

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