Crown Point Press
Newsletter
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Overview

Wayne Thiebaud, *Cakes and Pies,* 2006. Color direct gravure. Paper size: 30 x 25 1/2"; image size: 22 x 18 1/4". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

A New Year's Greeting from Wayne Thiebaud and Crown Point Press

By Kathan Brown

"How old is Wayne Thiebaud, anyhow?" someone asked me. I had to look it up. He was born in November, 1920, so he is 86, about fifteen years older than I am. I was surprised, because we have sons (and now grandchildren) similar to one another in age. Our sons together made forts in my front yard while Thiebaud was making etchings at Crown Point in my Berkeley basement in the early '60s. Thiebaud and I have worked together frequently over the years but not every year. So, it was a special pleasure to have him in the etching studio recently, working hard, telling jokes, talking about playing tennis (he plays every day) and about his students at U.C. Davis (he was teaching at Davis when I first met him, and—although at some point he was supposed to have retired—he still is teaching there). Nothing's changed, despite the world's raging craziness outside our oasis.

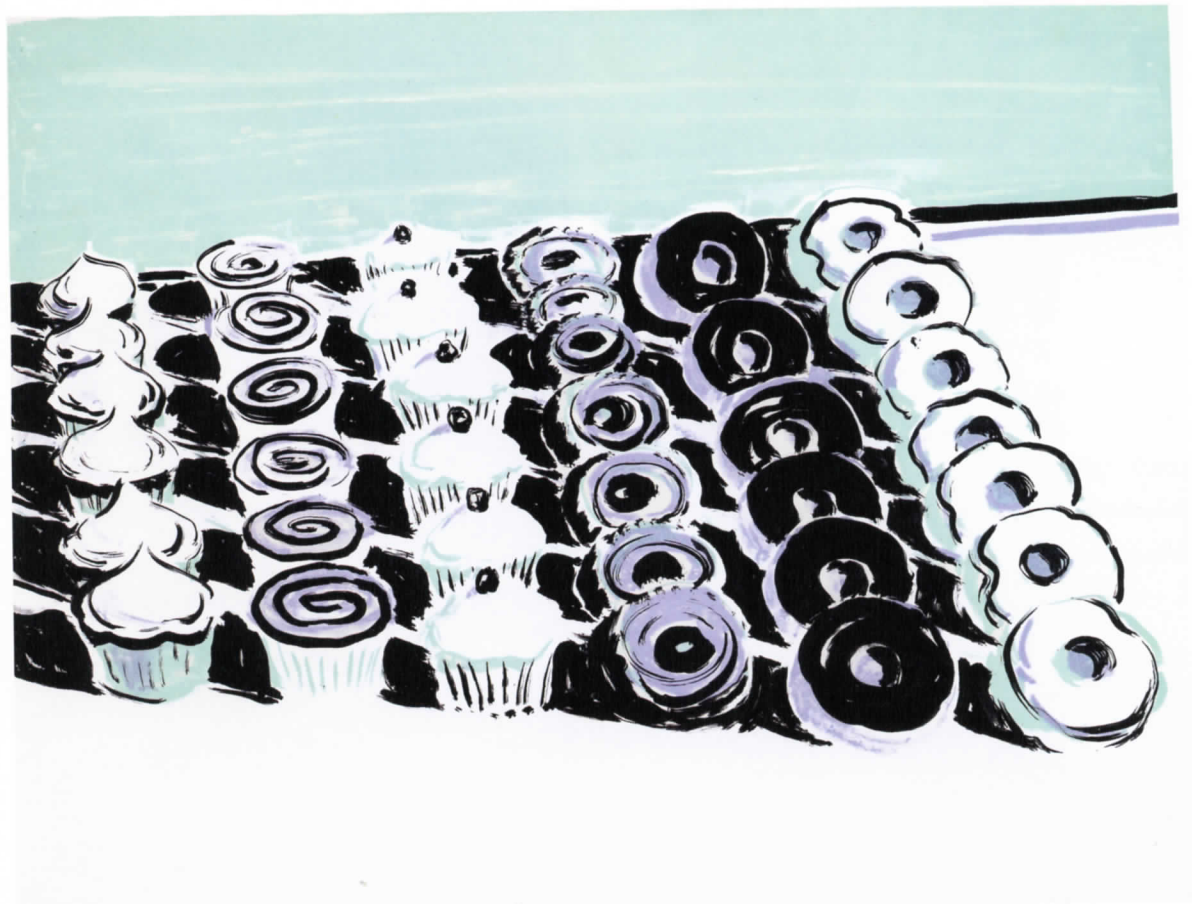
Art, as Thiebaud approaches it, is an oasis, a way of pay-

Wayne Thiebaud, *Dark Cakes and Pies*, 2006. Direct gravure printed in black and gray on gampi paper *chine collé*. Paper size: 30 x 25 1/2"; image size: 22 x 18 1/4". Edition 30. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

ing attention to something that is concretely there: sane, straightforward, surprising and poetic. Forget posturing; forget manipulating others. Look at something really hard. Do something really well. Be open to sensuality, to humor, and to delight. That's what I learned from Thiebaud forty years ago (our first publication together was called *Delights*), and I've been proselytizing about it ever since. The concept of Magical Secrets that Crown Point is exploring now in a series of books and on a new website continues that proselytizing. I have the courage for it because of Thiebaud's early and clear instruction to me never to be afraid of seeming to be foolish.

I remember his describing how foolish he felt when he first began painting pies and cakes in the mid-'50s when abstract expressionism ruled the art world. "I felt sort of embarrassed by the fact that I had subject matter in there," he told me, "so I tried to cover it up with arty strokes." Realizing, however, that he liked arty strokes (or something like that), he began studying the work of the nineteenth-century Spanish painter Joaquin Sorolla who used thick paint with clearly marked strokes, and at the same time he saw an exhibition of Richard Diebenkorn's work that was moving from abstraction into figurative subjects. "There is a long tradition of painting that I admire in which the paint is obviously manipulated by hand," he said. "That kind of coding was fundamental to my inquiry."

Thiebaud takes one step after another in a kind of joyful inquiry, and although he loves to paint (and eat) sweets, no particular subject matter is fundamental to him. He shifts easily from still life to figure painting—rows of pies coexist with dogs running on the beach—and he has done this kind of thing from the beginning. That is why his work cannot be characterized as pop art, which by definition works with pop-



Wayne Thiebaud, *Cupcakes and Donuts,* 2006. Color direct gravure. Paper size: 26 x 31"; image size: 18 x 24". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

ular subject matter. He gets as much inspiration from visiting museums as he does from observing the world around him.

"I'm a real, well I guess the word is thief, really," Thiebaud said in a 1997 public conversation with Ruth Fine and me at the National Gallery when Crown Point had its 35th anniversary exhibition there. "I love art history and I love what it does for us. I see it as a kind of private game refuge where we keep extraordinary examples of what it's possible to do. It's in a sense the bureau of standards that you feel privileged to be in some way, however minor, connected to. That community of excellence, at least for me, represents the wellspring by which you live." In re-reading that conversation, published in *Overview* ten years ago, I found it full of useful insight for today.

It is Thiebaud's inquiry into what it's possible to do, he said, that keeps him coming back to printmaking. "If someone asks why you bother to do etchings it probably means they haven't had a chance in their own experience to see what aesthetic beauty there is in that process," he told Ruth Fine. "It's undeniable for me. Nothing can quite duplicate that marvelous etched line and those velvet passages and the power of the relationship between ink and paper."

In my book, *Magical Secrets about Thinking Creatively* (2006), I laid out thirteen Magical Secrets that characterize approaches artists use to their work. One of them was "Get into the Flow," and I selected Richard Diebenkorn as an example because his concentration when he was working was so intense that the flow of energy around him in the studio

Wayne Thiebaud in the Crown Point studio, 2006.

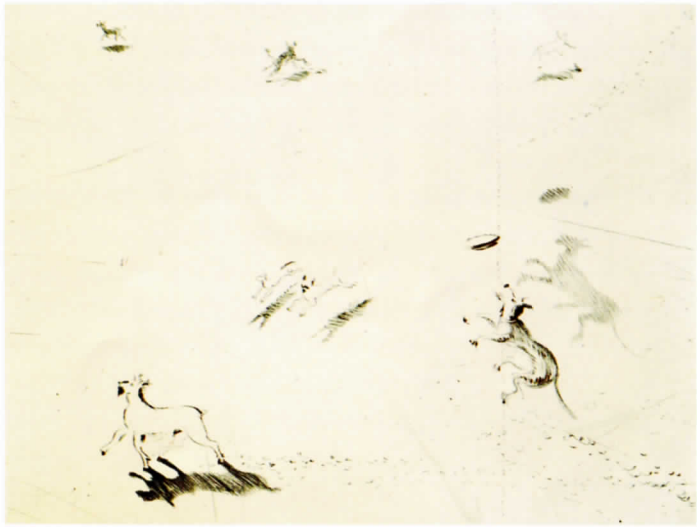
Wayne Thiebaud, *Beach Dogs*, 2006. Drypoint on gampi paper *chine collé*. Paper size: 24 x 19"; image size: 15 3/4 x 11 3/4". Edition 25. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

technology of the paint. The question is, when you translate it into something smaller, in black and white let's say, and printed, what do you do, and what's the intrigue, why do it? Well, I think the intrigue is in the relationship between one kind of thing and another; what the differences are, the distinctions."

Thiebaud drew the pie, cake, and donut images on transparent Mylar that a printer placed in contact with sheets of light-sensitive paper-backed gelatin and then exposed to light. The gelatin hardened in the exposed areas, and in the next step the printer adhered each image-bearing tissue to a copper plate. Washing the plate in hot water removed gelatin in varying thicknesses depending on the density of Thiebaud's brushstrokes. Then aquatint was applied to the plate to provide tooth, and the plate was etched. Photogravure plates bite to varying depths in the acid, depending on minute differences in the gelatin's thickness, and they are printed in intaglio, the ink coming from the depths of the plate not from the surface. Gravure and photogravure are the same process, but if a print is made with direct gravure, as these are, the image was transferred without use of a camera directly to a plate or plates from drawings made for the purpose. Thiebaud made three drawings for each image, and the resulting plates were printed one on top of the other. All three plates were used for both the color and the black and white versions. After each image was etched, Thiebaud worked with the printers to refine the colors.

Thiebaud has often made his prints in both color and black and white versions; it's one of the benefits of printmaking that such a thing can be done. In the National Gallery conversation mentioned earlier he spoke about this practice as "a good chance to serialize a single idea to see how I can operate. This is a kind of standard procedure, isn't it, for painters?" He spoke about a Picasso show then at the Gallery, noticing "the same essential visual thought stretched out in front of you in six or eight ways. So the idea of making a couple of versions of something, let's say you print all the plates in black and white as opposed to using the color plates the way you'd planned. You have two different versions and that changes really everything or a great number of things. That's a very important construct in formal investigation."

Formal investigation, Thiebaud says, is what he is primarily engaged in when he paints or makes prints. He shies away from thinking abstractly about art, a term that he says "causes a lot of anxiety." His concluding words in our conversation at the National Gallery ten years ago are perhaps even more fitting in the confusing world of today than they were then: "However attractive and interesting and fascinating the concept of art may be, painting and printmaking are real things that you can look at, love, and get pleasure from. They don't even have to be art. But they're there. You can see them. You can look at them. Don't worry about whether something is art or not, whether its high art, low art, mid art. All of that, I think, has made a terrible kind of confusion about something



Wayne Thiebaud, *Seven Dogs*, 2006. Drypoint on gampi paper *chine collé*. Paper size: 20 x 23"; image size: 11 3/4 x 15 3/4". Edition 25. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

that gives us such pleasure and creates these alternate worlds for us to look at. As far as I'm concerned, printmaking is more important than art."

Isn't that great? With tremendous pleasure, I present to you, as a positive way to begin 2007, seven new etchings and drypoints by Wayne Thiebaud.

Wayne Thiebaud, *Tide Figures*, 2006. Color drypoint with hard ground etching on gampi paper *chine collé*. Paper size: 39 3/4 x 30 1/2"; image size: 29 1/2 x 21 3/4". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit

In the Crown Point Gallery:

Wayne Thiebaud: Beaches, Cakes, Dogs & Pies

Winter Group Show

January 30 – March 10, 2007

In Kansas City, Missouri:

Visit the Crown Point Press booth at the 2007 Southern Graphics Conference, March 21-25, in Kansas City. We will be featuring our new book, *Magical Secrets about Line Etching & Engraving: The Step-by-Step Art of Incised Lines*, by Crown Point Master Printer Catherine Brooks, with an appendix on printing by Kathan Brown. For more information about the book, go to www.magical-secrets.com. For more information about the conference, visit http://sgc.kcai.edu.

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