

Overview

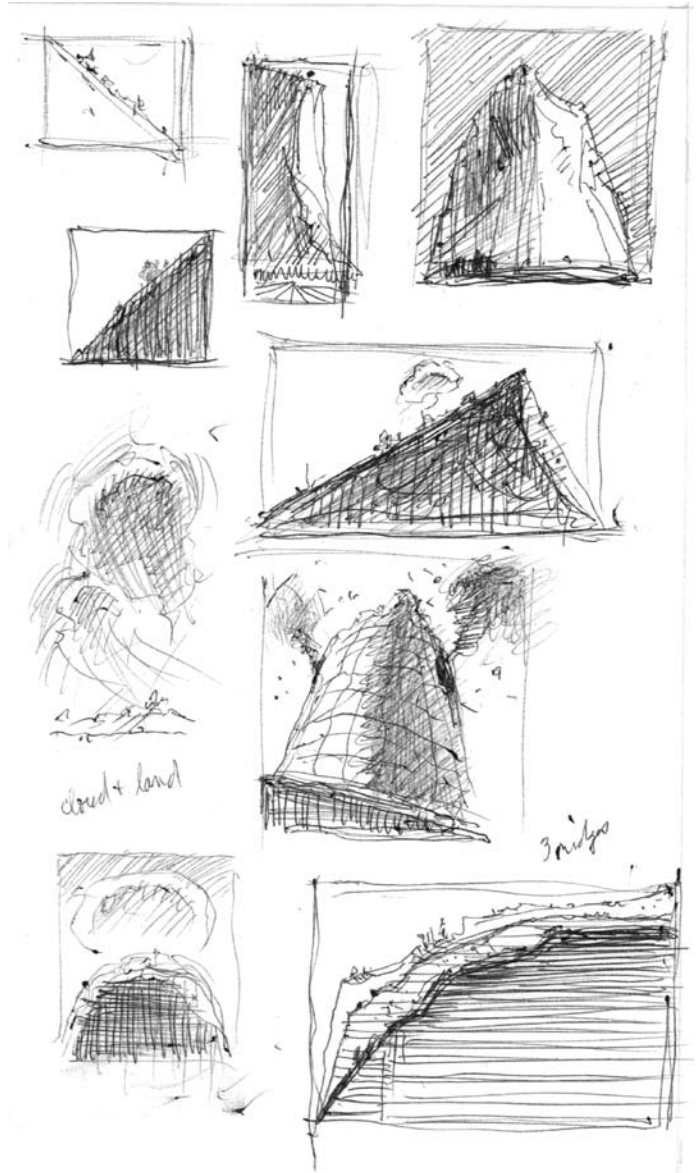
WAYNE THIEBAUD: Mountains

I have often told the story of Wayne Thiebaud's first day at Crown Point Press in 1964. He asked me to prepare a number of small plates with traditional hard ground, and after I had done that he arranged them in a row in front of him on the worktable. Then he got out a stack of snapshots of his paintings, and made another row; each plate had a photo behind it. With an etching needle, he slowly and attentively began copying the images onto the plates. I went upstairs to my kitchen to fix lunch.

I was high-minded about printmaking. I think this was partly because as a nascent publisher I was discovering that many people thought of prints as "reproductive" and therefore second-class, and partly because I was steeped in the notion of bringing the image out of the materials. For whatever reasons, before he could even take a bite of the food I had prepared, I started lecturing Wayne about copying himself. Remembering that moment, I am grateful that he is a patient and forgiving man.

He listened respectfully without saying anything, and then took one of the small plates and drew the lunch. He neatened up the sandwiches in the picture and added a garnish. Then, as we ate, he talked.

He said he was trying to find out what was important in making a picture. A piece of pie, he said, could call to mind Mom's apple pie, or pie in the sky, or it could be a triangular shape on a



A page from Thiebaud's sketchbook, 2011.

round one. Does the tool matter: a brush or an etching needle? If he slathers paint like frosting on a picture of a cake, is that cheating? Can he bring off the same image without paint?

He accepted my invitation to make etchings in order to try to find the answers to these questions, he said. "When you change anything," he added, "You change everything."

Fast forward forty-seven years. Things have changed, but not everything. Emily York, who was not even alive when Wayne told me about pie in the sky, is doing the printing, and Wayne has a teenage grandson visiting in the studio. The intense concentration is the same.



Heart Ridge, 2011. Hard ground etching with drypoint. 12-x-9-inch image on 16¼-x-13-inch sheet. Edition 25. All images printed by Emily York.

Thiebaud is working on a group of small plates, just as he was doing long ago, and he is sitting at exactly the same table. It has traveled from my Berkeley basement to a studio in Oakland, then across the bay to a light-filled loft that we lost in the earthquake of 1989, and now the table is in our beautiful San Francisco space that was built long ago for a newspaper. And here sitting at that table, I am happy to say, is Wayne Thiebaud at the age of ninety, still trying to find out what is important in making a picture.

We have done sixteen print projects together since our first one, and some have included large colorful prints. But Thiebaud has always been partial to limited means, and since a project usually includes several images, Crown Point Press has many black and white ones on our list of his works. We also have many prints in which he has used the physically demanding process called drypoint.

Drypoint lines are carved out of a copper plate by hand with a sharp tool, not etched with acid. In drypoint, as the artist pulls the tool through the metal a burr is thrown up at the side of the line. The burr prints with a rich soft character that varies according to the angle of the tool and the force of the artist's pull. Drypoint is physical; it requires strength and steadiness. And it is also unpredictable. Sometimes the metal grabs the tool and makes it do something you couldn't imagine. Using drypoint is a capri-

cious way to make a print, and its difficulty is one reason that historic drypoints (Rembrandt's, for example) are rare and coveted. Another reason is that the richness of the burr erodes quickly and editions are generally small.

The images in Wayne Thiebaud's new drypoints fill the space around them, carving into it. They are images of mountains. In one, only the mountaintop shows and a gigantic cloud is in the process of expanding into the entire sky. In another there seem to be forest fires; smoke plumes drift from behind a towering rock that rises from a ridge lined with miniscule trees, rooftops, maybe farms. Two images are of precipitous mountainsides, tiny trees holding their own. And one is a whole mountain, solidly angular against a cloud encircling its peak.

Thiebaud is a dedicated teacher, continuing to give classes at the University of California at Davis long after his supposed retirement. In 1972 I wrote down something he said to a group of students: "Don't 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."

Recently, as I was engrossed in the exhibition "The Steins Collect" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, I remembered that remark. The exhibition showed notebooks detailing Matisse's instruction in a school started by Sarah Stein, the wife of Gertrude Stein's brother Leo. Gertrude, apparently, joked about this, calling Matisse *chère maître*, dear master, or C. M. for short. The more unruly Picasso would not be pinned down to teaching.

According to Jack Flam, in his book *Matisse and Picasso: The Story of Their Rivalry and Friendship*, the two artists were also fundamentally different in that Picasso believed that "pictorial disharmony and the destruction of the human image would best capture the spirit of the new century" while "Matisse would never become reconciled to the idea of radically linking destruction with creation and violence with modernity."



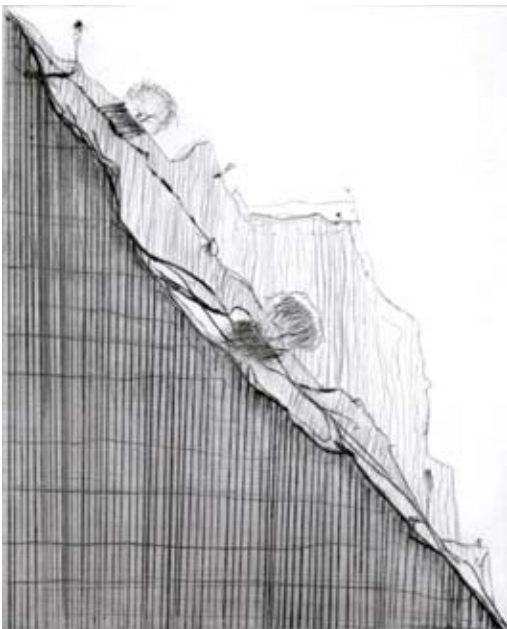
Wayne Thiebaud with printer Emily York, 2011.



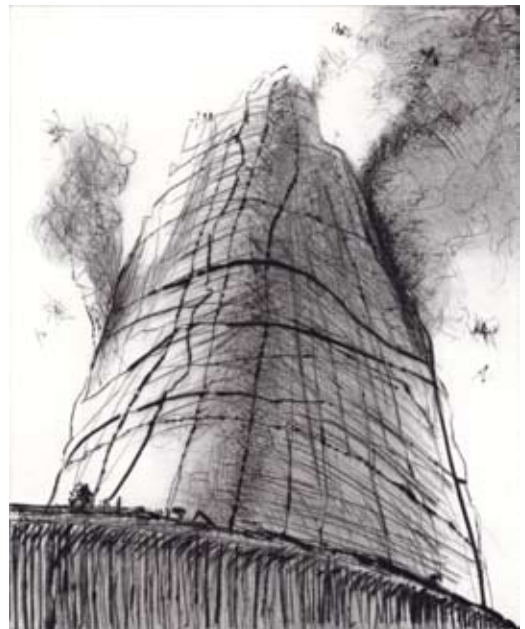
Sierra Cloud, 2011. Hard ground etching with drypoint. 6½-x-8-inch image on 11¼-x-12-inch sheet. Edition 15.



Land Cloud, 2011. Hard ground etching with drypoint. 8-x-6½-inch image on 12¼-x-10½-inch sheet. Edition 15.



Diagonal Ridge, 2011. Drypoint. 8-x-6½-inch image on 12¼-x-10½-inch sheet. Edition 15.



Mountain Smoke, 2011. Drypoint. 8-x-6½-inch image on 12¼-x-10½-inch sheet. Edition 15.

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Thiebaud, like Matisse, is at heart optimistic, and at the same time is always searching for a fresh viewpoint and is vigorous in his visual enterprise. I think (I hope) that “displacement” is a better word than “destruction” if we want to think of art as somehow encapsulating our times. Thiebaud has said that what he is doing in his painting is “a tremendous amount of adoption, adaptation, and change.” He says he “essentializes” his subject matter, reducing it as a sauce is reduced in cooking.

He sometimes remarks, smiling, that he is “in the oil business.” But he has also continually made prints throughout his career. “How do you figure out how to transpose visual images from one kind of sensibility or media to another?” he said in reply to a question in 1997 about my story of his first project at Crown Point Press.

“A painted image has a certain character, depending on the technology of the paint,” he continued. “The question is, when you translate it into something smaller, in black and white, 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.”

Essentially, what Thiebaud’s work is about is making distinctions. These new prints—surprising, straightforward, and also (I think) uplifting—are distinct. They have his touch and his sensibility deeply embedded in them.

—Kathan Brown

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In the Crown Point Gallery:

Wayne Thiebaud: Mountains

Landscape: A Group Exhibition

September 9 – November 5, 2011

In Los Angeles:

Visit the Crown Point Press booth at

Art Platform, L.A. Mart, October 1-3