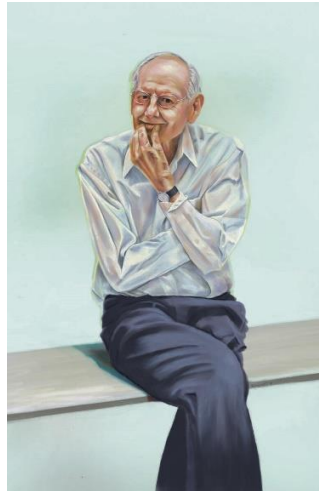


# San Francisco Chronicle

ART & EXHIBITS

## Of course Wayne Thiebaud is planning to paint on his 100th birthday

Sam Whiting | October 7, 2020 Updated: October 8, 2020, 11:19 am



An illustrated portrait of Wayne Thiebaud as an homage to the artist's style  
Photo: John Blanchard, The Chronicle

Wayne Thiebaud will begin his 101st year by arising before first light, making the morning commute upstairs to his home studio in the serene Land Park neighborhood of Sacramento, and laying thick swaths of oil paint on canvas.

His 100th birthday falls on a Sunday, Nov. 15, but Thiebaud (pronounced “Tee-bo”) works weekends. Birthdays too. Surely the most popular painter alive and working in California, Thiebaud answers his own home telephone. His speech is friendly and modest. Asked what his birthday plans are, he says, “I am just trying to make it there.”

During his 99th year, he debuted a series of clown paintings. During his 100th he has moved on to shopping malls, but he’s not happy with his progress.

“I’ll just go to work,” Thiebaud says, when pressed on the topic of his birthday. “I’m a pretty boring guy.”

But a vintage Thiebaud just sold at auction for \$19 million, proof that the art world has never found boring his representational paintings of pies, cakes and gumball machines; his realistic portraits; his skewed mappings of the dizzyingly steep San Francisco streets and the tangled Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

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Getting to know Wayne Thiebaud as the painter turns 100



Wayne Thiebaud's "Large Pool," from 2006.  
Photo: Berggruen Gallery

There is always demand to see his work, so on Friday, Oct. 16, the centennial begins with "Wayne Thiebaud 100: Paintings, Prints, and Drawings," at the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento. Also on Friday, "Wayne Thiebaud" opens at Berggruen Gallery on Hawthorne Street, directly across from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. SFMOMA, which is offering free admission and parking through Sunday, Oct. 18, has added to its collection of 58 Thiebauds with "Buffet," (1972-75) which looks like a Thiebaud birthday-party spread waiting for a line of eaters.



Wayne Thiebaud's "Buffet," 1972-75. Oil on canvas  
Photo: Wayne Thiebaud / Licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York, Katherine Du Tiel

The Berggruen show will display 50 works, many borrowed from private collectors and rarely seen. The Crocker show is twice that size, with 100 Thiebauds for 100 years.

It is his eighth exhibition at the Crocker, going back to his first solo show anywhere in 1951. Nearly half of the 100 works come from the Crocker's own collection, and it will fill the museum's entire exhibition space plus an adjacent gallery. Thiebaud says it is the largest show of his combined works ever amassed.

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Wayne Thiebaud saw the streets of San Francisco like no one else



Artist Wayne Thiebaud (right) curates paintings for SFMOMA's collection in 2018. Beside him is friend and painter Clay Vorhes as they look at a piece that has just been placed. Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

Artist Wayne Thiebaud (right) curates paintings for SFMOMA's collection in 2018. Beside him is friend and painter Clay Vorhes as they look at a piece that has just been placed. Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

One hundred oil paintings and works on paper is a lot to discuss, especially for Thiebaud, who is hesitant to discuss even one. He lights up when asked to discuss other painters, which he did two years ago when he curated a gallery show at SFMOMA.

But 20 minutes is the limit when discussing his own work. To maximize efficiency, he agreed in advance to select five pictures from the Crocker show to critique.

“What you have here are five paintings that represent what I do, which is to try and paint at any time any subject matter in any medium under the general heading ‘people, places and things,’ ” he says.

On Nov. 15, the Crocker will host a members-only birthday party for Thiebaud, but the honoree has not committed to attending. You are more likely to catch him there on some random weekday, his lanky frame hunched over one of his masterpieces, as he looks for flaws that could be improved upon if only he could pull it off the wall and take it back to his studio. Sneak up and eavesdrop and this is what you might hear him say:

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“Betty Jean Thiebaud and Book”, 1965-69

Photo: © 2020 Wayne Thiebaud / License

## “Betty Jean Thiebaud and Book,” 1965-69

“Betty Jean is one of the earliest figure paintings when I was working mostly from memory and had a series of disasters. So my wife posed leaning on the table. I put the book in later. The open pages have some of the paintings I greatly love. There is a (Georges) Seurat and an (Edgar) Degas as I remember it. Very often I put paintings aside because I don’t feel they are working as well as I would like them and later on take them up again. I kept Betty Jean around. The space seemed too empty, and that’s why I tried to put something else in it four years later.”



“Two Seated Figures,” 1965

Photo: © 2020 Wayne Thiebaud / License

## “Two Seated Figures,” 1965

“This image is of Betty Jean on the left and my old friend CK McClatchy on the right. They came to the studio. I tried having them move around and I tried having them stand still. Finally, I just settled into this pose, which was an attempt at nonnarrative. I was interested in the figures and the secondary or negative space in which they operate. It was a pose that both puzzled and attracted me. I think the intrigue makes it work.

“One time at a lecture a woman in the audience asked what the figures are doing. I said, ‘I don’t know. I present it for the viewer to try and figure it out.’ She said, ‘I know what they are doing. This is a guy and his sister who are mad at each other but had to go to a dance together.’ I said, ‘That’s an interesting interpretation, but it’s not what I had in mind.’”

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“Strawberry Cone,” 1969

Photo: © 2020 Wayne Thiebaud / License

## “Strawberry Cone,” 1969

“This is about transition. The ice cream cone is melting. The question is ‘is it going to be picked up or has it been put aside?’ One of the things about looking longer than you would usually look at something is that the edges begin to quiver under strong light. That’s the reason for the color edging the shadow. You can try this outside. Put something in front of you with color and see if you don’t find those edges quivering.

“This was done at the same time I was painting cakes and pies. The fact that they are all done from memory was formalized into a convention with the objects. These are among some of my most popular paintings. It is probably just that people love food and they are learning to look at things differently.”



“Street and Shadow,” 1982-83/1996

Photo: Wayne Thiebaud, Crocker Art Museum, gift of the artist

## “Street and Shadow,” 1982-1983/1996

“This was a painting which was part of San Francisco street pictures made up by the following process: I would go out in the street and look at the way intersections came together. I drew a lot

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and painted a lot. Then I would take those drawings back into the studio and totally make up the painting any way I wanted to make it. This was a gift from Edward Hopper. His street pictures were often made up this way, like stage sets in which you were the director. It is so steep because of the sense of disequilibrium that I often experience in that beautiful city of San Francisco. It is slightly unnerving.

“It took so long because of compositional difficulties. I might have exhibited it and seen it with a fresh eye and decided something could be changed, and that is when I finished it. I think it had to do with the cast shadow onto the street from the buildings. There was something wrong with it. So after the exhibition I brought it back to look at it more carefully and decided to change it.”



“Y River, 1998” by Wayne Thiebaud  
Photo: © 2020 Wayne Thiebaud / License

## “Y River,” 1998

“This is part of my delta series. That not well-known land below Sacramento. There are over 1,000 miles of waterways with rivulets, ponds and irrigation and so on. We lived there for four years in an old Victorian house and watched the seasons occur. This is an attempt to integrate as many of the seasons and times of day and points of view as I can possibly get into it. Same with the colors. It merges from spring to fall to summer.

“I made quite small paintings of the delta and then tried to blow them up. This is a 6-foot-by-6-foot painting. Sometimes what happens when you do that is that they fall apart because you have to be so careful with the scale and the relationship between things. This one succeeds as well as any of them did.”

“Wayne Thiebaud 100: Paintings, Prints, and Drawings”: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursday-Sunday. Oct. 16-Jan. 3, 2021. \$12 adults. Advance timed ticket required. Crocker Art Museum, 216 O St., Sacramento. [www.crockerart.org](http://www.crockerart.org).

“Wayne Thiebaud”: By appointment. Monday-Friday. Oct. 16-Nov. 28. Free. Berggruen Gallery, 10 Hawthorne St., S.F. 415-781-4629. [www.berggruen.com](http://www.berggruen.com).