

WAYNE THIEBAUD

Girl with a Pink Hat, 1973
Oil on canvas, 36 x 29 1/2 in



COURTESY SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, GIFT OF JEANNETTE POWELL
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HEARNE PARDEE In Conversation with Wayne Thiebaud

On Thursday, January 3, 2019, Wayne Thiebaud and I sat in his son Paul Thiebaud's office next to Wayne's studio in Sacramento, California. Wayne was involved in three shows in San Francisco, two of them at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA)—one featuring works of his from the museum's collection and the other featuring works by thirty other artists he selected from the museum's collection—and the third at Paul Thiebaud Gallery in North Beach, featuring his monotypes. At age ninety-eight, Wayne still paints and plays tennis daily. Spanning more than fifty years and a range of themes, his works reflect his commitment to the material and tradition of painting. His selections from the museum's collection exhibit the wide range of his enthusiasms, leavened with wit and intelligence. In a position to shed light on the culture of painting in America and its European heritage, he discusses here the critical perspective on painting he's developed in his wide experience of art and years of teaching, his appreciation of commercial art and comics, and his new paintings of clowns.

I first met Wayne when he spent a month in residence at the New York Studio School in 1973, and then I worked with him when I helped run the Studio School's Paris summer program in 1974, where he taught with Elaine de Kooning, Nicholas Carone, and George Spaventa. We reconnected in 2000 when I joined the faculty at the University of California, Davis, where he was still teaching. He became a mentor and encouraged me to teach the lecture class he discusses in our talk.

HEARNE PARDEE: I was struck in looking at your work at SFMOMA by how long it took to see the paintings—not just because the landscapes contain multiple pictures within them but because the layering of the paint itself becomes involved in the reading. I know you've thought a lot about this issue of seeing, being so involved in the material of paint but also in teaching from slides.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: Particularly with students, what they don't see very often is that slides are just reproductions, so it's just a souvenir of the painting; it doesn't have much to do with it. Reproduction of a painting is especially disastrous, I think, in my own work. One of the problems is that since I was trained in commercial art,

my work very much attends to that, so in reproduction it very often looks like just another ad. [laughs]

HP: People have connected you to pop art, and you've said you're not a pop artist, but the relationship is complicated.

WT: It's interesting. As far as I know, most of those so-called movements have a major critic or two that try, somehow, to codify and clarify what they feel it offers in terms of art history. . . . I don't think we ever got one. Lawrence Alloway was credited with the movement's name, but he didn't do much more beyond that, that I know of. Anyhow, my feelings about it are pretty basic: I think pop art—as far as I am concerned—is a kind of appropriation of commercial art and for that reason I find little interest in it. For instance, someone like Lichtenstein is really a designer. He studied with Hoyt L. Sherman at Ohio State, who is quite an imaginative teacher, but he [Lichtenstein] was interested in jewelry design. For me, that qualifies him as a kind of interesting designer, and he uses a particular vernacular of benday dots, of advertising schemas of various natures. As to some of the others, I am an admirer of Claes Oldenburg, particularly his drawings and early plaster sculpture, but my relationship to pop art is, I feel, very overdrawn. . . . I've never thought of Jasper Johns as a pop artist. To me, at least, the movement was a fairly weak echo of really quite wonderful graphic designers and people in the field of commercial art. So, it was never anything very attractive to me.

HP: When you started out in Los Angeles doing commercial art, some artists there were excited because they could start from a clean slate in a place that lacked the cultural history of New York or Europe. Were you inspired by that spirit at all?

WT: Well, I knew most of them and quite a number of them went to Chouinard Art Institute, which is a pretty commercially oriented art school—Edward Ruscha, Billy Al Bengston, a number of them. An exception would be Robert Irwin, who is much more of a thinking artist. He was much more interested in phenomena, so he was quite different. But they were very interested in some guy named Von Dutch [Kenneth Howard], who was

a designer of motorcycle insignias and involved in the craft of automotive design. Ed Ruscha is a very accomplished commercial artist; he knows how to letter and he knows quite a bit about typography. I think his work is quite fine commercial art, but I don't know what else to say about it. But there was quite a bit going on in LA—artists like Rico Lebrun and Man Ray were there, along with composer Arnold Schoenberg and people making experimental films, not just Hollywood films. I actually was able to take some classes at Chouinard myself when I was on furlough from the military.

HP: But you emerged as a painter and very committed to that tradition. In a talk you gave at the National Gallery in 2000, you distinguished art, which is a flexible concept, from painting, which is concrete and specific. You emphasized the role of empathy in bringing those flat, silent objects to life—they become metaphors for our body. That experience seems central in distinguishing the images in your paintings from those in advertising.

WT: Yes, the chance for people to see paintings in person. If they take a little bit of time to really engage with it. . . . it's what Richard Wollheim called the "beholder's share," that you have the responsibility—if you are going to feel the painting, or see the painting, or if the painting is going to mean anything—it has to come through you as well as through the painter. I think that is a crucial idea. And I also think that people know a lot more than they think they do about painting, because it is so much based on your physical feeling and—as you mention—the idea of empathy. You can feel when something is wrong in almost any painting. Most paintings have faults. If you can find those, you also find out what is good about the painting, in an odd way. But participating is certainly basic to enjoying the pleasures of what painting can do.

HP: How do we deal with the fact that we are so limited in our opportunities to get to see paintings? In the show you put together at SFMOMA with paintings from storage, you pulled out works that had never been exhibited in the museum. You rescued them, to put them in a state of visibility where people could experience them. It's a shame that doesn't happen more often.

WT: It shows that the odds are against us, that you have to work at being able to see paintings, but that along with the difficulties there are great pleasures. And pleasure is very much a part of it. Doesn't mean joyousness or happiness, it just means the idea of pleasure, which really is a deeper and more profound human experience, which we must be on our guard to be able to participate in. Particularly with today's rapidness, and this big, buzzing, confusing world that already has almost a fence against this quiet pleasure of what painting does.

HP: Your own paintings connect that pleasure to commercial products, like food in diners, which explains why some people link them to pop, but that pleasure you're talking about is quite different from the fantasies of material luxury that John Berger saw as common to advertising and oil painting. He saw oil painting as specific to capitalism, making realistic renditions of desirable objects, and he felt that color photography in advertising had taken over the function of painting. He also talked about reproductions undercutting the authority of painting, echoing Walter Benjamin.

WT: I think it's crucial that we know how much of a different convention photography is. We think too easily about it being close or having a sameness, but for me it is a crucial difference. The difference is that we are seeing with two eyes, and we have to take these two different perspectives on the subject and merge them. That is tricky, because they are never quite merged. The other thing about photography is that it is really never in *critical* focus, it is always a *relative* focus—it's printed on a surface, so there's no textural immediacy. The camera brings things into focus in ways we never do in ordinary seeing. Painting, on the other hand, has a crucial focus, an absolute focus, because it is a *thing*. Anything produced in photography, with photography, or even with a whiff of photographic information, tends to vitiate that crucial difference. It is a subtle but, for me, a very profound difference.

HP: Would you consider that paintings based on photographs bring that same shift of focus or displacement?

WT: Depending on the results of what they take from the

photograph, but usually you can easily determine, "Well, that came from a machine, it came from something other than a human being." I guess that's why mostly I'm interested in one person, with their hands. No other equipment, videos, photographs, smartphones. All those things are of secondary importance to handmade paintings.

HP: What about someone like Robert Bechtle? He's kind of like Seurat, who engineered his paintings.

WT: Bechtle started out a little more extended in terms of representational painting, and when he began to use photography, I think he escaped that mechanical quality, not only by taking his own photographs, but also by doctoring them up pretty severely, rendering them quite differently from trying to get "the camera effect."

HP: You yourself often work from memory, from the accumulated experience of looking at things and looking at other paintings.

WT: I think using the memory is a wonderful thing, and a lot of painters have talked about it, including Degas, who had this ramp, apparently, or at least wanted to have it, where you drew from the model on one floor and then ran up to the other floor and tried to reproduce what you had seen from memory. Interestingly, he talks somewhat about the codification of memory and the iconic potential of memory. The other thing about memory is that, in my view, it may be one of the bases of style. That's because the memory depends on human interjection. Interpretation can become singular, and in the modernist preoccupation we're always talking about individuality. I am not so sure that's as important, though, as the fact that painting is also both collaborative with art history and cumulative with art history.

HP: Degas also experimented with photography, though, didn't he?

WT: He did. And he worked from photographs and to me those are his least interesting works. He also cut up the photographs and made collages, particularly in dancer positions.

HP: No sooner did we have photographs than we had collage! He was years ahead of his time.

WT: He was an extraordinary man, I think. A great epicure, a great diary keeper, very much interested in cooking, in recipes. In his diaries, he'd write what he had for lunch in some little village that he passed through. He also wrote sonnets, quite a lot of them. He wrote a beautiful sonnet to Mary Cassatt about a parrot, and he gave it to her as a get-well sonnet because she'd fallen from her horse and broken her leg. What the hell did that have to do with anything? *[laughs]*

HP: Well, it shows the breadth of his culture, and I was actually thinking about words in relation to vision when I listened to that talk you gave at the National Gallery. You were showing slides, but I had no images, so I was listening to your words and you were describing paintings. You were saying "look at this color" and creating an image of the painting. Sometimes we get more effective images through our imagination. You bring together your own experiences.

WT: Words are a great amplifier; that is how radio was different from television. I remember how imaginative those programs were in my own mind, based on my own experience as opposed to seeing a rather disappointing visualization of it as a movie. The memory, I think, is crucial to be employed. Whether it's Giotto or Vermeer. You see, all painting is from memory, but the interval between the seeing and the use is crucial. In other words, if you are painting an apple in front of you, looking back and forth at the painting, there's hardly any time at which information doesn't keep coming to you; this results in what I would call a kind of taxidermy, killing it off because if you have so much information, so much detail, it no longer seems real. Like that drop of water in the alley or that fly on the flower. Those seem pretty pedantic, being very interesting in terms of the world of ideas and literature and poetry, but overdone. Dick Diebenkorn talked about the "headlong": Avoid the headlong, or you're just going on when the energy has been lacking, or your capacity to interrupt and interject something else between these automatic, uninteresting flourishes.

HP: I had a couple of questions related to memory with regard to paintings in the show of your work at SFMOMA. One painting [*Pineapple Tray (1972/1990/1991)*] is a monumental still life of a pineapple perched on top of stacks of hors d'oeuvres. I was struck by the strangeness of the whole thing, the absurdity of this big pineapple surrounded by olives and deviled eggs, little vignettes, all densely, beautifully painted. The pineapple started to look to me like an X-ray of a pineapple, the way your mountain paintings seem to show their interior geological layers, or the windows in buildings in your cityscapes suggest stuff going on inside. But according to the label, the pineapple painting was completed in the 1970s but reworked in 1990–91. How does the process extend over almost twenty years? Do you remember anything particular about that painting?

WT: On a number of occasions, I've continued to work on paintings over a long period of time. I think a lot of it comes out of commercial art, and the way in which commercial art develops clichés. When you are a layout person or an art director making layouts, you are provided always with a deadline, and you have this big page where you need to make a whole ad for a market. You have to figure out how to make all these different things: an apple, a pear, a pineapple. Or in jewelry ads, you learn a certain way rings are made, or lipsticks with stripes and a dot. So the painting of the food uses memory plus this almost training in clichés that is the basis of those kinds of paintings, particularly in the early sixties and seventies. But it's something that runs through my work that, for instance, all sign painters recognize very quickly. They say, "Ah, you used a no. 4 flat brush on that one," or, "Beautiful laid watercolor. That's a beautiful wash where the wash washes itself." I mean, they recognize those things. I still feel like I have an art director looking over my shoulder.

HP: So you want to reassert your personal interpretation.

WT: I'm interested in critical interrogation—I suppose, particularly, since Richard Nelson, the head of our department at UC Davis, all of a sudden gave me this course that I wasn't prepared to teach. It was called *Art Theory and Criticism of Painting and Sculpture*, and you trace

the history of criticism. Lord, I spent weeks and months trying to get up to some sort of speed and understanding that there was a whole tradition of criticism, arguments about what criticism can do or not do. So this course of Richard Nelson's, wisely I think, was a course required of painters in order to equip them with some armor against criticism through understanding where criticism comes from and what it's based upon. Is it formalist criticism? Is it a kind of ideological criticism? And you can separate out how that critical use needs to be negotiated, so that you aren't disappointed by the criticism, you aren't overwhelmed by it, you aren't mystified by it. That course proved to be, for me at least, a substantial education in the necessary value of that kind of careful, analytical, acute criticism. Whether it is formalistic or ideological, it can be a great asset to a painter as a tool.

HP: It's interesting that you connect your process of critical revision to teaching, to which you remained devoted long after your retirement. I was moved by the painting of a student in your SFMOMA show—it captures the psychology of the student-teacher relationship, which is a big part of so many artists' lives and deserves more attention. The painting reminds me of Chardin's studies of children, the beginning of our fascination with the developing mind. But as to being critically aware, there was a statement you wrote when the Museum of Modern Art acquired one of your paintings in 1962. It's like a teaching statement, and in it you said that even though you indulged in trick-of-the-eye painting, you wanted to make it possible to "see oneself having the illusion." You talk about how you use the impasto so that the layering of the pigment makes people aware that it's paint, even though they are seeing it as ice cream at the same time.

It brings in criticality early on, answering John Berger's comments on how paintings just display material possessions.

WT: It brings up something I really actually wanted to talk to *you* about, and that is the concept of simultaneity—that painting has the particular, unique power to make a form simultaneously flat or floating in space. Your work inquires about that for me. I came to recognize this a little bit late.

HP: You're talking about how you're looking for a denser, layered space, as opposed to the flat backgrounds you've often used. You've pointed out to me today that you're using some strokes of pure color floating in the empty spaces of paintings you're working on now.

WT: I went over your catalogue where you have these very flat, two-dimensional color shapes, which can be floating or flat dead on the surface, straight from Cézanne, where he is taking a really interesting flight through space, when he begins to annotate where things are, and he moves around—particularly in his watercolors, where he'll just locate something by a color or a slight shape. And then you are aware and available to make this trip through space that he has, even though it is all fiction. It can be a really wonderful machine, implementing this simultaneity.

HP: Well, I got that from the Albers color course at Yale, the idea that art is the difference between physical reality and psychic affect, and then from the New York Studio School, where I learned about Hoffman's [theory of] "push-pull" and how two neighboring marks on your canvas could be ten feet apart in space.

WT: Now do you find in students a great difficulty in having them experience that?

HP: Yes. *[laughs]* You would think it would be the most obvious thing in the world but no, sometimes it takes them a very long time.

WT: It's almost Kierkegaardian—you have to take a leap of faith.

HP: Yes. But I'd like to go back to a different sort of simultaneity in your paintings at SFMOMA, to the big cityscapes that have so many little paintings within them. There's a building, just a big, flat rectangle, very abstract, like a canvas. Then something happens within it or next to it. It's almost like early Renaissance art before they had unified perspective. You use perspective one way in one part and another way in another, you're constantly shifting the point of view. Maybe it's more like Japanese prints. Are you influenced by them?

WT: Sometimes, yes, Chinese painting, all those different conventions. That's what I mean by hoping that our paintings can be cumulative, so that they are indebted to tradition and art history. And I think painters need a good art history basis and introduction. On the other hand, art historians need an introduction to what painting is. For me, many of the best art historians were or are painters. Leo Steinberg was quite a good painter, and a number of others.

HP: Meyer Schapiro also made paintings.

WT: Yes.

HP: It's quite amazing, sometimes, that the things you'd think would be obvious are not always obvious to art historians, just like to students. But going back to your own paintings, you seem to try and integrate many different perspectives into one overall orchestration.

WT: You hope, you hope.

HP: There's a literary term—*parataxis*—for putting things together one after another with no hierarchy or overall logic. We could also think of time compression in terms of comics. I know you have always been interested in George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, and some of the little vignettes in your cityscape—where there's a mattress or something on a roof, for example—recall his wit. You could go through the painting and connect those pieces together sequentially in a sort of comic strip mode of looking.

WT: George Herriman was a big hero of mine, and also of Elmer Bischoff. He credited Herriman particularly for his great use of what he called his “in and out of darkness and light.” Bischoff actually connected Herriman's work to what Rembrandt does, where the whole thing is mostly darks—maybe eighty-five percent dark, fifteen percent light on just the hand or nose and cheek. That dialogue is fascinating to me. Picasso was also interested in Herriman. Of course, I had a great conversations with Philip Guston, who admired him. A lot of American painters started as cartoonists.

HP: You met Guston through the New York Studio School. That was back when he was doing his Nixon cartoons, wasn't it?

WT: That's right. [laughs]

HP: Just thinking about Guston's images, he seems to be more related to a narrative aspect of cartoons with his Ku Klux Klan figures and some of the Nixon things. How do you think of cartoons in relation to your own work? Is it more the overall image you're concerned with, the simplification and iconic quality of a cartoon image?

WT: I think, particularly with Herriman, it's how graphic and how powerful his images are. If you just turn them upside down, the way he uses these blocks of color. I see him a little more like Daumier . . . because they are somewhat a mixing of vaudeville and early Jewish burlesque and a kind of philosophic commentary. He'll say something like, “What is ott?”

HP: Ought? O-u-g-h-t?

WT: O-t-t. Ott! And he'll say, “Ah! A pen, an ink, a fool to guide them!” That's his reference to a writer. His work is full of those. I wish I could think of more . . . readers of *Krazy Kat* will know right away, Diebenkorn or Bischoff or Guston. So, he was written about by writers like Bill Berkson, e. e. cummings, and Adam Gopnik. He spent a lot of time in the Southwest with painters, particularly those painters around Santa Fe and that area. He's quite unusual; a big biography has just come out on him. The strip didn't do that well commercially; newspapers didn't want to take it. But Hearst demanded that it continue, because Franklin D. Roosevelt was a fan!

HP: Well, let's go back to another painting in the show at SFMOMA, *Girl with Pink Hat* [1973]. I've seen that reproduced a lot. One of the first things that struck me in front of that painting was that I could walk to the neighboring gallery and see Matisse's portrait of his wife with a hat, which caused such a scandal in 1906.

WT: I love that painting, of course. For a while I was

doing women with hats, and that's when that [*Girl with Pink Hat*] came about.

HP: But your model has no clothes on. How did that happen?

WT: That was, in a way, her idea. She was engaged to this print dealer, and he wanted a portrait of her. Didn't specify anything, and I don't do portraits, so I just said, “Well, I'd be glad to make paintings of her, and if it works out . . . then it's okay.” I made two paintings of her. I also made quite a few drawings of her that we gave to him and to SFMOMA.

HP: Yeah, some of them made it into the show. Some of her in a bathing suit. But turning to figure painting was a big change in your work, having just established a reputation with the food paintings. And you talk about working from memory, but when painting the figure, you rely on a model.

WT: I tried—I think after the food pictures—to do some paintings from memory, figures from memory. And they were disasters. I mean, they were. They looked like commercial illustrations and worse. And that's when I went into that seven-year [period of] drawing from the model with charcoal. Along with that, I began to paint then from the figure. And those paintings are not done from memory. They're done from direct encounter over quite long periods of time, with friends and family posing.

HP: The artist I was thinking about while looking at that painting was actually Courbet. I had some problems with your isolation of figures against white backgrounds, the stiffness—but I realize people had the same problem with Courbet's early figures, thinking they were like the little mannequins of children's art. Meyer Schapiro wrote about that and points out that Courbet laid the groundwork for impressionism, for an art that was purely based in color and vision and on painting as a material thing. So Courbet is at this tipping point. Looking at the way you paint the woman with the hat, it's very physically painted, like Courbet. You respect the local colors, like Matisse does in those two early ones that you selected for

your show, which were done prior to fauvism but are very dense and rich.

WT: Isn't that [painting of a] teacup something you wish you could drink coffee out of?

HP: Yes, it's wonderful. Like Matisse, you're trying to get as much as you can out of the local colors.

WT: That kind of painting, I think, is what led me to something like fauvism in my landscapes. Fauvism represented something very crucial to me in terms of how it was possible to do paintings like that with color—particularly Derain's great Collioure paintings. And what the fauves do when they're successful is they get the value right. If you get the value right, the darkness or the lightness, you can then use almost any color, hue, or intensity to fit into that value structure. And that's, I think, a really great human invention. I don't think machines can do that . . . yet. [laughs]

HP: Courbet was certainly a master of value. He wrote something about putting a white bowl on a white cloth and filling it with eggs; he painted it and said something like, “Now I've exceeded Monsieur Ingres.” [laughs] But the other thing about Courbet is how eroticism gets in, as it does in your work. I've seen that coming partly from your background in advertising—the pictures of Betty Jean in her bathing suit like photo shoots for publicity.

WT: Did you know Diane Waldman?

HP: Yes, I found the article she wrote about you for *ARTnews*, “Eros in the Cafeteria” [1966]. She quotes your observation that to be erotic, something has to seem available. [laughs]

WT: That's sensuality, I think. Again, you make that leap to faith when you look at a painting and you find its sensuality. You find its touch! Its facture, its kind of immediacy: its salt and pepper, its spices; those are, again, difficult to acquire. Connoisseurship depends on those kinds of developmental abilities, I think. And why connoisseurs will always, always tell you, “I can't tell you why I think that's

a real one, but I feel it. And what I have seen, and felt, really advises me to say that that's a real Vermeer, or that's not a real Vermeer." And so on.

HP: That's the pleasure of looking, experiencing how the artist has been engaged. Your comments on the paintings you selected bring out aspects of that experience.

WT: I should've been a little more careful with those. I didn't know they were going to post them on the wall. [laughs]

HP: Well, in them you point out very specific ways the artists used painting to good effect—the white touches of ripples on water in the George Ault, Helen Lundberg's variations on browns, the patch of white in the little James Weeks, or the orange sweater in that vast, luminous space of Elmer Bischoff. You didn't get a Bonnard, who you particularly like, but that painting captures something of Bonnard's overall luminosity.

WT: That was a beautiful painting of Elmer's.

HP: And then there's a Morandi, whom you collect. You compare his objects to a repertory company. My question is why you, whose paintings have so many varied things in them, are drawn to someone so austere? Is that just an attraction of opposites?

WT: It is. I actually tried to copy Morandi. I made a copy of him one time I remember. Someone once asked me a question I had never been asked in a lecture: "Mr. Thiebaud, what do you think Morandi would say about your work if he came into your studio?" [laugh] Oh my God! I said, "Well he'd probably say, 'What is all this color here?'"

HP: He would have to put on sunglasses. But on the subject of the show, I'm struck by the range of your empathy, and by the way you're connecting American and European modernism through the lens of the Bay Area. It's a welcome idea to me, who worried as an art student about not being European, that I hadn't grown up with the culture of museums. America seemed so hopeless to me when it came to trying to do things in art.

WT: I just think there is only one world of painting. Unfortunately, we don't have a history of painting from the cave period—or whenever we first did painting—up to now, a history where you focus *just* on painting. Not about sociality, not about wars, not about the relationship to kings and courtesans and all of that, but what is the painting? What does it do, as a painting? I think that would make a terrific dissertation for some sharp, well-educated art historian.

HP: Well, I'd imagine it would be difficult to keep some of the cultural and social history out. How do you really filter what is purely visual and purely material about paint from everything else going on?

WT: That's the challenge. In other words, what is one of those Russian icons? As itself, is it worth anything? Or is it there because of Christianity, rather than its character as a painting?

HP: There are interesting and important Christian paintings that aren't particularly good as paintings. We could go back to John Berger. He considered that thousands of paintings in museums were at best mundane because they were painted under the capitalist-materialist convention: "I want a picture of my Oriental rug, a portrait of my mistress." They're made by painters who did that because that's the way you made a living as a painter. For Berger, Rembrandt and a few others stood out because they independently went deeper, managed to do something more than just the basic job at hand.

WT: Well, he puts it to the test, which is right. And I think he is right on both counts. I think there are sociological concerns that have to be addressed, and he was very much interested in, you know, exploitations, and corporate greed, and all that kind of stuff. But you can't qualify a painting on the basis of an intellectual reason for being a good painting. It has to be good in terms of old-fashioned value standards.

HP: So, you would have to weed out a lot of paintings.

WT: That's your test when you go to the museum. You can be fooled also. That's Ernst Gombrich's point in *Art*

and *Illusion*—you have to get in between what you are being told and taught to see as opposed to what you are actually seeing or are able to see. The typical example is when the dealer takes you to what in the trade is called the "kill room," usually a rug-covered wall with light from a funeral parlor, and you have this little pastel by Degas. Degas made some really ordinary pastels. Now the dealer is going to tell you this is a "prime example," one of the rare possibilities to buy a Degas pastel. Of course, they're rare, so now they've become like the diamond trade. But that's also crucial to, again, getting to the very personal and human experience of what enjoying a painting is based upon. I sound like I'm sermonizing or something.

HP: Well, let's go back to your own show. We haven't talked about the landscapes. You directed me recently to the art historian Margaretta Lovell, who writes about your work in terms of California's ecology: the absurdity of applying a rigid grid of streets over the hills of San Francisco, which generates your humorous juxtapositions of strange, architectural configurations, and then the flat, crazy quilt of the delta, where the bay connects to the river channels and their agriculture, and the spectacular mountains that rise abruptly for thousands of feet.

WT: Yeah, I was impressed with her scholarly approach and quite amazed that she came to some of those ideas. I'm not so interested in the pictorial aspect of mountains as in their abstract potential for expressing some of that feeling of empathy, even to the point of putting us off a bit, or feeling dislocated. That you would feel a sense of disequilibrium. Are you in a helicopter? Or are you on ground level? Well, you're not informed because there's no continuity of unity, of one-eyed view. And I think Margaretta Lovell actually instructed me, in a way. I was interested in off putting the viewer mostly because I just thought it was more interesting, but she equated that with a temporal aspect of the world, and the world being not yet made. I remember there's a great poem, I think William Butler Yeats, something about "I'm looking for the face I had before the world was made." It's a beautiful poem. What was it like before this happened? And what's it going to be like after? It's been here for a while. Now

archaeologists will go to mountains and find seashells. And we're plumbing the oceans to see what kind of mountains were underneath them.

HP: So we're unstable in time as well as space. Sounds like you're talking about the sublime, the feelings of awe and fear.

WT: It would be nice if I could get some of that into the paintings. I don't know, maybe a hopeless ambition. It's like what I was talking about when we were talking about your work, like, what is this? What are we seeing? Where are these things? I once told an old art professor about how I'd like to get a feeling like that, and he said, "Did you ever think that might be impossible?" [laughs]

HP: You do get geology into the paintings through the density of the materials, almost like a relief. In the catalogue for your show of early work at Manetti Shrem Museum at UC Davis, where she quotes your early statement about impasto, Rachel Teagle writes that you're "enacting the ritualistic merger of sign and referent." [laughs] Lovell has another way of putting it: she says you're rhyming things—the impasto "rhymes" with the cake frosting, and the way you're making these troughs in the paint rhymes with the way that a farmer tills his field. The same with the mountains—the paint rhymes with the stratification of the rock layers deposited there.

WT: In the Metropolitan Museum lately, I've been taken with the bas-relief and how that might relate to painting. And is there something in between? These textures in the painting are trying to deal with that a little bit, acting a little like low carvings, or high paintings. And so that is a conscious determinant of working on the mountains.

HP: You have a bunch of mountain and beach paintings here in the studio. Lovell doesn't talk much about the beach paintings, and I'm curious about the geological time of the mountains as opposed to the human time of people on the beach. If the mountains are the challenging part of California, the beach is for pleasure. Are those bathers painted from memory?

WT: Those are all from memory, right, based on a lot of drawing and painting I did in Laguna Beach when we had a condo that overlooked the main beach. So, I was there morning and night and midday. I saw a lot of different kinds of things going on. And that's a lot of what those beach paintings are about.

HP: There are many references there. You talked in your lecture at the National Gallery about Picasso, who makes incredible women bathers that he takes apart and puts together again.

WT: And apparently the beach is where we first landed. [laughs] We came out of the water.

HP: Your earliest work, before the paintings of food, involved beaches in Mexico.

WT: And I was raised on the beach. Grew up in Long Beach, and I sold papers on the beach, was a lifeguard in high school. So the beach was, and is, very much a part of my memory and my actual experience. I think the beach represents the highest and lowest. Whenever they want to sell you something really special, like a trip, it's always got a palm tree and a beach: go up to this, go to this luxurious pueblo. On the other hand, it's a very low life. And so it has these marvelous extremes.

HP: It even connects to the old idea of the pastoral, Titian and Giorgione. In a recent essay, Karen Wilkin pulled out a painting that particularly struck me, *Five Beach Dogs* [2006]. Do you remember that one?

WT: [laughs] Yeah, well . . . on the main beach in Laguna they have a timed thing where you can do anything with a dog. You bring them all down there until eight o'clock in the morning. So early in the morning, there's all of this wonderful backlighting of the dogs. They all bring their dogs and sometimes release them, so that they interact together. It's quite a marvelous community of dog life with the human beings sort of on the side.

HP: The central dog is jumping in the air—an image of sheer animal exuberance, just being alive and being

on the beach. And, you know, that's the simplest expression you could have of a kind of empathy. This is what we want, isn't it? [laughs] But then you've also very meticulously done the shadow of the dog, which repeats his shape, so it's a very deliberate painting. There's more improvisational exuberance in the monoprints you have on view at Paul Thiebaud Gallery. The beach scenes there show the bathers jumping, and they include a wide range of your other themes, all done with bravado and spontaneity—mountains, cities, traffic on the freeway, just everything. They're a lot like cartoons.

WT: Well, those exemplify the way I like to feel about being a painter. I'd like to be able to paint anytime, anything that I feel interested in. And not to be programmed—I have a lot of both artists and critics telling me that I make terrible career choices. [laughs] I didn't know quite what they meant by that. But when I went to New York and was around there, it was pretty easy to tell what they were talking about: the hierarchy of galleries, the hierarchy of critics . . . all of that. Interesting, but I think not very relevant to being a painter.

HP: What about Allan Stone? You were fortunate to find him. Amidst your poor career choices, you seem to have found a good dealer. [laughs]

WT: Yes, well he was the only one who'd show the work. And we eventually became friends and family . . . forty-some years we were together. And he let me show pretty much whatever I wanted to show. He'd tell me when he didn't want something. He'd look at something and he'd say, "Well, that's undercooked." He was very clear in his criticism. [laughs] "Take that back into the studio!"

HP: [laughs] He used a food metaphor for that.

WT: We haven't talked about cartoons and caricatures . . .

HP: One thing I wanted to ask about the landscapes relates to cartoons—and there are a couple of monoprints like this: You sometimes draw a diagonal line from corner to corner. The horizon is just the diagonal. I suppose that could be seen as making us aware of ourselves

looking, making us wonder, "What should I make of that?" You definitely throw the viewer off, if they're looking for a conventional landscape. [laughs] Does that come from cartooning?

WT: Well, several things about it. I hadn't seen that except in abstract art, where nonobjective painting can do almost anything. And we don't infer from that that it's an intrusion. But in . . . how shall we say . . . If you're trying to do representational painting . . . rules have to be engaged in some way because we've talked about the need for feeling right about it. And frankly, I'm still unconvinced about that, about those paintings. But I can't leave it alone. It's another kind of simultaneity, abstract and representational. There's something there that interests me. And I might even show you a couple of recent ones where I can describe what I'm thinking about when I do it. For example, is the diagonal the horizon or just the edge of a ridge, where the real horizon is unknown? Am I obliged to account for it as the edge of some object?

HP: I've seen some around the studio where, just like weeds growing through cracks in asphalt, stuff sprouts out of that line.

WT: Some of the paintings turned out to be, for me . . . of some interest. So that's why I pursued it.

HP: My students have been doing a landscape project and I showed them that diagonal, and they said, "Well, that could work."

WT: You're doing them a good service; they can think about it.

HP: But there's the larger question about cartooning and caricature.

WT: I collect original cartoons by other cartoonists. I have a great love of that particular art form. The graphic power of it still, I think, remains unresearched in a really critical way. But the iconic power of cartoons . . . something is there that needs to be addressed, as we discussed about Herriman. Caricature, on the other hand,

is a much easier thing for me to talk about. I think I offered this to some art historians at some kind of convention where I said, "Can caricature be described as an element of style?" In other words, what are Mayan figures but caricatures of the figure? What are Egyptian figures other than caricatures of both humans and beasts combined, plus disassociation from any kind of rationally organized, organic figure? Feet both pointing the same way and directing us elsewhere the same way. But other than that, caricatures of figures have been a long tradition. With Daumier and even early Monet—he did these quite marvelous caricatures. All the way back to the cave period, when the caricature of the bison is so effective. So . . . there is something about caricature in representing human form and animal forms. But let's take it a step further and talk about the caricature of color, how the fauves really took color range, prismatic, total range, and caricaturized it into painting—the ice feeling in Bonnard next to hot coals, or that use of extremes between radiating reds, oranges, and yellows next to the coolness of the blues and greens, and so on.

HP: So it's a kind of exaggeration? But it's also exerting authority, like saying, "Well, I'm going to do this and make it that way and that's going to be it." In your discussion with Richard Wollheim about Matisse [*Modern Painters*, 1993], you were talking about how Matisse closes off his spaces and establishes omnipotence over the painting, a self-enclosed world. Your "corner to corner" could be seen as a very American answer to that. Karen Wilkin talks about your "pictorial willfulness."

WT: That's right. The same is true, I think, of space. I think cubism is really a kind of caricature of spatial referents. Those planometric associations take themselves in this way of forming a spatial organization. That's pretty much lost with synthetic cubism. It's called "synthetic" because it's been caricaturized. They no longer have to look at the model. They can just do whatever they want. They may look at the still life but still are going to keep this planometric formal caricature of spatial referents.

HP: I think it's interesting that you included a forgery of a Picasso in the show at SFMOMA, a painting they've

decided isn't a Picasso. You can see how easy it is to get into that planometric thing and make a Picasso out of it once you have the idea.

WT: Exactly. I'm shocked that it was ever, ever accepted. [laughs] It looks so amateurish.

HP: Do you want to say anything about what you're working on right now?

WT: The mountains still fascinate me. I'm still doing those. I'm doing a lot of repainting them, a lot of trying to correct them or—I don't know if *correct* is the right word—but trying to make them look a little different than they are if they aren't quite working. I'm working with about eight students from around the country, who come to show their work. They have already graduated and are out in the world. They want to come and just talk about their work and about painting. So, I've been doing that [and] I force them to talk critically about my work. They are hesitant at first to do it but once they get at it they are pretty good! They give me a lot of variations and ideas. So, that's been kind of helpful. But I'm just about ready now to go to the other preoccupation of the past three years. And that's painting clowns.

HP: Clown paintings?

WT: I've hidden them for about a month or two, but now they're back in the studio. Adam Gopnik at the *New Yorker*, when I visited him last, asked what I was up to. And I said: You don't want to know. He said, "Come on, what are you painting?" When I said clowns, he sort of bristles and says, "Oh that is so much like you!" I don't know what he meant by that, I'll have to ask him.

HP: He hasn't seen them?

WT: No.

HP: Well, one could think of them coming out of your interest in humor, and clowns being caricature figures. Are you trying to make funny paintings, or is a combination of things?

WT: I have about forty-five bad paintings of clowns and six etchings.

HP: Wow.

WT: Anyone who knows anything about art history knows how far clowns go back. That's also a thing that's interesting to consider: how and in what way they've played a role in art history. By various sorts of eccentric people, folk artists, and in some master works . . . maybe that's my rationalization, too.

Hearne Pardee, professor of art at the University of California, Davis, was educated at Yale, Columbia, and the New York Studio School. His paintings and collages create connections among disparate sites and question assumptions about the visual field. He also contributes to art publications, including the *Brooklyn Rail* and *artcritical*.

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WAYNE THIEBAUD

Canyon Mountains, 2011–2012
Oil on canvas, size 66 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 54 $\frac{1}{8}$ in



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