

A New Exhibition from Wayne Thiebaud, America's Renowned Pastry Still-Life Painter

BY RACHEL CORBETT | SEPTEMBER 30th, 2014



ART © WAYNE THIEBAUD, LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK, NY

For those familiar with his work, the painter Wayne Thiebaud conjures almost Pavlovian associations with dessert. That's because Thiebaud, who is 94, has devoted more than half his life to portraying glossily glazed doughnuts, rainbow-colored lollipops and creamy dollops with such discipline and affection that they come to look more precious than gemstones.

Thiebaud took years—in some cases decades—to complete many of the paintings in his latest show, at New York's Acquavella Galleries from October 1 through November 21. "He is not a fast painter," says gallery director Eleanor Acquavella, in an understatement. Thiebaud has never allowed her inside his Sacramento, California, studio and "never shows a work in progress. He waits as long as it takes until he knows it's finished."

Like Cézanne's oranges or Morandi's vases, Thiebaud's desserts pulse with a life of their own. In one of the show's larger canvases, a childlike vulnerability haunts the rows of cakes lining a cold case, each adorned with a ruffle of cream or a raspberry coronet, like girls dolled up for church. In another, two plump éclairs sit stiffly side by side as if siblings posed for a family portrait.

But while many of Thiebaud's signature confections will be on view, the show highlights an even broader selection of his lesser-known portraiture, California cityscapes and beach tableaux. These works will strike some as a departure. While Thiebaud's early art is bright, flat and tight, his palette has gotten deeper over the past 15 years, the impasto thicker. The loose sweeps of amber coastline are the closest Thiebaud comes to abstraction.

"I think for him there is a sense of now or never in the experimentation department," Acquavella says. Even the desserts have taken a sensuous turn of late: Bordello-red icing tarts up a heart-shaped cake painted this year; its lacy white border squirted directly, so it seems, from tube to canvas.

But look long enough at one of Thiebaud's mountain landscapes—painted from his memories of places like Yosemite and Laguna—and you'll spot a cream puff of a cloud in the sky, a chocolate dome of a foothill. Just as his desserts cast big, blocky shadows, his mountains, too, carry importance in their mass.

"He has really stayed pretty consistent," Acquavella says, bringing to mind the wisdom of one of history's greatest still-life painters: "The grandiose," Paul Cézanne once said, "grows tiresome after a while."