

Artforum
March 29, 2018

Richard Diebenkorn and Wayne Thiebaud

ACQUAVELLA GALLERIES

This exhibition contained twenty-four paintings—nine by Richard Diebenkorn and fifteen by Wayne Thiebaud (the two were lifelong friends)—all ostensibly engaging particular places in California. Berkeley appeared in four of Diebenkorn's works (*Berkeley* #21, 1954; *Berkeley* #39 and *Berkeley* #44, both 1955; and *Driveway*, 1956), as did Ocean Park, an area of Santa Monica (*Ocean Park* #40, 1971). But, as Thiebaud's nameless places, among them *Urban Freeways*, 1979, and *Fields and Furrows*, 2002, made clear, these images could be almost anywhere that there are big cities and rural areas. The compositions were all unpopulated, with the exception of Thiebaud's *Tidelines*, 2004–14, where a row of five tiny figures and their shadows function as aborted *repoussoir* devices, hesitantly accenting the flat strip of white beach on which they stand, and generalized to the point of anonymity. The absence of human beings in the landscapes suggests that these locations are peculiarly unfit for living, however busy the freeways and flourishing the land. Indeed, these scenes tend to be depicted from a distance—often from aerial perspective—furthering their strangeness and, indeed, their estranging character. However indirectly, Diebenkorn's and Thiebaud's paintings bespeak the dehumanizing absurdity of the modern, man-made environment—strikingly evident in Thiebaud's *Urban Freeways* and *Morning Freeway*, 2012–13, both epitomized by a mythical, ever-sunny California.

These paintings had more to do with space than with place—the broad expansiveness of Diebenkorn's *Driveway*, for example, a study



Wayne Thiebaud,
Ripley Ridge, 1977,
oil on linen, 48 × 36".

plicated geometrical compositions was here made decisively clear by *Ocean Park #40* and *Untitled*, 1977. Meanwhile, the paint in *Berkeley #21* and *#44*, often gesturally amorphous, adumbrates the flatness rather than denying it.

Thiebaud is clearly taken with quasi-arabesque spiraling curves, present in *Coastal Farms*, 2008, *Urban Freeways*, and *Morning Freeway*. Crazy-quilt patterns and paradoxical spatial contrasts abound in his works, perhaps most conspicuously in *Green River Lands*, 1998. Seen from above, the earth's surface seems to rise vertically, covering some four-fifths of the painting; seen below and in perspective, it stretches into the distance. The contrast between the pinkish trees and their bright-blue shadows, alongside parallel rows of green plants, adds ironic humor to Thiebaud's cunning yet quixotic composition, which is both an abstraction embedded in a representation and a representation embedded in an abstraction. Something similar occurs in *Levee Reservoir*, where the luminous reservoir seems to hover above the parallel rows of the green field, linked by a yellow flower casting a bright-blue shadow.

Thiebaud's *Ripley Ridge*, 1977, is also particularly noteworthy, for reasons that are both aesthetic and social. A row of two-dimensional diagonal shadows, all bright blue, are sandwiched between two rows of three-dimensional white buildings. The composition seems to illustrate the pain-fed words of the California poet Robinson Jeffers. "This beautiful place defaced with a crop of suburban houses," he wrote in "Carmel Point," published in his *Selected Poems* (1965), mourning the natural paradise that the California Impressionists painted with loving care.

—Donald Kuspit

in receding perspective rather than a description of a particular road, and by the grand, infinite blue in Thiebaud's *Flood Waters*, 2006–13 and *Levee Reservoir*, 2017—and had more to do with expressive abstraction than with empirical representation. Observed reality is the point of departure for formalist concerns, a point made explicit by the geometric abstractions in two *Untitled* works by Diebenkorn, 1976–77 and 1979, both rather barren schematic outlines, unadorned by color. These compositions make clear the fascination with form. Color exists to emphasize the flatness—the planarity—of the bluish street and green lawns in Diebenkorn's *Cityscape #4*, 1963–66, and of the blue water and green land, as well as the volume of the bluff, in Thiebaud's *Bluff and Farmlands*, 2017. That modernist flatness is the essence of Diebenkorn's com-