WAYNE THIEBAUD IN CONVERSATION WITH **PHILIPPE DE MONTEBELLO**

JANUARY 9, 2018

PHILIPPE DE MONTEBELLO: Good afternoon, Mr. Thiebaud.

WAYNE THIEBAUD: **Hello. Thank you for your interest.**

DE MONTEBELLO: Not at all, it's perfectly natural, I love good painting.

THIEBAUD: **Thank you.**

DE MONTEBELLO: So, I'm going to ask you some questions and reply to your responses. This is all very informal. I am going to bring up some obvious points of discussion, and some less so, just to get your voice into the catalogue, okay?

THIEBAUD: **That will be fine.**

DE MONTEBELLO: All right, so my first question is, as you know, this is an exhibition where you are being paired with Richard Diebenkorn with some of your landscapes and some of his. How do you feel about this? Do you think that it will underscore your similarities or your differences?

THIEBAUD: **I feel honored, first of all, because he was an influence on my own work and we became friends and I have a great admiration for him. So, it's a great pleasure to be paired with him. We've had one other exhibition some years ago. It was a much smaller one, and also more varied.**

DE MONTEBELLO: Well that's very generous of you. What is interesting, indeed puzzling to some of us on the East Coast—and I guess this is an East Coast, West Coast interview—is the notion of the two of you and others, even Hockney, being grouped together and called "California artists," as if somehow there was a special palette associated with California, a very special style. Do you really think of yourself as a "California artist"?

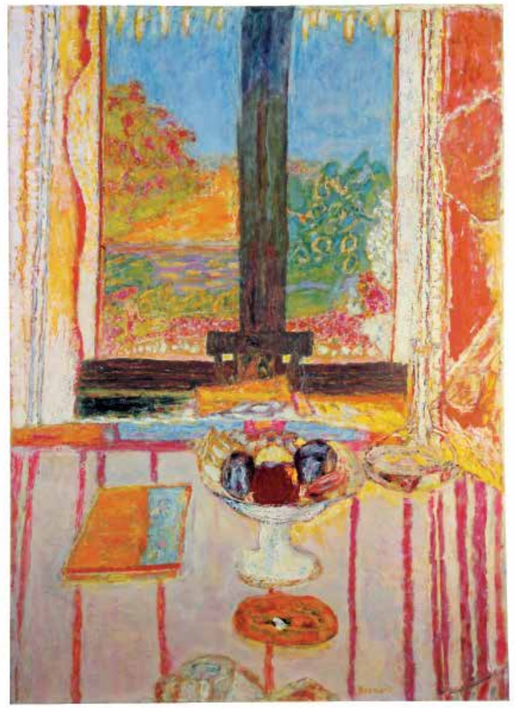
Wayne Thiebaud in his Sacramento gallery, September 2010
Photo Max Whittaker

THIEBAUD: **I often say when we are grouped as California artists that it has a characteristically false premise. Since there is only one art world or one painting world, as far as I'm concerned, it's like referring to California painting like referring to "California mathematics" or "California science." I feel much more general and very deeply interested in the whole tradition of painting, which is my love.**

DE MONTEBELLO: Well I am delighted to hear you say so because that reduces the rather pejorative element of regionalism and reintroduces that of universalism. And you certainly deserve the second. I was always surprised by the notion of the "California look" because in fact, in the highly saturated sunshine of California, colors tend to be washed out, not in fact as bright—or as people have said about yours, confectionary. When you apply your very colorful, though, actually rather muted palette to landscape, are you extending that of the earlier still lives—the cakes, the subject matter that is colorful—and transposing it almost arbitrarily onto landscape?

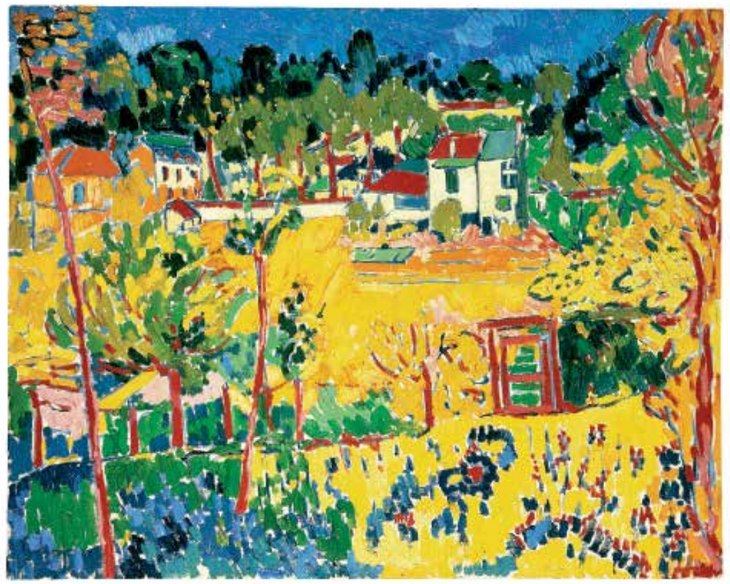
THIEBAUD: **I think those series are more spectral in character and follow the influence of my predecessors, so many wonderful ones, such as [Pierre] Bonnard, Matisse, and those wonderful Fauve painters. But also, the Middle Eastern painters, the Rajput or Indian painters, and others as well. But it does insist upon two yellows, two reds, two blues, so that you are working obviously with different temperatures. So that, essentially, landscapes were a convenient method of asserting a kind of color emphasis for some of the problems which I enjoy attempting to work through.**

DE MONTEBELLO: Well, I think that's fascinating and there are too many artists active today who aren't as articulate and as specific about their points of departure as you are. And I was going to bring up the Fauves because, of course, there is obviously a Fauve quality to many of the arbitrary colors that you impose on your landscapes and draw out of them. And I think there is a comparison with Bonnard and [Édouard] Vuillard, who, just as you have, created images by fusing background and foreground; giving equal weight, in a sense, in terms of color and intensity to both, is also something that you do. In fact, you play with issues of perspective in your landscapes. It gives them, to my eye, great intensity and enormous pulse in mixing both natural and bird's-eye views in the same plane and tilting it up, losing the sky and focusing on all of the patterns. You do this as a reaction to things seen? Or are you actually looking to transform things seen into your own version of abstraction?



[LEFT]
Pierre Bonnard
Table Before a Window, 1934
Oil on canvas
40 x 28 1/2 inches (102 x 72 cm)
Private Collection

[BELOW]
Maurice de Vlaminck
Environs of Paris, 1905
Oil on canvas
25 1/2 x 32 inches (65 x 81 cm)
Private Collection



THIEBAUD: **Well since I work from memory—of course I go out and draw a lot and paint on the scene—but essentially it's a studio practice of attempting to use as many tools of perspective and the influences from East and West and wherever, and attempting to make a non-pictorial emphasis to find the landscape, or to find that section of the landscape through negotiations of space and many of the directions that you annotate. So, it's a great joy to make it as a research problem and attempt, for instance, to use as many perspectives, points of view, and flatness, to make a picture which happily has not been seen before. A very difficult task. A very rich heritage of the tradition of art history gives us those standards of excellence, but also ways of doing things. So as an old art teacher in the university, these are the ways in which I go about it.**

DE MONTEBELLO: And I think that's a very good explanation and I think, to a certain degree, your *tilting* of the landscapes upward goes back precisely to the miniature art of the Indian and Rajput painters that you evoke. Part of the intensity and the almost unsettling quality of some of your landscapes to me, and I wonder whether you would agree with this, goes back a little bit to Cézanne's still lives where the tables are tilted up and, where, were it not paint on canvas, the plates and fruit would all tumble into our space, no?

THIEBAUD: (laughs) **Yes, that's right. Yes, I find his works quite jolly, in that sense. I know it's a very serious breakthrough that he makes and we are all educated by his example but there is a kind of humanness which he re-enters into the atmosphere and that's why he's such a great example and a great treasure for us.**

DE MONTEBELLO: You mentioned a moment ago your teaching and how important that is to you and it's wonderful that you've done it for so long. And to me it raises the following question: Would you say that to a certain extent, the fact that you teach has some bearing on your work… in the sense that you instinctively continue to apply, exercise, and experiment a bit in function of your teaching and striving to be true to it?

THIEBAUD: **That's a very good, precise statement about what I do. Actually, teaching was my education. I was fortunate that I was hired, I had not gone to art school and, while I wanted to go, it was not possible. So a lot of wonderful craftspeople and tradespeople and typographers, old sign painters, illustrators and so-on, guided me as an apprentice. So, there was a very direct kind of way in which one went about teaching oneself and being responsible to a high standard. So, when I began to teach I simply would give examples or projects which I was interested in, and fortunately the institutions which I worked at—first a junior college and then an university—were very allowing of that sort of thing. I would set an example, for instance, a color problem, attempting to define the three uses of hue, value, and intensity, which is a difficult and highly subtle challenge for one to learn. You learn that value by far trumps something like hue and intensity, something that is a difficult thing to learn, so…I'm afraid I am a little verbose and I'll try to make it shorter.**

DE MONTEBELLO: Not at all, you're actually very explicit and precise. It's wonderful.

THIEBAUD: (laughs) **Thank you.**

DE MONTEBELLO: And, so it is a fascinating interaction, a kind of almost autobiographical, autodidactic way of experimenting, which leads me to ask whether you consider yourself as someone who is willing to take risks. You've said in many interviews that you're never really fully satisfied with the last picture you have done, that you are always thinking of the next one. Do you occasionally destroy work that you are dissatisfied with?

THIEBAUD: **Quite a little bit of destruction has to take place and your description is probably one of the most important things at least for modern artists—I don't know beyond that, but risk was always at the center of so many things. I see Picasso as a sort of practicing art historian, where he'll try any culture and any movement and of course, make it his own, but that range and fullness of life I think is absolutely the premise upon which one paints. At least, that's my view of it. There's never quite enough, it's never full enough…you're still looking if you can in any way at all find some sort of new visual species, however small and however it accommodates itself. But once you learn how to do something, or you run through a series—my series seem to take around ten to twelve years or more and then I probably have done what I can do.**

DE MONTEBELLO: Let me interject at this point. On one level that is obviously true, and you say so, but you do revisit pictures that you've done years before and actually intervene in them, making substantial changes to them.

THIEBAUD: **Yes.**

DE MONTEBELLO: Is that a form of re-creation? Is that, oddly enough, a violation of a particular defining moment in your career?

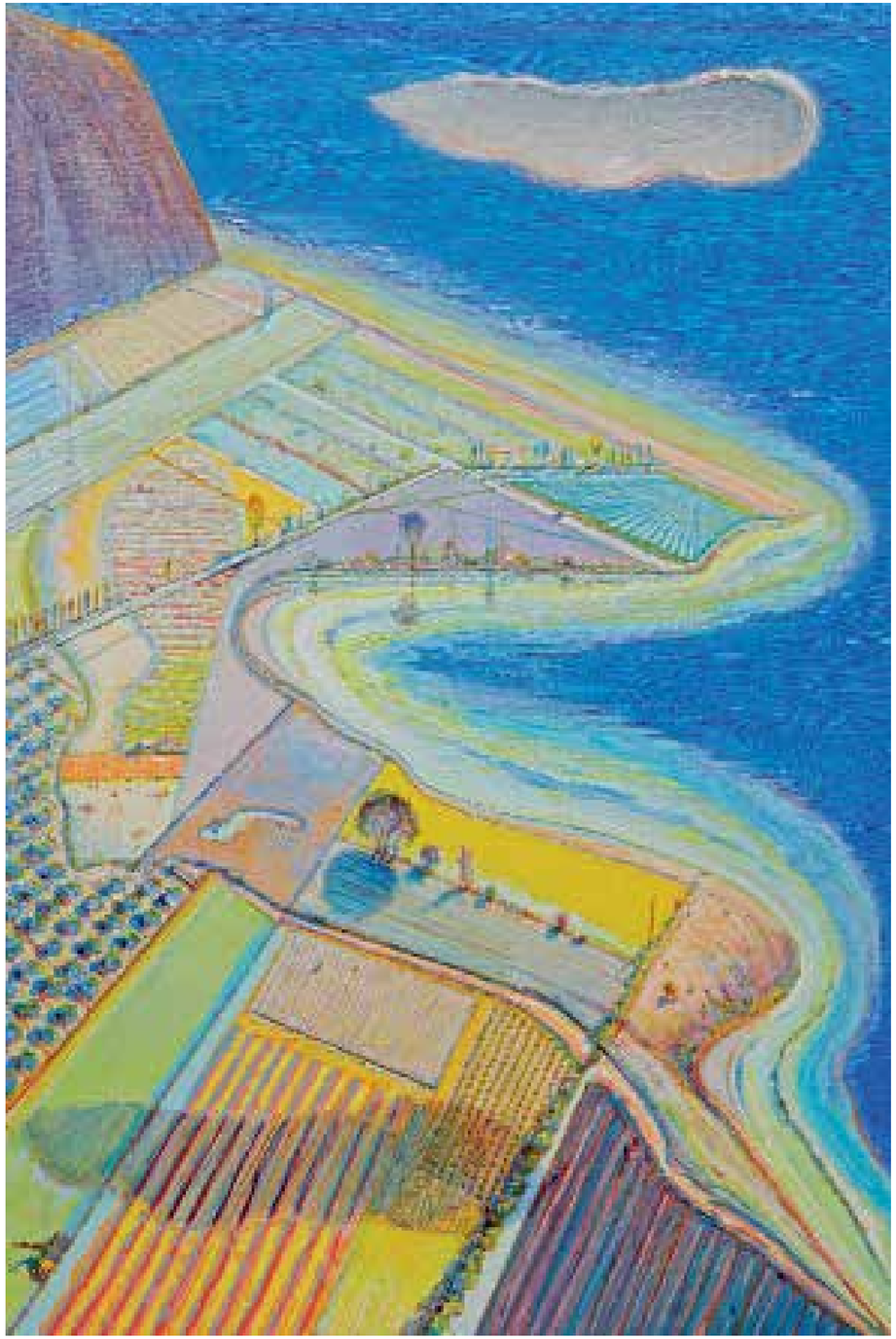


PLATE 14
Wayne Thiebaud
Coastal Farms, 2008
Oil and acrylic on canvas
72 1/8 x 47 7/8 inches
(183.2 x 121.6 cm)
Private Collection

THIEBAUD: **I think part of it comes from my commercial art experience, perhaps. But yes, that idea of regaining… for instance, about a month ago, I started painting cakes and pies again and it was a shock. But somehow, I've seen something new, for instance, those glass globes they put over leftover pieces of cake.**

DE MONTEBELLO: Right.

THIEBAUD: **Or something of that kind, where I've seen a knife inserted in something, then it seems to me that I have a new little fresh thing that I would like to annotate as a part of the general survey of the work over so many years. So it is true, I go back. But usually I'm headed on to something and have no idea what to do… I almost hate to admit what I'm trying to paint now** (laughs).

DE MONTEBELLO: Well, to follow up on that fascinating aspect of your continual renewal of yourself, which is remarkable, would you then say that it would be fair to characterize much of your work and the subject matter as essentially pretext for images? That in the end it doesn't matter whether it's a mountain, a cake, or a beach scene?

THIEBAUD: **I think that's a perfect answer to that which we've just discussed. Every painting is its own unique thing, so that, even if you repeat yourself, there are those changes. And I've lost the exact, fine question that you had, I'm afraid.**

DE MONTEBELLO: I'll rephrase it because I am sure you will have something interesting to say. My question was essentially, is the actual subject, the object you are painting, largely a pretext to create images?

THIEBAUD: **That's the perfect question that I would like to address and that cites the idea of formalism.**

DE MONTEBELLO: Uh-huh.

THIEBAUD: **That's what I'm always primarily interested in, which is making that thing as well as I can. So that, yes, there isn't a lot of difference between a mountain and a cake which would significantly shy me away from painting it. That's a very important thing I think. Dealing with students, for instance, what you want to get them started on is just**

that particular aspect of their work. Developing your tools so that your craftsmanship is almost of your honor and you don't expect to find ways around that. For me at least it's very central and I find myself, as much as a contemporary artist, a big booster of academic drawing and academic standards.

DE MONTEBELLO: That's beautifully put and I think your own work proves it. You obviously *love* to paint because the surfaces of your pictures vibrate and pulsate through their painterly quality where we sense your paint-laden brush on the canvas. You must really delight in the act of painting, don't you?

THIEBAUD: **I *love* painting** (pauses).

DE MONTEBELLO: You don't need to say more.

THIEBAUD: **It's one of the most difficult things to do but one of the most wonderful things to do.**

DE MONTEBELLO: Well, and because you do it, you share it and transfer that love to all of us and I think the response that you've seen over many, many years—and may God grant you many more—I think is a source of great pleasure and continued admiration for your work. I think you've said about as much as we can print and draw out and I'm very, very grateful to you.

THIEBAUD: **Let me tell you how much I admire you and your work.**

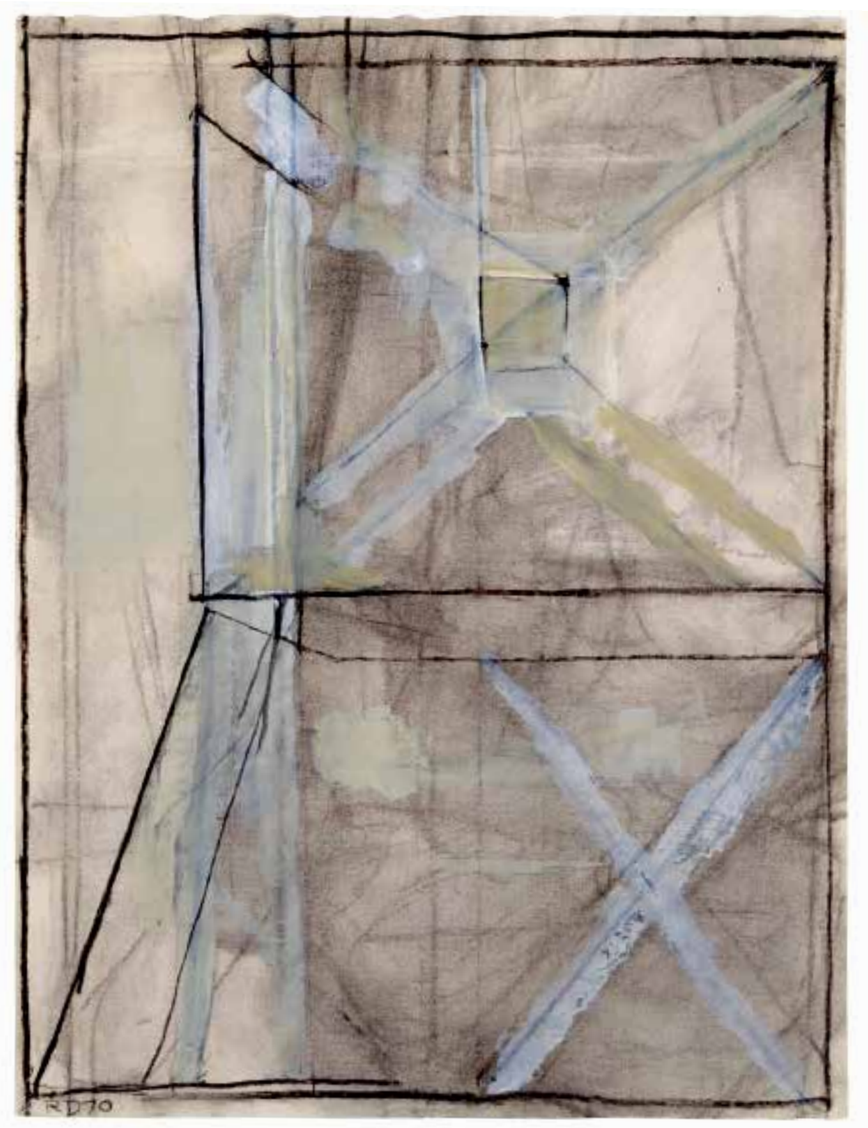
DE MONTEBELLO: Thank you, sir.

THIEBAUD: **Which I've followed pleasantly for a long time. I've always thought that one of my best vacations would be to pitch up a tent in the Metropolitan Museum.**

DE MONTEBELLO: (laughs) I wish you would! (both laugh)

THIEBAUD: **Thank you very, very much.**

DE MONTEBELLO: Thank you Mr. Thiebaud.



Richard Diebenkorn,
Untitled #15, 1970
Charcoal, gouache, cut and pasted paper on paper
25 x 18 inches (63.5 x 45.7 cm)
Thiebaud Family Collection

I often say when we are grouped as California artists that it has a characteristically false premise. Since there is only one art world or one painting world, as far as I'm concerned, it's like referring to California painting like referring to "California mathematics" or "California science." I feel much more general and very deeply interested in the whole tradition of painting, which is my love.

—WAYNE THIEBAUD