

**Wayne Thiebaud Mountains: 1965–2019. Text by
Margaretta M. Lovell and Michael M. Thomas**

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Wayne Thiebaud Mountains: 1965–2019.
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Wayne Thiebaud Mountains: 1965–2019 catalogues a 2019 exhibition at Acquavella Galleries in New York City. It includes a biography of the artist; a foreword by Eleanor Acquavella, the owner of the galleries; and essays by Michael M. Thomas, a former curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Margaretta M. Lovell, a professor of American Art at the University of California, Berkeley. The 33 plates of the works exhibited boast vivid colors and high resolution, showing Thiebaud’s much-lauded brushwork to great advantage. While it can be difficult to gauge the relative sizes of the different paintings, Thomas and Lovell occasionally provide a helpful sense of scale by comparing them to each other.

Wayne Thiebaud was born in Arizona and grew up in California. He started out in cartooning and commercial art, then gained recognition for his “cheerful, impossible to

FIGURE 1 Wayne Thiebaud, *Around the Cake*, 1962. Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, gift of Ralph T. Coe in memory of Helen F. Spencer, 1982.0144. (© 2021 Wayne Thiebaud / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society [ARS], NY)



FIGURE 2 Wayne Thiebaud, *Big Rock Mountain*, 2004–2021/2019. (© 2021 Wayne Thiebaud / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society [ARS], NY)



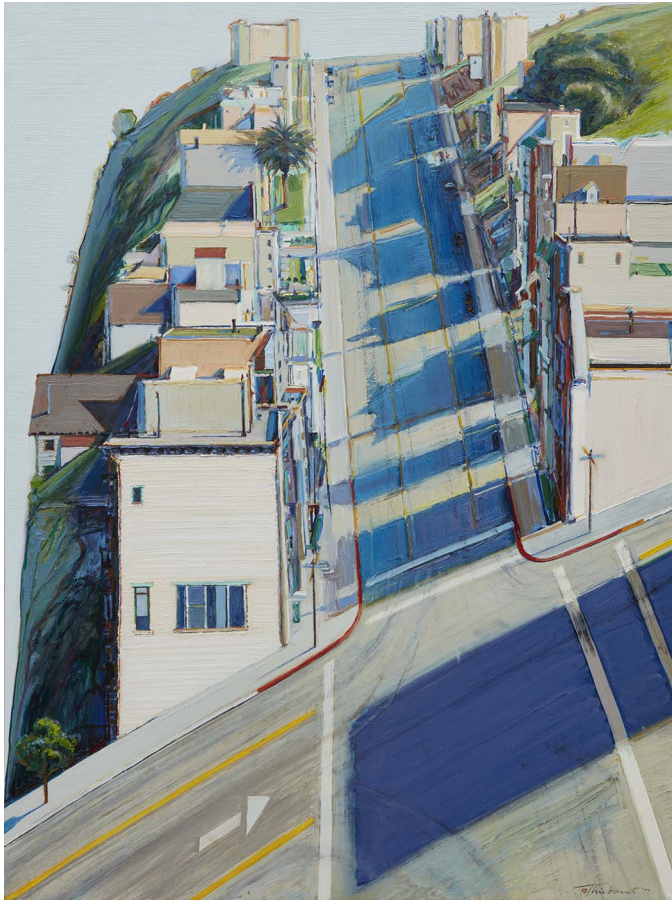
resist” paintings of “desserts, shoes, countertops, and other quotidian objects” (p 11; Figure 1). He began his series of mountain paintings “entirely from memory” (p 7) in the 1960s, intensifying his focus on mountain subjects in the 2000s.

In “Wayne Thiebaud’s Mountains: An Appreciation,” Thomas takes a conversational tone, avoiding excessive jargon and employing broad strokes, for example, “America is about independence and so is Thiebaud” (p 24). He notes the paintings’ “monumentality” (p 13), “precipitous verticality” (p 14), and “general lack of human presence” (p 18), in contrast to works of other mountain painters. Through such comparisons, Thomas portrays Thiebaud as an unconventional landscape painter and primes readers for the works to come. Thomas’s judicious use of quotes also conveys Thiebaud’s personal charm: “I’m obviously a very influenced painter and I delight in being so” (p 18).

As a geologist, I read Thomas’s discussion of *Big Rock Mountain* (Figure 2) with interest. In my view, it illustrates vertical exaggeration, cross section, and layer-cake geology effectively. The fact that Thiebaud “painted and repainted [it] over the past 15 years” (p 19) lends the work an appropriate sense of change over time, albeit on a human, rather than geologic, scale.

Though Thomas’s essay helped me appreciate Thiebaud’s enigmatic mountains in a more nuanced way, I did not feel the “special joy in verticality” (p 19) he describes. While the series may reflect the artist’s joy and virtuosity, many of the works inspire disorientation and dread in this viewer.

FIGURE 3 Wayne Thiebaud, *Ripley Ridge*, 1977. (© 2021 Wayne Thiebaud / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society [ARS], NY)



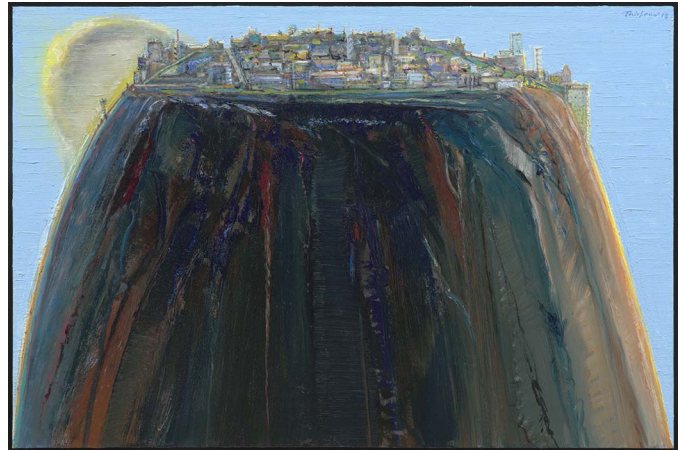
Thomas writes that “Mountains endure. That’s the essence of their character” (p 22), but these landscapes suggest imminent change and even destruction, from mass movement in *Big Rock Mountain* to apocalypse in *Mountain Fire*.

Lovell provides historical and geological context in the essay “City, River, Mountain: Wayne Thiebaud’s California,” supplementing the paintings with maps and satellite imagery. Like Thomas, she extols Thiebaud’s use of impasto (relief) painting, appropriate for depictions of topographic relief. Also like Thomas, she quotes effectively, from critics appalled by Thiebaud’s foray into landscape painting (“Burn these landscapes, burn your brushes, and eat the ashes, and never paint them again” [p 27]) and from the artist himself, who is most interested in “painting that is representational and abstract simultaneously” (p 29).

Thiebaud’s melding of abstract and representational struck me as cinematic. *Ripley Ridge* (Figure 3) anticipates the Escherian Paris street scene in *Inception*, while *Laguna Rise* (Figure 4) could be the meteoric city of Novi Grad in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. The artist himself acknowledged the cinematic quality of his work: “. . . people who love paintings will spend as long as hours looking at a single painting and it unfolds like film, like a motion picture” (Mailman 2020).

Like films, Thiebaud’s mountains evoke a visceral response. The looming, precarious peaks cause “disequilibrium” (p 52) and vertigo. In Lovell’s analysis, they

FIGURE 4 Wayne Thiebaud, *Laguna Rise*, 2003–2012/2018. (© 2021 Wayne Thiebaud / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society [ARS], NY)



are “horizonless, no governing perspective clarifies the visual field, and no foothold positions the observer steadily on the edge of the pictured world . . . a familiar kind of subject spatially disrupted and deliberately defamiliarized” (p 39). In the Sierra Nevada paintings, vertical and overhanging monoliths “seem to float without base, context, or resolution” (p 45). Thiebaud’s defiance of the conventions of landscape painting results in “bizarrely original and eerily unsettling” scenes (p 48).

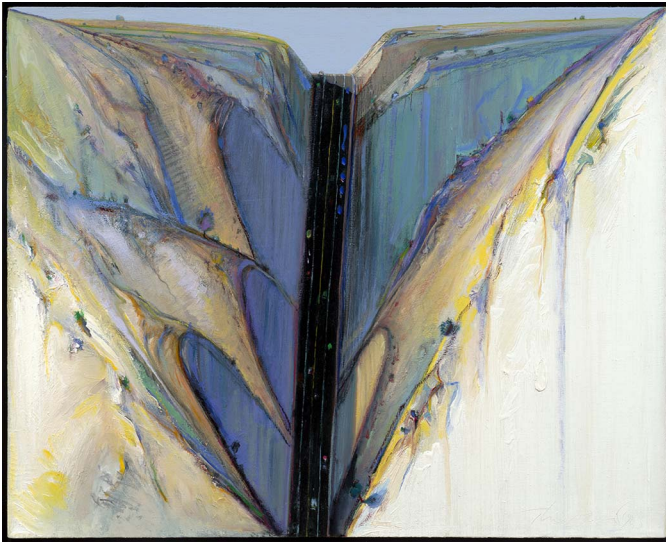
Lovell delves into Thiebaud’s use of color, to edifying effect. Thiebaud rejected conventions of not only visual perspective, but also atmospheric perspective, where distant dark objects appear blue due to moisture and dust in the atmosphere scattering short-wavelength blue light (Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2016). Thiebaud’s mountains are predominantly blue, even in the foreground; they could be seracs or icebergs. Lovell also celebrates Thiebaud’s extensive use of halation, “a halo-like effect in which light spreads beyond the edges of a bright object” (Oxford University Press 2021), particularly with contrasting colors like blue and orange. Passages like these add to the curious reader’s enjoyment of the mountains series.

Like Thomas, Lovell takes nuanced looks at particular paintings. I was intrigued to learn that Thiebaud considered the roadcut in *Road Through* (Figure 5) “a heroic human achievement against great odds” (p 30). To me, the road’s vertical orientation and scarp-like roadcuts on either side suggest an ominous, artificial fault.

Lovell invokes “the tales Americans tell . . . about themselves and their relationship to the hospitable continent they have occupied so completely” (p 37) and alleges that Thiebaud’s landscapes “tattle on what Americans have done to the land . . . and suggest the attitude of the artist (and of Americans writ large) toward human landscapes, habitation, and an unquiet planet” (p 36). Just what do Thiebaud’s “pictorial tall tales” (p 39) tell us? We find a clue in his “heroic violence” (p 30) interpretation of *Road Through*.

While Lovell acknowledges California’s indigenous and immigrant populations, neither the essays nor the paintings disambiguate Thiebaud’s political perspective. Readers and viewers in search of more explicit political statements about Californian landscapes will find them outside the pages of

FIGURE 5 Wayne Thiebaud, *Road Through*, 1983. (© 2021 Wayne Thiebaud / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society [ARS], NY)



this book in contemporary indigenous art, one recent, monumental example being Nicholas Galanin's *Never Forget* installation at Desert X (Figure 6).

Wayne Thiebaud Mountains: 1965–2019 underdevelops the artist's politics, perhaps, but not his affability. Thomas and Lowell introduce us to a humble and loyal living legend, who eschewed the New York art scene to remain a longtime Sacramento resident and professor at the University of California, Davis. We also gain an appreciation of Thiebaud's range and versatility. Art lovers who are familiar with Thiebaud's earlier work will enjoy the opportunity to get to know Thiebaud as a painter of distressing mountains as well as delectable desserts. As for the tales Americans tell themselves, readers can draw their own conclusions, or search elsewhere for more critical analyses. To quote the novelist Zadie Smith (2005: 130): "Art is the Western myth . . . with which we both console ourselves and make ourselves."

Serving as a source of personal meaning is not art's only function, however. The arts and humanities also help conceptualize global change in mountains. The editors of the MountainMedia section invite *MRD* readers (and the

FIGURE 6 *Never Forget* by Nicholas Galanin, 2021. (Photograph by Nathan Mallon, reproduced with artist and photographer permission)



mountain research community as a whole) to explore and emulate such expressions across disciplines.

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