

# Despite his pop-art success, Wayne Thiebaud likes tradition

By Hunter Drohojowska

"I always see myself as a traditional painter, working with traditional problems in the representational idiom."

That might seem a surprising statement from Wayne Thiebaud, the Northern California artist who rode to success with the pop-art movement. His paintings of pies, cakes, gum-ball machines, billiard balls and other common objects were easily, if erroneously, linked to the soup cans of Andy Warhol or the comic strips of Roy Lichtenstein.

But a retrospective of his work since the early '60s — at the Newport Harbor Art Museum through Feb. 16 — proves him to be, as he says, traditional.

(The exhibition is underwritten by a \$100,000 gift from the Irvine Co., the first part of a 10-year, \$1 million gift commitment the firm has made to the museum to fund major exhibitions.)

Thiebaud's pictures of desserts are as delectable as Matisse's still lifes; the figure paintings are as imposing and formal as those of Thomas Eakins; the landscapes of serpentine freeways are nearly as abstract as the protractor paintings of Frank Stella.

Thiebaud, 65, looks tan and fit, wearing a mint-green vest with his blue blazer and gray slacks. Palm-ing a Perrier in the museum cafe before his opening-night party, he reveals the secret of this glow of good health: "14th."

14th?

"Fourteenth in the Northern California Senior Tennis Tournament Circuit. Betty Jean (his wife of 26 years) is sixth," he adds with a grin.

He confesses that he would have become a tennis pro if he hadn't



Looking fit at 65, Wayne Thiebaud says he would have become a pro tennis player if he hadn't become a painter.

become one of the country's best-loved painters.

Sports' loss is the art world's gain.

Thiebaud recalls his initial surprise at being called a pop artist, being lumped together with artists he'd never heard of. "Painting has nothing to do with the art categorical stance, the labels," he says. "But you are so thankful that people call you anything, as well as to have people pay attention. Most painters go unnoticed. I'd made up my mind I would teach and just paint what interested me.

"I had made up my mind that it was not possible to make a living but to make a life about painting," he adds. Thiebaud, who teaches at UC Davis, points out that very few people continue as artists.

"What it brings is eternal growth, a life spent in the edifica-

tion of that which you are passionate about, taken over by," he says. "But very few people like painting as painting these days. Depending on how you see it, it is either very silly or very sublime as a human venture."

One source of Thiebaud's inspiration is art history. "I'm interested in the tradition of realist painting from Velazquez through Vermeer to Chardin," he says. "How terrifically complex and abstract their work is. What interests me about realist painting is the many perceptual responses conjoined. In an Eakins you can see part impressionism, part expressionism, part realism."

That is the formal language of painting that keeps Thiebaud at the easel. He doesn't work from ideas, which he calls "dangerous." His decisions of what to paint are generally dictated by some problem he wants to solve in color, design or space.

"Color is an emotional medium," he says. "I can be as emotional about color as about man's inhumanity to man."

Thiebaud notes that the impressionists often referred to their art as an unruly mistress, canvases of wild color that seemed to rule the painters' lives.

"Students will say they are in charge of a painting, which means they are in trouble with it," he says. "If you don't understand what the surface is telling you, you manhandle the painting. You have to deal with the capacity to interrupt your work, too, to keep it from finishing itself. It may look like a tour de force, but that's not what painting is about. It's about inquiry, imagination, trying to do something you can't do, incorporating the human attributes of mistakes, stutterings, hesitancy."

Thiebaud, who grew up in Long Beach, worked as a commercial artist and cartoonist before returning to college to get a degree in fine