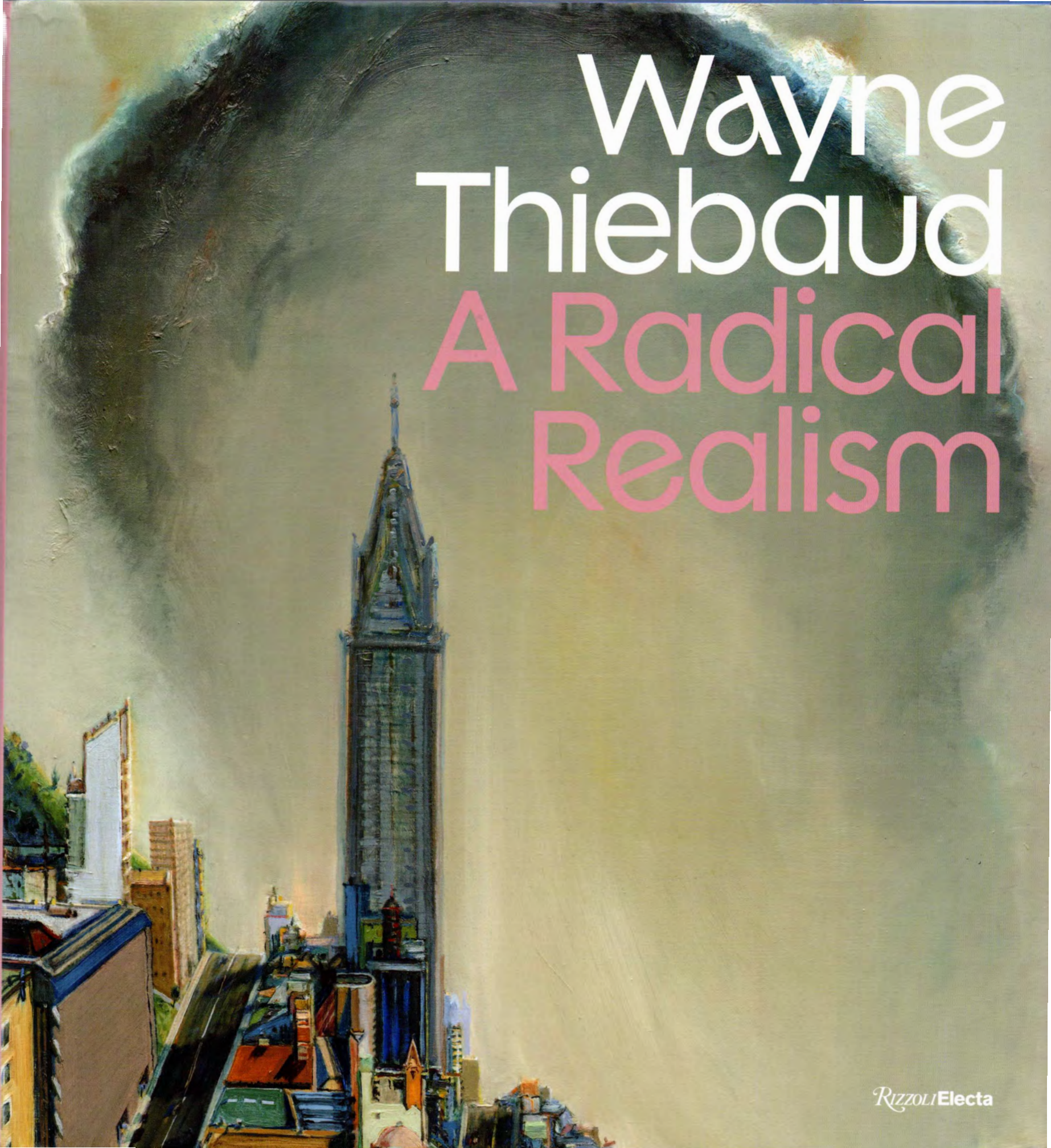


Wayne Thiebaud

A Radical Realism

RIZZOLI Electa

"Anyone Can Be My Protagonist"

Julia Friedman

> "The truth is that every strong artist builds on his weaknesses: it is only weak artists who deny them."
> —Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, 1987

In early 2001, shortly after Wayne Thiebaud turned eighty, writer and essayist Adam Gopnik interviewed him at the historic Herbst Theatre in San Francisco.[1] Toward the end of their hour-long exchange, Gopnik asked whether Thiebaud had any regrets about what, if anything, he could have done better. The response was that he had "not worked with the figure enough." The figure, said Thiebaud, "is the devil," because to simply represent the figure within a given artistic convention, or style, is to dodge the challenge of giving the painting "some degree of real feeling, and transporting character." He concluded: "that's the thing that bedevils me. I keep trying, I even try now, making these disastrous attempts, but I keep on trying anyway." To be sure, Thiebaud's persistent return to figure paintings and drawings over the course of his long career is a proof of his tenacity and determination to re-create in the American vernacular the "real feeling" and "transporting character" found in the paintings of Velázquez, Degas, and Eakins. Many of his later "disastrous attempts" were witnessed firsthand by the British philosopher Richard Wollheim, who Thiebaud mentioned early in the Herbst Theatre interview. Wollheim was his friend and occasional colleague at UC Davis between 1989 and 1996. The two became acquainted sometime after Thiebaud's San Francisco Museum of Modern Art retrospective of 1985, which was also the year Wollheim moved to the Bay Area to join the faculty of UC Berkeley. This was just one among many mentions of the philosopher in Thiebaud's lectures and interviews. The frequency with which the painter revisited his conversations with Wollheim reflects the importance of their dialogue, which ended with Wollheim's passing in 2003 but continued to influence Thiebaud's painting until his own death in 2021.

There is little mystery in Wollheim's opinion of Thiebaud's work. It is detailed in a 1989 review for *Artforum*,[2] and a longer essay entitled "A Painter's Alchemy," which he wrote the same year for the British journal *Modern Painters*.[3] Wollheim argued that Thiebaud worked against the grain of postwar American figuration in that he did not subscribe to the sentimental vision of his compatriots, for whom everyday, empirical objects could achieve the status of poetry. Boldly forgoing irony, "the great alibi of contemporary art,"[4] Thiebaud rejected the facile and banal approach that puts painting and its subject matter on an equal footing. He was not interested in "the pursuit of appearances"[5] and did not use the illusion of replicating the real world on canvas as his justification for painting. Wollheim saw Thiebaud as "rescu[ing] painting from the charge of superfluity."[6] Far from turning the easel into a window through which the real world is represented in oil paint, Thiebaud understood that "the value of painting must lie in a visual experience to which it gives rise: an experience which at once derives from looking at the real world, and enhances the real world when we return to

Wayne Thiebaud, Untitled (Gene Cooper) (detail), 2019

it."[7] Painting does not have to compete with reality. Its goal is to become its own *visual species* by using "the traditional features of art"[8] such as lighting, composition, and color.

Long before he wrote about Thiebaud's alchemy, Wollheim had made his reputation as a philosopher (there is even a paradox named after him), and also contributed to the rarefied subfield of the philosophy of art. In 1984, he was invited to deliver the prestigious A. W. Mellon Lecture in the Fine Arts at the National Gallery of Art—an honor normally reserved for art historians. In 1987, these lectures were expanded, and published by Princeton University Press in a volume called *Painting as an Art*.[9] It is the third chapter, "The Spectator in the Picture," that Thiebaud repeatedly referenced in his talk and interview, and which points to the reason behind the formal and philosophical complexity of his figures. It stems from the viewer's preconception of how any given pictorial genre functions. This is especially true for figure paintings where sitters are not nameless models, but friends and family members of the artist. Their names are known, their likenesses are familiar. Even when Thiebaud differentiates between "straight portraiture" and figure painting that he maintains to be "direct encounters" with the sitter's appearance,[10] viewers are conditioned to look for an animated character, a vivid personality, a transmitter of emotion. Ever since Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, the critical emphasis has been on identity and the inner world (often the inner turmoil) of the sitter. German idealist philosophy, with its principle of inwardness, gave rise to the twentieth-century Expressionist portrait, dominant in the post-WWI work of Chaïm Soutine and, when Thiebaud began painting figures in the 1960s, in the works of Alice Neel and Lucian Freud.[11]

Thiebaud refused to conform to the conventions of portraiture, governing pictorial genres in general, and all paintings—whether landscapes, still lifes, or figure paintings—as the locus of "'inherently' the same kind of problem."[12] That bred confusion in the viewers' (and the critics') perception of his figure paintings, which were often seen as lacking some essential quality that ought to be present in the depictions of human beings. Critics who attempted to identify what was missing have often remarked that Thiebaud's most puzzling paintings treat human figures in a similar manner to the foodstuffs and haberdashery of his still lifes. But men and women are not cupcakes and ties; they are expected to enact their humanity, or at least to adjust themselves to the viewer's projections of their presumed behaviors. And while there are similarities in modeling and lighting, perhaps the most intriguing parallel between Thiebaud's still lifes and his figure paintings is the "stilling" of the figures by representing them in the moment either immediately before or after an action. In a 1974 interview with Dan Tooker, Thiebaud explained his technique using the image of chronological "centering": "what I am interested in, really, is the figure that is about to do something, or has done something, or is doing nothing, and with that sort of centering device try to figure out what can be revealed."[13] Thus the balance of action is purposefully left out.

Wollheim describes the action left out of the painting as "representational content in excess of what [paintings] represent . . . what is given to us along with what the painting represents."[14] Such content "in excess" reveals itself through "an unrepresented spectator." This spectator, Wollheim tells us, is different from both the external spectator—the *spectator of the picture* (an actual person in the room that contains the painting) and from the internal spectator—the *spectator in the picture* (the person in the locale and historical period represented in the painting). The distinction between the external and internal spectators is important, because only the external spectator is aware of the painting's marked surface, which the internal spectator does not see. In addition to these two, Wollheim purports that some paintings also contain an *unrepresented* internal spectator who "must be so located in the represented space that he can see everything that the picture represents and he can

see it as the picture represents it."[15] This is "the protagonist," who facilitates "centrally imagining" the event, since his point of view is at the center.[16] The protagonist does not have to be a specific person: "anyone can be my protagonist provided only that I know enough about that person to keep him, her, constant in my thoughts . . . It can be merely a person of some particular kind, the kind being more or less specific." Critically, it is the artist who endows the protagonist—the unrepresented spectator—with "a body of dispositions."[17] It follows that if the protagonist, as a surrogate of the painter, sustains the painter's action—stilling, in the case of Thiebaud—then the external spectator will be compelled to empathize with the emotional register of stillness.

The true content of the picture is now accessible to this external spectator who will not be limited to what the painting represents. From the vantage point of the painter, this model makes the unrepresented internal spectator (the protagonist) indispensable for delivering the content of the painting to the external spectator in its entirety, with clarity and cogency:

> First, the external spectator looks at the picture and sees what there is to be seen in it; then, adopting the internal spectator as his protagonist, he starts to imagine in that person's perspective the person or event that the picture represents; that is to say, he imagines from the inside the internal spectator seeing, thinking about, responding to, acting upon, what is before him; then the condition in which it leaves him modifies how he sees the picture. The external spectator identifies with the internal spectator, and it is through this identification that he gains fresh access to the picture's content.[18]

In other words, the internal spectator acts as a proxy for the external spectator—the spectator *in the* picture enables the spectator *of the* picture to gain access to what the painting contains but does not represent.

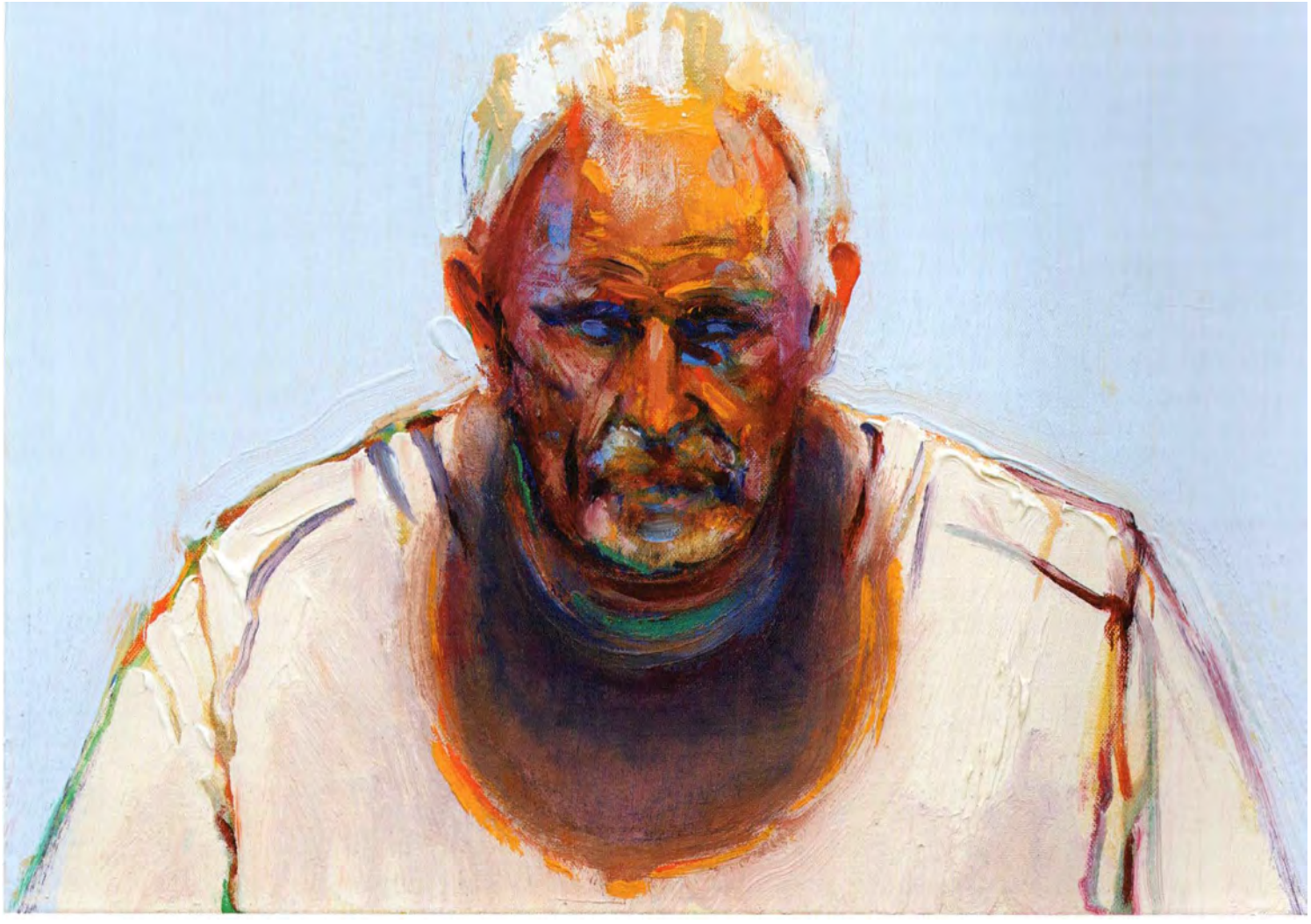
To illustrate his argument, Wollheim uses the example of Édouard Manet's figures, which are "turned in upon themselves by some powerful troubling thought; they are figures who are temporarily preoccupied, figures who have retained and cherish, who cosset, a secret, to which their thoughts have now reverted."[19] As in Thiebaud's interview with Tooker, in which he described his figures as either pre- or post-action, so Manet's mutable characters are in a temporary freeze-frame: "a moment later and the mood may dissipate, but until it does, they are absent from the world."[20] It is this proximity in the emotional registers between Manet's and Thiebaud's figures that makes Wollheim's knotty theory of the "unrepresented spectator" appealing. The philosopher's multitiered system, which necessitates multiple spectators to access a painting's content in its entirety, suggests a way to interpret some of Thiebaud's most enigmatic figure paintings. That is not to demystify them, which would be a fool's errand, but to underscore the fact that, just as with Manet, whose frontality or near-frontality in figure paintings was, according to Wollheim, one of his works' most provocative features, but was dismissed as "mere ineptitude,"[21] Thiebaud's stilling of his figures "opens up an undefined or irrational volume of space in which a perambulating internal spectator might insert himself."[22]

Thiebaud goes to great lengths to entice the external spectator into careful looking. As he stated in the interview with Bill Berkson, the "speculative arena is one of the intrigues of painting."[23] And as one scholar noted, his unadorned white backdrops have a specific purpose: their "clinical austerity creates a nonnarrative context that forces the artist, and the viewer, to concentrate on the figure."[24] Removing the anecdotal pushes figure paintings away from the realm of illustration, the explicit, where nothing remains unrepresented, into the realm of fine art, the implicit, where, as Wollheim argues, content may reside outside what paintings seem to represent.[25]

Take for instance Thiebaud's canonical *Girl with Ice Cream Cone* from 1963 (p. 124)—one of his

Wayne Thiebaud
Girl with Ice Cream Cone, 1963
Oil on canvas
48 ⅛ × 36 ¼ in.
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest Fund,
Smithsonian Collections Acquisition
Program, and museum purchase, 1996

Wayne Thiebaud
Untitled (Gene Cooper), 2019
Oil on canvas
18 × 18 in.
Collection of Wayne Thiebaud Foundation



earliest figure paintings that followed his shift to the new style of brightly lit still lifes. The frontally posed model (Thiebaud's wife, Betty Jean), illuminated by a 32K photo floodlight,[26] is positioned in the middle of the canvas; she faces outward and is parallel to the picture plane. Wollheim referred to this placement as "the arbitrary viewpoint *par excellence*: head on."[27] Given the setting—the ice cream cone and the bathing suit imply she is oceanside or at least poolside—the model's lack of any emotion appropriate to enjoying a cold treat on a hot day, and her failure to attend to the cone she is holding up to her mouth, present a palpable threat of the ice cream dripping down the improbably neat folds of her garment. Yet she is oblivious to the physical facts. This should suggest to the external spectator that the humdrum narrative of the soon-to-be-melted ice cream is not the point here. The point is the suspended eroticism presented to the external spectator, through the suggestive pink of the cone with its phallic shadow, the model's parted lips, her legs akimbo, and the gradient darkening of her inner thighs. Her body is transfixed in the pictorial space. Caught in the austerity of the white background, the figure is pushed forward by the purple shadow she casts, and held back by the unrepresented internal spectator—the protagonist right in front of her. It is this protagonist who conveys to us, the external spectators, the suspended eroticism he is "seeing, thinking about, responding to, acting upon." Thiebaud implies this frontality in this painting in the manner of Manet.

Something similar, albeit in reverse, happens in *Untitled (Dane Cooper)* from 2019 (P. 127), a portrait of art historian Dane Cooper, Thiebaud's longtime friend. Cooper has been the subject of a half-dozen paintings over the past four decades, ranging from conventional portraits to generalized depictions and caricature. *Untitled* contains a centrally positioned *en face* bust, illuminated from the top, and depicted against Thiebaud's trademark grayish-white background. Because of his forward-tilted head, his light-colored clothing, and the position of the floodlight, Cooper appears to be weighed down by an X-ray lead apron covering his chest. The figure is stilled in its pictorial space in the same way as the girl with the ice cream, only here the sitter exudes experience, certainty, solidity. He is an actor; she is acted upon. He leans forward, into the space occupied by the external spectator, not backward as she does. The undifferentiated ground remains behind him, permanently arrested by his broad figure dominating the foreground. This is in stark contrast to the voidlike space that envelops the girl with the ice cream. Instead of suspended eroticism, the protagonist of *Untitled* projects the gravitas of old age, inviting the external spectator to contemplate the natural order of things.

At times, the proximity between Manet's and Thiebaud's treatment of figures is uncanny. Wollheim's characterization of the French painter's 1868–69 masterpiece *The Balcony* (P. 129) could be applied verbatim to several of Thiebaud's figure paintings: "We see a group of people who are in close propinquity—in *Le Balcon*, crowded together as if they were inside some transparent capsule—but who, for all their physical closeness, fail to make contact." If it were not for the mention of "*Le Balcon*," this could easily refer to Thiebaud's 1963 *Eating Figures (Quick Snack)* (P. 130), in which a woman and a man—he used Betty Jean and his dealer Allan Stone as models—perch on adjacent diner stools, their sides pressed together to the point of making them look like conjoined twins, yet oblivious of each other's presence. It might also describe his iconic 1965 canvas *Five Sitting Figures* (PP. 132–33), where three men and two women confined to an invisible closed circle serve as a perfect illustration of Wollheim's account of Manet's *Balcony*: "contact between them has been broken. Something has impinged upon them with the effect that, for the duration of the picture, for that special time, they are locked up in their own private thoughts."[28]

We might wonder why the philosopher's discussion of Manet's "suspended encounters" and "transient moment[s] of intense, shared isolation" seem to chime so harmoniously with Thiebaud's ballroom paintings from the early

Édouard Manet
The Balcony, 1868–69
Oil on canvas
67 × 50 in.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

1990s. Why Wollheim's statement about how "we anticipate the vehemence with which, once their heads clear, the two protagonists will re-enter the moment,"[29] which was actually written about Manet's 1879 *In the Winter Garden*, so clearly evokes Thiebaud's *Eating Figures*? Or we might question why his characterization of Manet's group paintings as manifestations of "momentary withdrawal, of abstraction, of secretiveness, along with a strong register of physical presence, by the particular way in which he captures the fleeting relations—the non-relations [. . .] between the members of the group" so perfectly describes Thiebaud's *Five Sitting Figures*, whose "transient mood" also "was established by the oblique gaze, the averted look, the failure of one pair of eyes to look into another—with the implicit sense that all this could change from one moment to the next, so that, as concentration returned, communication would be re-established."[30]

Perhaps the answer to all these questions rests in Wollheim's and Thiebaud's shared fascination with the ambiguity of painting—the only art form that could be perc ived simultaneously as a marked surface and as a realistic illusion of life. Wollheim thought that Manet wa able to retain the balance between the e two modalities, ensuring what he called the "twofoldness" of his paintings by emphasizing the *matière*, "the empathic thematization of the brushstroke." Neither imagination nor perc ption could be allowed to dominate: "Manet eeks to activate the aspect of twofoldness that imagination occludes: that is, awareness of the marked surface." Whenever the external spectator is in danger of losing sight of the marked surface, it is the painter's task to use the resources of his medium to regain balance. Wollheim offers the example of the evolution of Manet's portrait of Théodore Duret, whose recollections of his sittings confirm that Manet added embellishments to the portrait (impasto brushwork, stronger colors) after the fact. He did so "to recall the external spectator to twofoldness, from which he had been induced to depart" because the portrait was too much of an illusion of real life, which made the external spectator lose track of the *matière*. In the case of Manet, "embellishment is deployed so that imagined entry into the picture-space is cut short and the spectator is returned to ordinary seeing-in."[31]

I believe that Thiebaud did something similar in the recent reworking of the 2003–8 canvas *The Speaker* (P. 134). Wollheim, who died in 2003, the year the painting was started, did not pose for it, and although Thiebaud drew the scholar on multiple occasions, *The Speaker* is a generalized representation, not a portrait. It is painted from imagination. In 2019, Thiebaud adjusted some colors and added writing to the blackboard in the background, thus effectively bringing it forward, all the while intensifying the impasto brushwork. These changes shifted the image from looking like an illustration of "a type" (a lecturer), in the vein of Norman

Wayne Thiebaud
Eating Figures (Quick Snack), 1963
Oil on canvas
71 ½ × 47 ½ in.
Private Collection

Wayne Thiebaud in front of **Five Sitting Figures**, 1965
© The Estate of Leo Holub

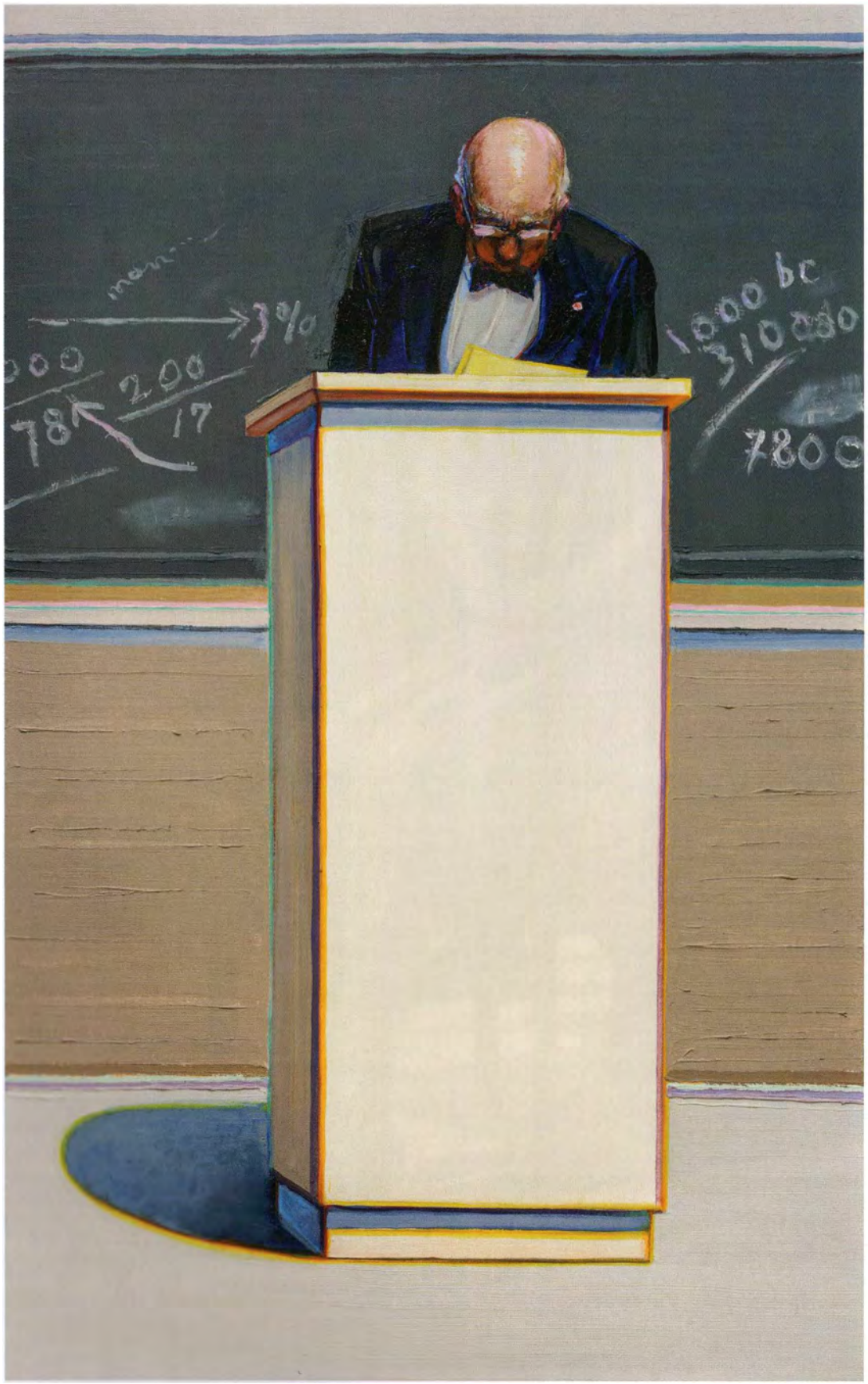
Rockwell, to making the external spectator irrevocably aware of the marked surface. The reworking was the way to highlight the *matière*, by juxtaposing the impasto of the figure with the smooth anonymity of the lectern, which is a prop, both literally and formally—a broad, uninterrupted geometrical block that contains and constrains the human figure. This is precisely the kind of adjustment from the explicit to the implicit that Wollheim describes Manet performing, as the painter added the embellishments via color and impasto, to realign the imagination and perception of Duret's portrait into perfect twofoldness.

Of course, the question of balance between the marked surface and the image in the painting has been the holy grail of painting since the Renaissance, and several Old Masters have been credited with obtaining it. Both Thiebaud and Manet had Velázquez in their sights as they pursued their own twofoldness. Wollheim cites Manet's reference to Velázquez's 1635 *Pablo de Valladolid* portrait at the Prado Museum as "perhaps the most astonishing piece of painting ever done." Thiebaud had always been aware that the quest for "the combination of round figures and a flat surface" began nturi ag , and that his attempts to solv this visual rid ll are part of a historical continuum.[32] H told Adam Gopnik, only half-jokingly, tl at painting the figure was "practically impos ibl t d ... [you] go to the Prado and see Velázqu z, and th n you are ready to shoot yourself." As Wollh im put it in his 1998 Thiebaud essay: "[a paint r] becomes part of the tradition that he invok ."[33] Manet's paintings "were undertaken in dir t competition with the Old Masters" and he "[saw] his task as finding an up-to-date equivalent for what his predecessors had done."[34] Thiebaud continued Manet's project, by translating Velázquez into the twentieth-century American vernacular.

Translating, however, does not mean simplifying. Thiebaud's all-American protagonist is considerably more complex than a crude template of West Coast Pop. Echoing the painter's real-life interests and associations, his protagonist is an amalgam of various subcultures: California leisure athletes, workers' union advocates, readers of Sartre, and spectators of Beckett's plays. The protagonist who acts as the external viewer's proxy in *Five Sitting Figures* possesses a knowledge of existentialist philosophy and of absurdism. In the mid-1970s, Gene Cooper contextualized this painting in an article on Thiebaud's engagement with the theatre in general, and with the Theatre of the Absurd in particular.[35] Cooper argued that the Theatre of the Absurd, with its realization that if "cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his action become senseless, absurd, useless"[36] perfectly aligned with Thiebaud's approach to life, o i- ety, and art. He also saw a close kinship b tw n the painter "representing his figures a till d beings, inserted into a vacuous spac " and th Absurdists relying on minimal m ans to g n r ate maximal content.[37] Both shun fals ly ol liga tory but superfluous action in fav r of g nuin ly existential experiences.

In Thiebaud's ca , it was th e p rience of looking at painting . With out an ov rt, asily identified action to p rf rm, th figur s in *Five Sitting Figure* ju t "ar ,"[38] and it is up to th

Wayne Thiebaud
Five Sitting Figures, 1965
Oil on canvas
60 × 72 in.
Collection of Wayne Thiebaud Foundation



Wayne Thiebaud
The Speaker, 2003–8
Oil on canvas
48 × 30 in.
Collection of Wayne Thiebaud Foundation

external viewer "to feel the painting, or see the painting, or if the painting is going to mean anything—it has to come through you as well as through the painter."[39] The painter becomes the lingering protagonist in his own imagination, which he passes on to the external spectator.[40] By "stilling" the figures, by letting them just be, without engaging in any action or *purposefulness*, Thiebaud compelled his external spectators to take their time and *look* at his paintings. The same was true for his philosopher friend. Those who knew Richard Wollheim often commented on the unusual length of time he dedicated to looking at a single painting. So, while Thiebaud and Wollheim accepted that "anyone can be a protagonist," close looking was nonnegotiable.

Notes

1. On January 17. Originally broadcast on KQED for their City Arts & Lectures program. Introduced by Linda Hunt.
2. Richard Wollheim, "Wayne Thiebaud: Green River Lands, 1998." *Artforum* 38, no. 2 (October 1999): 134–35.
3. Richard Wollheim, "A Painter's Alchemy," *Modern Painters* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 20–24.
4. Wollheim, 1998, 20.
5. Wollheim, 1998, 22.
6. Wollheim, 1998, 22.
7. Wollheim, 1998, 22.
8. Wollheim, 1998, 23.
9. Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*. The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1984. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). At some point Thiebaud attempted to substitute E. H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (also based on the A. W. Mellon Lectures and published by Princeton UP) with Wollheim's *Painting as an Art* but students rebelled because they found the latter text too challenging. As Wollheim's Berkeley colleague Svetlana Alpers put it in his obituary: "the critical writing in *Painting as an Art* is exceedingly complex—in part because it is used to tease out elements of a general system." (*Artforum*, May 2004).
10. Bill Berkson, "Thiebaud on the Figure," in *Wayne Thiebaud. Figurative Works 1959–1994* (Wiegand Gallery. College of Notre Dame, 1994), n.p.
11. Norbert Schneider, *The Art of the Portrait: Masterpieces of European Portrait Painting 1420–1670* (Los Angeles: Taschen, 1999), 15.
12. Wollheim, 1998, 22.
13. Dan Tooker, "Wayne Thiebaud," *Art international* (November 1974): 22–25, 33. Cited in Tsujimoto, 105.
14. Wollheim, 1987, 101.
15. Wollheim, 1987, 102.
16. This is the case because, as Wollheim explains, "visual imagery . . . is inherently perspectival," and "it is only if it is imagined as occupied that, in imagining the event, I imagine from the inside someone seeing it, hence that I centrally imagine that event." Wollheim, 1987, 104.
17. Wollheim, 1987, 104.
18. Wollheim, 1987, 129.
19. Wollheim, 1987, 141.
20. Wollheim, 1987, 141.
21. Wollheim, 1987, 161.
22. Wollheim, 1987, 162.
23. Berkson, "Thiebaud on the Figure," n.p.
24. Karen Tsujimoto, "Figure Paintings," in *Wayne Thiebaud* San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1985), 103.
25. It is important to keep in mind that while Wollheim's multiple spectator model might be useful in appreciating certain figure paintings, it is not a unified theory for interpreting all representational work. As Wollheim pointed out: ". . . *some* paintings contain a spectator in the picture. Some do: some don't. More precisely, some do, most don't." (1987, 103)
26. Wayne Thiebaud, "Personal Notes on Painting," in *Figures* (Palo Alto: Stanford Art Museum, Stanford University, 1965). Introduction by Gerald M. Ackerman, statement by the artist.
27. Wollheim, 1987, 161.
28. Wollheim, 1987, 149.
29. Wollheim, 1987, 155–56.
30. Wollheim, 1987, 157.
31. Wollheim, 1987, 166.
32. Thiebaud, "Personal Notes on Painting."
33. Wollheim, 1998, 22.
34. Wollheim, 1987, 142–43.
35. Gene Cooper, "Thiebaud, Theatre and Extremism," in *Wayne Thiebaud* (Phoenix: Phoenix Art Museum, 1976), 11–30.
36. Here, Cooper quotes Eugene Ionesco, 28.
37. In his interview with Bill Berkson, Thiebaud confirms that his minimal approach is part of a larger strategy.
38. In the exhibition catalogue for his 1985 retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, curator Karen Tsujimoto recognized Thiebaud's grounding in both mid-twentieth-century discourse, and in the Old Masters' treatment of the figure. Her astute argument accounts for the painter's continuous emphasis on his formal investigations, his skepticism of artistic conventions, his purposeful divestment of the personal and the anecdotal, his eschewing of narrative content, his ability to "evoke a sense of disquietude," and his propensity for painting the figure that "just is." Thiebaud's figure paintings freeze the moment, transfixing their sitters the way Edward Hopper froze his solitary subjects. Tsujimoto compares the viewer of Thiebaud's figures to a voyeur, who furtively catches them "in an instant of quiet expectancy." Tsujimoto, 1985, 106.
39. "Wayne Thiebaud with Hearne Pardee," *The Brooklyn Rail*, 2019. https://brooklynrail.org/2019/03/art/WAYNE-THIEBAUD-with-Hearne-Pardee.
40. "[W]hen I centrally imagine an event, the person whom I imagine from the inside must be me, or that I must be the protagonist in my imaginings." Wollheim, 1987, 103.