

# Artweek



■ **Midwestern Art Schools** ■ **Helaine Fortgang** ■ **Charles Ray** ■ **Kathryn Jacobi**

JANUARY 1998  
\$4.00







Diane Buckler, from *Waters of Time*, 1997, Iris print, 35" x 47", at William Turner Gallery, Venice. page 20

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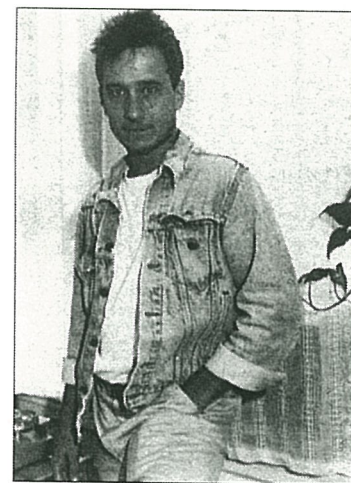
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I'm asking myself, what kind of food am I? You'll be thinking I'm looking at the scales and seeing candied yams, peanut brittle, marshmallow Santas. But that's not quite my meaning. By way of explanation, I'm going to take the long way around and tell you about going hunting with my father.

Taking the long way around makes it a story in the great tradition of my father's stories. Background you should know: he's a retired Methodist minister. He's a hunter. He lives in Kansas. When he sets the scene for a hunting story, the U.S. Geological Survey has nothing on him as far as cartographic detail. He talks you past the old farmsteads, verbally lifts the barbed wire as you crawl under each fence, and places you precisely north south west or east of a hay bale, bush, or tuft of grass—because of course hunters are always looking for places to hide. If your eyes haven't crossed from trying to follow the directions, then the story starts getting good, at least if you like outdoor adventure.

When we join the action of this particular story, you see a couple in the cab of a pickup heading out into the farms around Goodland, Kansas. My father, a minister; me, a vegetarian. It's 6:30 A.M. and the frost on the fields picks up a rosy glow from the dawn sky. Behind the seat is a quiver of razored arrows.

I'm in the truck because I want to get to know my father better. My father's in the truck because he goes out every single day to scout. He needs to know where the animals are because hunting with the bow, he has to get really close to get a shot. He checks off the little herds of deer like so many appointments. "Down to the left there, just past that tree ... they'll be heading up that creek there to feed." "Wild turkeys just around the bend." "The next deer are up around the south lease." This morning's air is quiet and he's given up on actual hunting—without wind, the animals hear him sneaking up, no matter how delicately he crawls on his stomach.

We jounce into a pasture and stop on a little rise to look at deer on the next ridge. Suddenly, over the near horizon, ears poke up. We freeze. A curious mule deer climbs into sight, not thirty yards away. She lifts her nose into the air, trying to catch our scent. And stands there. Her yearling fawn comes up behind her, and the pair of them give us the once-over. Right in front of my vegetarian eyes, all cellular tissue courtesy of cruelty-free produce and grains, they stand for long seconds in sure-shot range. You could probably take them out with a spit wad, let alone a sixty-pound bow.

I suspect my father and I were both a little relieved that the bow was in the back of the pickup.

The moment passed; the deer bounded away. I glanced at my father, wondering if he was disappointed. He just lifted his binoculars to follow their path. He seemed to enjoy figuring out which band of deer they belonged to as much he would have slinging a carcass into the bed of the pickup.

The thought of killing animals disturbs me, so I don't eat them. But during this time with my father, I saw that he has his own kind of love for animals. His enthusiasm, study and care for his territory and the animal life within it make him a model predator, quite comfortable with his position in the food chain. Perhaps this is because both as a minister and as a hunter he's logged a great deal of time around death. He knows no one's going to get away; he's accepted the order of things.

I'm not about to start ordering steaks, but my hunting experience did start me thinking about food chains and my place in them. My body is going to feed a worm or a

plant. But will my creative work "feed" anyone, become part of a cultural "food chain"? Mostly I think of how this work benefits me—will I have a good time, will I get paid, will I gain status? When immediate rewards are elusive, I feel discouraged, or peevish, or bitter. Yet, looked at as part of a big, cultural food chain, no minute invested in art is wasted. Painting is not dead as long as one person is painting. And my own thoughts, my own work, have been fed by many, many people who lived their entire lives without money or recognition.

Henry Darger, for instance. A "feeble-minded" hospital janitor, who created a strange, sexually charged story about seven little girls at the center of a universal struggle between good and evil. He wrote 19,000 pages about their adventures, illustrated with hundreds of drawings. This work was completely private until just before his death, when his landlord, a photographer, cleaned out Darger's single room home. Some of the illustrations were exhibited recently at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. They are crude, inventive, obsessive; they are very interesting "food" for the artist.

Part of the appeal of an artist like Darger, of course, is his presumed innocence with regard to the day-to-day art world. Extreme cases like his are reminders that difficulties in life don't preclude making a contribution. But we have to take it on faith. Just as we don't know if our bones will become earthworms or daisies, we cannot know which traces of our activities will nourish future artists.

This past March, scientists in England announced that DNA analysis proved that Adrian Targett, a history teacher in Somerset, was a blood relative of a hunter who lived 9,000 years ago. Today, Targett lives a few hundred yards from the grave of his relative, who is known as Cheddar Man from his burial site in the Cheddar Gorge. Perhaps this news is an amazing coincidence; but it seems much more likely that it is a whisper of the vast unspoken history which shapes Targett's—and our—lives without our conscious knowledge.

I don't have to go back 9,000 years to find personal suggestions of this history. On the farm where my father grew up, hunting small game for food during the Depression, there's a derelict stone farmhouse, the remains of his grandparents' home. I don't know much about them and even less about any ancestors further back, but the farm ruins tell me that a great deal of back-breaking labor went into the lives that eventually led to mine. All their homesteading and plowing and sewing eventually put me in a place and time where I could make art. In this light, day-to-day dissatisfactions are of no consequence.

This doesn't mean, unfortunately, that rejections or lousy drawings or pangs of envy won't curdle my mood on a regular basis. My capacities for self-pity, fear and jealousy are quite intact, perhaps even necessary in some way for daily life. But when I am reminded of the awesome extent of our cultural food chain, it gives me hope that my efforts will not go to waste.

## Artweek

Vol. 29 No. 1

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Artweek (ISSN 0004-4121) is published monthly, 11 issues per year for \$32 per year by Spaulding-Devlin, Inc. dba Artweek, 2149 Paragon Dr., Ste. 100, San Jose, CA 95131-1312. Periodical postage paid at San Jose, CA.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Artweek

2149 Paragon Drive, Suite 100  
San Jose, CA 95131-1312

Back issues: as available, from:  
2149 Paragon Drive, Suite 100  
San Jose, CA 95131-1312  
408-441-7065  
800-733-2916 (California)

Available as microfilm and microfiche from UMI. Indexed by Art Index as of January 1979; prior years indexed by Artweek.

Editorial: Artweek assumes no responsibility for the safety or guaranteed return of unsolicited materials. Material will be returned only if accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope.  
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## A conversation with Wayne Thiebaud

By Meredith Tromble

In the early '50s Wayne Thiebaud negotiated an exhibition of his paintings in the snack bar of the Star Lite drive-in in Sacramento. He got four free passes. In the early '60s he began painting snack bar foods and his first one-man show in New York sold out before he got off the plane from California to attend the opening. That show caught the wave of interest in pop art, but as Thiebaud's career continued it became clear that his interests were much wider than pop. He's worked in all the major traditional genres of painting, still life, figure and landscape, giving them a distinctive twentieth century twist. A recent show of his new landscapes at the Campbell-Thiebaud Gallery (co-owned by Paul Thiebaud, his son) was praised by critic Kenneth Baker as displaying the "mischievous freedom of a 'late style.'"

**Artweek** *When I started tallying up the shows you've had I had to stop counting at about 700 ...*  
**Wayne Thiebaud** Talk about being over-exposed.

**AW** *Do you ever feel that the demands on you to produce are a problem?*

**WT** Fortunately it's not that way with me. I've never been to art school and I don't think of myself as an artist. I'm more interested in the long tradition of painting as painting. And for me that's a very important distinction. I think art is something other than painting. It's dangerous for a painter to refer to himself as an artist. It's like a priest who refers to himself as a saint. Painting is a much longer and older tradition than art. Art's a rather recent invention, in terms of an idea. It's a kind of discourse. Painting is an activity, a very mysterious activity. And it fascinates me.

**AW** *Are you not as fascinated by "art," as you're defining it?*

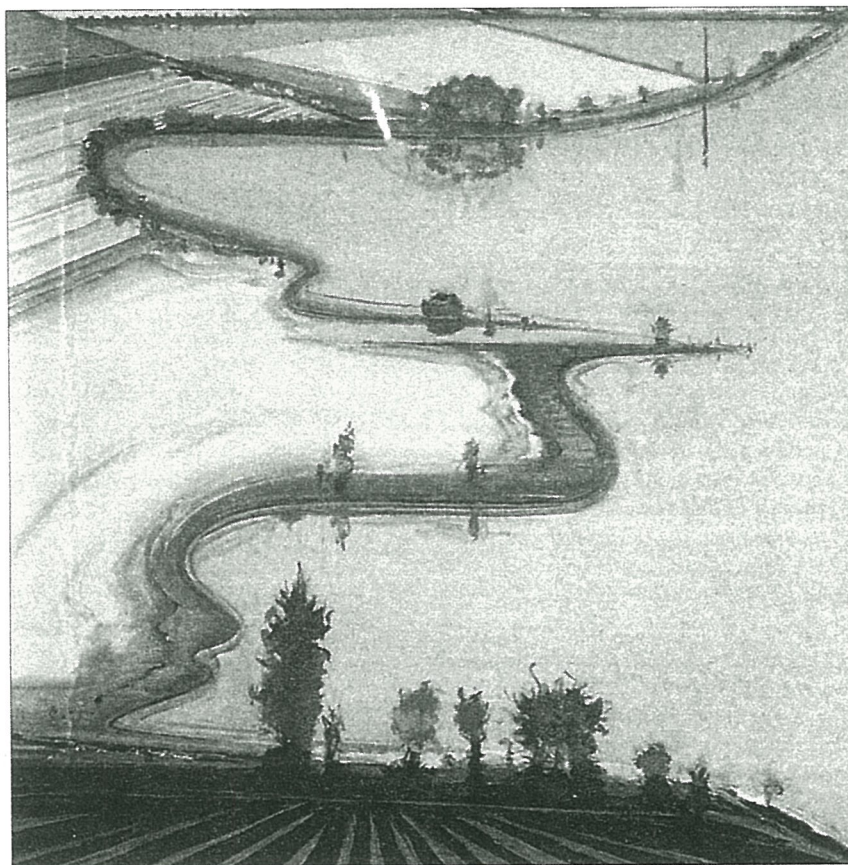
**WT** It's hard for me to even say what it is. "Art" is one of the dirtiest words in our language; it's mucked up with all kinds of meanings. There's the art of plumbing, there's the art of almost anything that you can say. My own sense of it is that it means something very rare, an extraordinary achievement. It's not delivered like the morning paper, it has to be stolen from Mount Olympus. One has to go into training and have a lot of perseverance to achieve art.

**AW** *What kind of training helped you with your attempt to climb that Mount Olympus?*

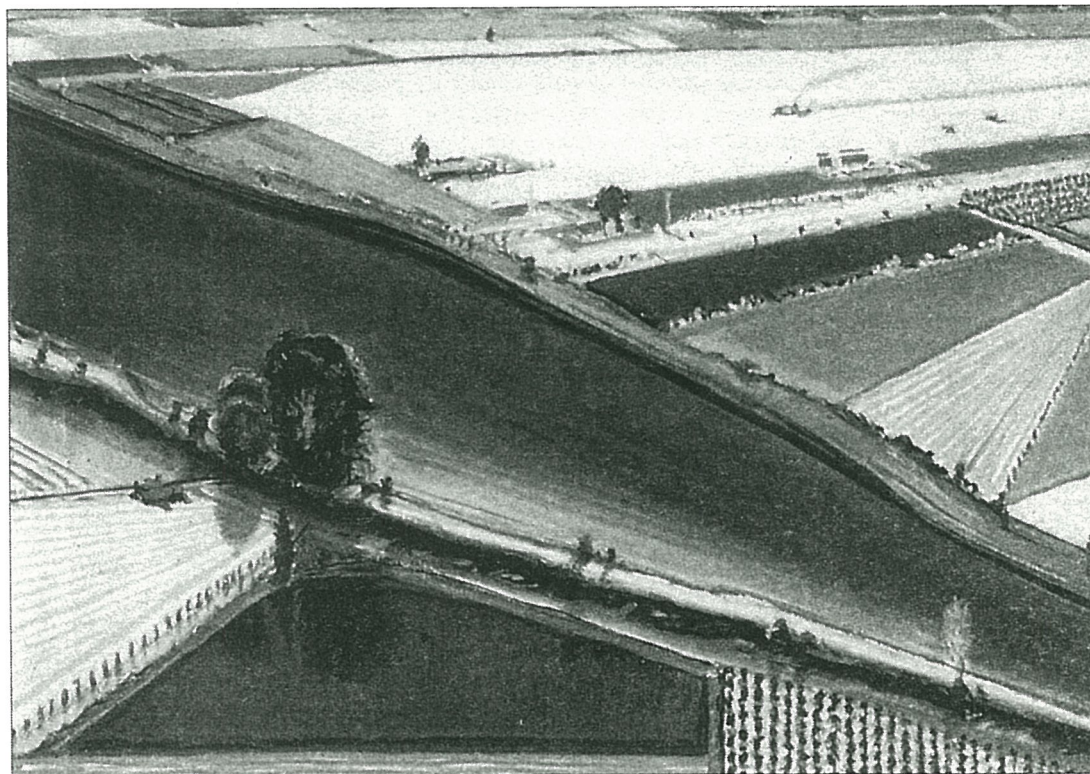
**WT** Stealing from everybody that I can.

**AW** *Is that what other people call influences?*

**WT** I think we have a misconception about where painting comes from. It's not a hermetic activity. It doesn't come from an individual. It's a communal, commemorative, very layered activity that comes from groups of people. If you think of painting's history, you find these enclaves of people who worked together, who helped each other, who depended on each other. You need confrontation, you need critical interrogation. Those movements that we now revere, whatever they are, whether it's the Renaissance, Bay Area Figurative Painting, Abstract Expressionism or Dada or Surrealism, there were groups of people worked



Wayne Thiebaud, (above) *Coastal Farms*, 1997, oil on canvas, 24" x 24"; (below) *Bright River*, 1996, oil on canvas, 23-3/4" x 36". (Photos courtesy of Campbell-Thiebaud Gallery, San Francisco.)



together. For me that is a very important aspect of being a painter.

**AW** *Do you have around you a group of painter friends?*

**WT** Yes. Always. I've had people who have been very helpful, who I have been very influenced by and very dependent upon. I even depend on my students. I steal from them if I can and I tell them that.

**AW** *What's an example of something that you stole from one of your students?*

**WT** When I first started teaching I taught in a junior college night school. One of my students was a marvelous man in his eighties. I gave a project of painting a still life and talked about composition, about balance, equilibrium, and tension ... I hate to think of it now. This grandfather brought in a little stuffed animal to paint and as he started his picture, he put this little ani-

mal right in the middle of the canvas. So I said, "Don't you think you want to make a more interesting composition?" He said, "No! I don't want to move it to the side. I want to see the son of a bitch." He had a kind of directness, like shooting a rifle. And he made this terrific painting. No nonsense, no baloney. So I stole that from him.

**AW** *Do you have an intimate audience? Is there someone around you that you trust more than anyone else to look at your paintings first, who gives you feedback?*

**WT** Well, you certainly learn not to trust yourself. We all need critical confrontation of the fullest and the most extreme kind that we can get. You can unnecessarily limit yourself by choosing your criticism. I mean, who I'd like to believe is my Aunt Edna, who kept telling me what a terrific artist I was. Thank you, Aunt Edna, say it again. But how would I feel if Matisse or Morandi or Richard Diebenkorn walked into my studio? That's quite a different audience. Dick Diebenkorn was a very good critic, a very tough critic, tough on himself, tough on others. He expected the finest. That's the kind of person you need and who you look for if you're serious about being a painter.

**AW** *I understand that you've always emphasized painting from memory. Why?*

**WT** The kind of painting that I admire, in the tradition of representational painting, comes from the painters who are able to combine perceptual manifestations and conceptual enterprises. For instance, take Degas, who seemingly is very interested in representing the figure but always interjects abstraction. There's a mysterious conceptual series of constructs which drives the painting into a language and grammar unique to the work. Degas talked a lot about memory. If you

read his notebooks, he mentions devices that he uses to see the model from all different positions and then to draw from memory. You force yourself to spend a lot of time looking and drawing directly but also to spend a great amount of time conjuring up the drawings on your own. If you have a setup in front of you there's a certain amount of limitation of what you might be able to do with it. Whereas if you are working from memory you have a much wider way of orchestrating potential variations of that structure.

Meredith Tromble is editor-in-chief of *Artweek*.