The New Criterion

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Past continuous

by Julia Friedman

We do not quite say that the new is more valuable because it fits in; but its fitting in is a test of its value.
—T. S. Eliot

The most beautiful lives, to my mind, are those that conform to the common human pattern, with order, but without miracle and without eccentricity. Now old age needs to be treated a little more tenderly.
—Montaigne

The artist Wayne Thiebaud turns 100 tomorrow. His latest work, a bold new painting he cheekily calls *One-hundred-year-old Clown*, offers a retrospective look at his long career while also breaking new ground.

The modestly sized canvas, which I viewed recently while it was still on the easel, depicts a bust of an old man, his torso in three-quarter aspect, his head in profile. The background, in the painter's trademark fluorescent bluish white (underpainted with pale yellow), is mostly rendered in wide horizontal brushstrokes, a contour halo tracing the outline of the figure. Other aspects of the painting index familiar Thiebaud tropes: the skullcap on the old man's bowed head doubles as a cameo of a mountain he has painted repeatedly since 1965; the blue and red lines on the front of his black coat echo the markings on an asphalt road in Thiebaud's San Francisco streetscapes from the Seventies and Eighties, while the multicolored curve of the right ear summons up his Sacramento Delta landscapes of the late Nineties and early 2000s. Finally, there is the proverbial cherry on top of the cake (or cupcake, or sundae) in the shape of a sloppily applied red smudge on the tip of the old man's nose. Together with the occasionally translucent, frosted patina (perhaps white clown makeup?) that covers the neck and most of the face, we have enough visual cues to trigger our Thiebaud still life receptors.

Wayne Thiebaud, One-hundred-year-old Clown, *2020, Oil on canvas. 2020 © Wayne Thiebaud/VAGA at ARS, NY.*

It is difficult to say whether *One-hundred-year-old Clown* is a genre-bending painting (in that it contains elements of and references to portraiture, landscape, and still life), or a painting outside any genre. Could it be that Thiebaud, who has been fortunate enough to have had over seven decades of experience and growth as a painter, has made the ultimate breakthrough into a meta-generic space? Thiebaud's early interest in painters who, in the poet and critic John Yau's words, "reinvented particular genres such as still life, landscape, and cityscape" (Yau cites Cézanne, Morandi, de Chirico, and Hopper), logically led to his own reconceptualization of painting genres to the point of merging and layering them in a single masterwork. Although Thiebaud's reputation

has long been established (Karen Wilkin hailed Thiebaud as "an American master" in 2015), it wasn't until his latest body of work, launched that same year, that the nonagenarian painter changed his perspective from the observer to the object of observation, vicariously stepping into the ring of his circus-themed paintings and drawings. Not content with limiting himself to the still lifes and landscapes that already secured his place in the canon, Thiebaud began a new chapter, painting without presumption, but with the hope of sorting out some decades-old memories, thoughts, and sensations.

As I wrote in *The New Criterion*'s December 2019 issue, Thiebaud's choice of subject in his circus series is based on the painter's "clown memories" of a traveling circus he saw in the early 1930s in Long Beach, California. The series is a palimpsest of events from the past and ideas from the present, informed by a lifetime of making, looking at, and teaching art. The works balance formal concerns with a philosophical viewpoint that spans the sophisticated humor of George Herriman's logic-defying comic strip *Krazy Kat* and the existential pathos of Henry Miller's short story *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* (1948). Thiebaud's clowns are a complex body of work, at once wistful and focused. It refracts his earlier paintings, but now in the new context of the tragicomic. Tragicomedy is key to the clown series because the circus is the ultimate tragicomic world—a union of two opposites, of seriousness and merriment, attempting to resolve absurdity into laughter. The clowns are ritual performers of the human condition—tragicomic figures par excellence. They are, in effect, artists.

Over many decades, Thiebaud has given his artistic predecessors full credit in a multitude of interviews, lectures, and paintings. The *35 Cent Masterworks* (1970–72) is perhaps the most prominent example of his homage to the painters who came before him. The canvas depicts a card stand containing a dozen reproductions of works by painters he admires: Thomas Eakins, Diego Velázquez, Henri Rousseau, Honoré Daumier, Paul Cézanne, Piet Mondrian, Claude Monet, Giorgio Morandi, Edgar Degas, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Giorgio de Chirico. It is, in effect, a catalogue of influences.

In his essay "Wayne Thiebaud's Incongruities," John Yau described the artists in Thiebaud's *35 Cent Masterworks* as the painter's "historical mentors," who embody "permissions" to create his own art, rather than "burden[s] to overthrow, escape, or deny." While Yau does not argue for causality between the painter's embrace of his influences and his "ability to draw on a wide range of sources without ever looking derivative," he astutely identifies the lack of tension in Thiebaud's borrowing by the viewers' perception that "whatever he uses has been his all along." These borrowings affect our reaction to the sources themselves: the huddled solitude of Morandi's bottles now brightened by the fluorescent glow of Thiebaud's deli counters.

But why this metatextual referencing of past works, both his own and by others? It will help to turn to "Tradition and the Individual Talent," an essay published by T. S. Eliot in the autumn of 1919, one year to the month before Wayne Thiebaud was born. In it, Eliot argues that while critics tend to seek out new aspects of poetry—aspects that "least resemble anyone else"—novelty in and

of itself does not make good art. It is a poet's thoughtful response to earlier poets that validates his work and allows it to take its place in the broader canon: "not only the best, but the most individual parts of [the poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously." Of course, new works cannot simply conform to tradition, which Eliot defined as a "simultaneous order," the merging of the old and the new; they need to leave the tradition "ever so slightly altered." In Eliot's perfect "simultaneous order," the relationship between tradition and innovation is symbiotic. On one hand, all new artistic output requires contextualization: "no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone," because "his significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists." On the other hand the art of the past is changed by the art that comes after it: "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past."

According to Thiebaud, *One-hundred-year-old Clown* is the summation of his clown series. Given the clown/artist simile developed throughout this series and the coincidence of the subject's age, the canvas is also a link to Thiebaud's portraits. Among these is a shirtless self-portrait that shows a frontal view of the painter's head and chest as he gazes intensely into an invisible mirror. This work, finished in the late summer of 2020, preceded *One-hundred-year-old Clown.* By Thiebaud's own admission, both paintings evoke the late self-portraits of Pierre Bonnard.

Timothy Hyman's monograph on Bonnard presents the French painter's self-portraits, which he classes "among the most poignant self-portraits in the entire tradition of Western painting," as "unfold[ing] a parallel sequence" in which "the emotional timbre shifts from reverie, to something approaching tragedy." Hyman identifies Bonnard's 1931 *Le Boxeur* (*The Boxer*) as "the most disquieting" of the late self-portraits:

> Here he has caught sight of himself squaring up to the bathroom mirror with puny fists, in play, or in impotence. From the battered pulp of the head—a red lump of raw meat, set atop the naked torso—there emanates a terrible pathos, eyes lowered in shame, in defeat. And yet, the picture triumphs after all; a kind of tragic-comic clowning is transformed, by the exquisite violet line along the shoulder, by the magically shimmering yellow-and-blue field in which the figure is embedded, into an image of unforeseen beauty.

This vision of "unforeseen beauty" borne out of "tragic-comic clowning" in Bonnard's late self-portraits, including the "smearing and fingerprinting white and yellow blobs of an unmatched tenderness," applies equally to several works in Thiebaud's clown series. Does his *One-hundred-year-old Clown* now inhabit Pierre Bonnard's self-portraits from the 1930s and 40s? I think so, and the reciprocity might hinge on both painters' lack of fear to come across as undignified. Timothy Hyman's perceptive observation about Bonnard's "tragic-comic clowning" in *The Boxer* certainly resonates with the tragicomic theme of Thiebaud's clown series, including his *One-hundred-year-old Clown.*

Pierre Bonnard, The Boxer (self-portrait)*, 1931, Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay) / Michèle Bellot © ADAGP, Paris 2015.*

In the concluding paragraph of "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot combines his two lines of argument—one about "simultaneous order" and one about the artist surrendering his personality to the work of art:

> The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.

One-hundred-year-old Clown is a work that contains "the present moment of the past." It looks back at the late self-portraits of Bonnard, and it revisits the entirety of Thiebaud's own oeuvre. Yet it is impersonal. It is a painting about painting and the human condition. It is also a masterwork.

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