Hour of the clown

by Julia Friedman

Ancient Romans believed in the “hour of the wolf”—a point on the cusp of night and dawn, when demons had the upper hand. In modern times, the concept of this magic hour was re-introduced by Ingmar Bergman’s 1968 horror movie, *The Hour of the Wolf*, which told a story of a painter disturbed by visions. Since then, the phrase has also been used to describe a more generic state of psychological urgency, where the only option is to face reality and to reflect on it, unsettling as it may be. The twentieth century had its share of lupine hours, but in its current incarnation, the demonic is farcical rather than sinister. As I have mentioned elsewhere, today’s evil is comparatively frivolous, and its way to hearts and minds lies through distraction and trivia. Today, it seems, the Huxleyan entertainment utopia is more relevant than the Orwellian surveillance dystopia. The clown has replaced the wolf.

About four years ago, Wayne Thiebaud, the nonagenarian painter best known for his still lifes and landscapes, began to depict what he calls “clown memories.” These works in progress presently include approximately fifty paintings, twenty drawings, and six etchings. They are a response to the outside world, as well as another new segment in Thiebaud’s decades-long career as a painter. The clown series contains works with the familiar vocabulary of colors and “object halos” and works that tackle representations of simultaneity through the kind of painterly gestures we normally associate with abstraction.
Clowns have popped up in his work before, but this time Thiebaud approaches the subject more systematically. He does so with great care and sensitivity to the long tradition of clown representation in Western painting. Clowns and their cousins—Pierrots, Harlequins, Bajazzos,
Pulcinelles, mountebanks, badins, jesters, tramps, zanies—have occupied artists’ imagination for well over three hundred years. Antoine Watteau, Claude Gillot, Francisco Goya, Honoré Daumier, Gustave Courbet, Georges Seurat, James Ensor, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Georges Rouault, Pablo Picasso, André Derain, Gino Severini, Max Beckmann, Edward Hopper, and Walt Kuhn all painted and drew clowns. They invested clowns with various associations, from surrogates for the artist’s position vis-à-vis the public, to faith in fallible humanity, to a profoundly pessimistic view of human deficiency. Clowns have been used to express bohemian aloofness, and they have been presented as multivalent and mysterious (indexing the mystery of painting that eludes investigation), timeless (knowing neither past nor future), isolated and alienated, supernatural and demonic, miraculous and crepuscular, ordinary and marvelous.

Thiebaud, who is well aware of these interpretational complexities, doesn’t seem concerned with the most recent incarnations of the clown in contemporary art. Chronologically, Beckmann and Kuhn are his latest visual points of reference. (He also relies on texts and cinematography.) I could not discern any references in Thiebaud’s series to more recent representations of clowns, of which there are plenty, including Jonathan Borofsky’s Dancing Clown (1982–83), Bruce Nauman’s now-canonical Clown Torture videos (1987), Paul McCarthy’s clownish Painter (1995), creepy clown faces in the paintings by Josh Smith (2014), Jimmie Durham’s 2011 Pagliaccio non son, Cindy Sherman’s 2003 clown self-portraits, and Ugo Rondinone’s hyperreal psychedelic clown sculptures from 2002 through 2017.
The above list of clown-themed contemporary art has been redacted to only the most recognizable names, but it could have included another dozen or so artists. In the last three years there has been a noticeable uptick in clown art displayed by museums and galleries. What could possibly account for this increasing interest? *Artforum*’s deputy editor Elizabeth Schambelan answered this question unequivocally in the December 2018 issue. The theme of the volume was monsters and, for its cover, the editorial board chose not an artwork, as it is normally the case, but a photograph of

*Wayne Thiebaud, Clown Group, 2019, Acrylic and charcoal on paper, ARS (Artists Rights Society).*
Gritty, the puppetesque mascot of the Philadelphia Flyers. Schambelan sees him as “an anticlown” and a fitting periapt for 2018. Gritty is an antidote to the “evil clowns” of the current political establishment: “We’re living in the era of evil clowns and ludicrous monsters because they’re what crawl out of the cracks when the bedrock breaks.” Gritty, “an anticlown,” is her solution.

As Schambelan explains to her readers, visual art that portrays a world populated by “evil clowns,” in which Grand Guignol murders by America’s allies and comical moments at state funerals are normalized, will be invariably grotesque. She cites the earlier precedent of George Grosz’s Weimar period works that depicted that era as “marked by hyperbolic grotesquerie,” where what looked like cartoons turned out to be “realistic reportage.” According to Schambelan, 2018 was another year when “realistic reportage” was exactly what humanity needed. In other words—send in the clowns.

Thiebaud’s clown paintings and drawings engage the tradition of cartooning on the levels of both form and content (their creator began his professional life as a cartoonist). But Thiebaud has little interest in the kind of countercultural performativity Schambelan is calling for. He is careful to avoid what he calls “contextual impropriety,” never putting his clowns in situations where they do not belong or using tawdry tricks, such as reliance on narrative or anecdote, to usurp the role of visual logic. This is itself a formidable tightrope act, because Thiebaud admits that clowns are at once incarnated humans and phantoms. As phantoms they are subject to none of the usual restrictions and limitations that regular people have. And unlike regular people, whom Thiebaud renders after live models, the clowns in these new works are human figures painted from memory—just like the artist’s confections, cityscapes, and mountains.
Wayne Thiebaud, Clown & Shadow, 2019, Oil on board, ARS (Artists Rights Society).

While these clown paintings may be rooted in Thiebaud’s childhood recollections of the Ringling Brothers circus he saw in Long Beach, California, they are also a response to current societal trajectories. They remind us that clowns make people feel good about themselves, and that today there is a dire need for people to feel better about themselves. They are a commentary on the human condition, and a parody of our simulacrum-infused reality, in which old fashioned circuses are all but gone because they were too slow-paced to be entertaining for the generations whose attention span was recalibrated by television.

The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century three-ring circus, in which the audience reacted in unison, has been replaced by a multitude of individuals solitarily entertained by personal electronic devices. Today, the side acts and freak shows have migrated into mainstream street fashion, where colored hair, oversized pants, and bulky shoes mimic the clown costumes of yore. Regular citizens vie for the opportunity to reveal their phobias and peccadilloes before an audience of strangers on YouTube, reality TV, and tabloid talk shows. Clowns are no longer caricatures of people, but their avatars, ritually performing the human condition in the format of a
circus show: a succession of tragicomic acts followed by the Great Egress.

But Thiebaud’s new paintings offer more than just “realistic reportage” on the era of “hyperbolic grotesquerie”—they challenge the viewer perceptually and experientially. They are, in short, a much-needed humanistic pause in the hour of the clown.

Julia Friedman, an independent art historian, critic, and curator, has been a regular contributor to Artforum.