Wayne Thiebaud: A Retrospective

Acquavella Galleries
18 E. 79th St., (212) 734-6300
Through Nov. 30

As with the old Sara Lee slogan, nobody doesn’t like the paintings of Wayne Thiebaud. They’re usually as creamy-dreamy as the pieces of cake slathered in frosting of “Boston Cream” (1962), one of the pictures that first got him labeled as a Pop artist. (Although he was in the bellwether “New Realism” Pop exhibition at Sidney Janis that same year, he displayed none of Pop’s irony.) Mr. Thiebaud, who’s still working away in California and will celebrate his 92nd birthday next week, was talked about at one point as being in the “Bay Area” school of figure painters, along with David Park, Richard Diebenkorn (before he returned to abstraction) and Elmer Bischoff. But—not going in much for chunkily shadowed figures in vague landscapes—he wasn’t one of those guys, either.

What kind of an artist is Mr. Thiebaud? On the basis of this smallish but select retrospective of about 60 paintings and drawings, in a commercial gallery (but with several works on loan from prominent museums), he’s sui Americanus. The pastries, lollipops, toys, ladies in brightly colored bathing suits, ice cream, and even landscapes—especially the urban scenes, with their impossibly steep San Francisco inclines—have a cheerful practicality about them that’s anti-Beauarts, anti-European finishing touch. Mr. Thiebaud paints (to be blunt) with an assembly-line approach, turning out a variety of bright, happy pictures. He places sugary, off-white grounds around almost diagrammatically rendered objects outlined in narrow rainbows of pure color.

“Hot Dog Stand” (2004-12) gathers all his devices into one delicious work. And that swirled, thick white paint makes the most ready-to-eat beach sand you’ve ever seen.

Ivan Serpa: Pioneering Abstraction in Brazil

Dickinson Roundell Inc.
19 E. 66th St., (212) 772-8083
Through Dec. 21

The South American variety of geometric abstraction has an alluring—not superficial or lightweight—aspect of self-congratulation to it. Artists who practice it seem less concerned with dividing rules that run the universe, as did Malevich or Mondrian, than with advancing and refining taste. They allow themselves to taxi back and forth between rectilinear and curvilinear motifs, indulging in nuances of paint application, and proudly allude to their local landscapes.

Ivan Serpa (1929-1973) first fell in love with the precise, reductive pictorial language of the Swiss painter-designer-architect Max Bill, who had an influential retrospective exhibition at the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art in 1951. Although Bill believed that a rigorous work of art should mean nothing beyond itself, Serpa allowed his Brazilian romanticism to take over—which turned out to be a good thing.

You can see the difference when Serpa’s style changes from such paintings as 1953’s “Ritos resultantes” (an elegant but somehow familiar composition of attenuated triangles) to 1969’s “Untítulod (Serie Amazonica),” in which vegetative color and little curved indentations in nested rectangles lend the work an original poetry.

Waldo Balart: Chromatic Systems

Henrique Faria Fine Art
35 E. 67th St., (212) 517-4609
Through Nov. 24

Waldo Balart, who was born in Cuba in 1931 and originally studied political science and economics, left the island for the U.S. when he was 27. And no wonder: His father, who’d already fled, had been an official in the Batista regime, and Mr. Balart’s sister had been recently divorced from a fellow named Fidel Castro.

The artistically inclined Mr. Balart fell in with two entirely different milieus—Andy Warhol’s in New York (he acted in a couple of Warhol’s films, in-