

In Search of Refreshments

BY PETER PLAGENS

Wayne Thiebaud:

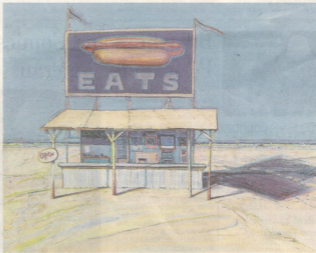
A Retrospective

◆ 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 Cremes" (1962), one of the pictures that first got him mislabeled 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

Swirled, thick white paint makes the most ready-to-eat beach sand you've ever seen.



Wayne Thiebaud's 'Hot Dog Stand' (2004-12) at Acquavella Galleries through Nov. 30.

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—his 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-Bauhaus, 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 divining 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, indulge in nuances of paint application, and proudly allude to their local landscapes.

Ivan Serpa (1923-1973) 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 al-

lowed 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 "Ritmos resultantes" (an elegant but somehow familiar composition of attenuated triangles) to 1969's "Untitled (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) 517-6609
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-

cluding "The Life of Juanita Castro," a spoof of the Cuban revolution), and Josef Albers's classroom at Yale.

Albers won, and Mr. Balart began constructing his "chromatic systems," precise, gridded arrangements of squares, stripes and the occasional solid circle on white grounds. The purely visual result in "Conjunto no vacío, Violeta arriba, Rojo debajo" (1979) carefully pairs a vertical vermilion rectangle at the bottom of the painting with a slightly more orange horizontal stripe above it, while making much the same subtle comparison between a descending violet shape and a couple of bluer stripes below it.

What keeps the work of Mr. Balart—who lives and paints in Madrid, where he moved in 1970—from being mere chromatic didacticism is the intensity of his belief in the value of his "systems" in and of themselves. As he told a Spanish newspaper last year, "My mentality is very European, I don't have the pragmatism of the United States."

While Mr. Balart's modest exhibition may not be a revelation in this respect, it is a welcome refreshment.