

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
75th Anniversary
Oral History Project

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

SFMOMA 75th Anniversary

WAYNE THIEBAUD

Painter

Interview conducted by
Jess Rigelhaupt
in 2009

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Discursive Table of Contents—Wayne Thiebaud

Interview #1: January 3, 2009

[Audio File 1]

1

First visit to the San Francisco Museum of Art, circa 1942—Participation in the Art Association Annuals in the 1950s and 60s—Exhibitions, art rentals, filmmaking at the museum—Museums and regional contemporary art—Thiebaud’s relations with various staff members—“The museum was slowly growing up”—Frank Lloyd Wright’s Butterfly Bridge—Concerns about collection development—Bay Area artists’ perceptions of SFMOMA.

[Audio File 2]

11

Henry Hopkins, John Fitzgibbon at KPFA—Jack Lane—David Ross—The “admirable” Neal Benezra—Thiebaud’s move to San Francisco in 1972, insights into the city’s art scene—Thiebaud’s paintings in the SFMOMA collection—Nancy Jennings, model for the painting of the girl in the pink hat—The New York art world—The East-Coast prejudices of the American Academy of Arts and Letters—Thiebaud’s earliest shows in San Francisco—Hot dog and pie paintings, and Pop Art—Commercial artists and the fine-art aristocracy—Distinctions and transitions, art world trends—Importance of long, familial-type relationship with dealer Allan Stone—Thiebaud’s de Young retrospective in 2000—The importance of the de Young—Humor and art, especially figurative art—SFMOMA’s role as an educational institution—The gallery scene in San Francisco in the 1960s and 1970s—SFMOMA’s Bay Area Treasure Award.

Interview #1: January 3, 2009

Begin Audio File 1 01-03-2009.mp3

Rigelhaupt: The question I like to start with is can you recall your first visit to SFMOMA?

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Thiebaud: It's a very foggy memory, but I *think* it was when I was in the Army Air Force at Mather Field, in 1942, probably. I remember coming up on furlough and going to the museum. At that time, you entered from the north little opening there—I think at McAllister Street, I guess—and then took the elevator up to the museum. So that was my first, as I remember. Subsequently, during that period of time, I visited a few times, not very many.

Rigelhaupt: Were there any exhibitions or pieces in the collection that you recall from those early visits?

01-00:01:36

Thiebaud: I can't remember very much about it. I do remember one tapestry hanging, at one point, a Matisse tapestry, hanging up on the wall, which I remembered. I also remember you could buy it for \$400. It was an editioned thing. I didn't have even four dollars, so I couldn't buy it. But other than that, I have very general impressions, but nothing specific until quite later.

Rigelhaupt: Well, one of the things that I have read about is your participation in the Art Association Annuals, starting in the early 1950s, and all the way through the early 1960s.

01-00:02:31

Thiebaud: Those were big opportunities for young painters. They were a lot of work, apparently, for the museum and subsequently, most places have done away with those, which is a shame for young people trying to get a chance to have some exposure. But then, it was a normal activity and many museums had them, throughout the country, as you know. But that was something which—I came back from the Army Air Force and settled in Sacramento, and went to school. I got a BA and MA at the university, California State University at Sacramento, which was then just beginning. So as a consequence, they eliminated a lot of courses that I had to take because I'd show them my portfolio of drawings. As a consequence, I got through college without being educated. But it was a wonderful opportunity. There were people who came to that university from the east. Since we were living in Sacramento, our opportunity was to drive to San Francisco and enter those annuals, which a number of us did yearly. Then I started teaching at the junior college. For the next several years, I was pretty much involved going to exhibitions. I'm trying to think of some of the exhibitions. They had an exhibition called "Dynaton." People like Gordon Onslow Ford, Lee Mullican. I can't remember the third member, but it'll be in the documents [Wolfgang von Paalen]. Those exhibitions were a great opportunity for us. We used to also take students down from there. We'd get a busload of thirty students or so and go. We did a

lot of that, back and forth. So in a way, I was on the fringe—as so many areas around San Francisco were. But the nice thing was that that funneled into the museum. Lots of young artists were working at that particular time. Then their exhibitions, subsequently, were great sources for students to see original work of the Modernist enterprise. [pause]

I'm trying to remember some of the pictures I submitted. The only one I remember is I submitted a painting that got in, called *Electric Chair*, sometime in the early fifties or late forties. Then they had print shows, as well. I remember having the chance to be accepted in that. A lot of times, I was rejected. So it was always a big thing for us to be accepted. Most of the time, we were rejected. But it was a lively and interesting scene, because the openings were well attended by all the people around the area. So it was a chance to get well acquainted, and the museum provided that social opportunity for interchange.

01-00:06:39

It was only later, during the early fifties, that I became more involved in the museum. I'd go down and take classes in life drawing at night, with an instructor, another painter by the name of Susan Felter. I'd go there and draw. I think you paid fifty cents or something and had a chance for a three-hour model. So the educational part of the museum was also very helpful. Later I got more involved with the museum because I designed and installed the California State Fair art exhibition. At that time it was quite a major exhibition; people sent in [work] from all over the state. Big trucks full of work from Los Angeles and all over California. There were \$15,000 worth of prizes. It was well attended by all the artists from all areas of California. I recall names of well-known artists such as Rico LeBrun, Stanton MacDonal-Wright, John McLaughlin, et cetera. Museum directors, critics, artists came from San Francisco and Los Angeles to help judge the exhibition. So we got to witness them at work.

So the curators, I'm trying to remember specifically how many of them came from San Francisco, either curators or directors, and I can't really say specifically who they were. But they were part of that. The other relationship with the museum was [in] designing the state fair, we had an educational exhibit of modern art. We took impressionism, fauvism, expressionism, surrealism—the major movements, and we borrowed things from the museums in Los Angeles, Pasadena, and San Francisco. I got several things from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. One I remember very well was a Salvador Dali pastel, with ants crawling out of the ground and this biomorphic form. But the astounding thing I recall now was how easy it was to borrow works. [chuckles] Today, it would be *impossible* to do that. We had a Jackson Pollock, we had [Amadeo] Modigliani, we had [Pablo] Picasso. About that time—Jackson Pollock was killed, I think, in the late forties—we also borrowed paintings from the California Palace of the Legion of Honor and the [M. H.] de Young [Memorial Museum].

01-00:10:21

The other relationship with the San Francisco Museum was I at one point became very interested in education; I produced educational films on painting and drawing. One of them entailed showing cubism and the development of cubism. We went down and shot a [Paul] Cézanne lithograph that the museum had. They were nice enough to let us do that. The result of that was that I met the curator then, a wonderful German lady [Anneliese Hoyer], like von Grosswich or something. It'll be in the records, I'm sure, but I can't remember her name. She was very helpful. She invited me to have an exhibition of prints then. I was working with prints. Manuel Neri and I, we had an exhibition of prints in one of the hallways there. That was a very big thing to me. It meant a lot to me. So the relationship became a little bit more frequent. It's remained ever since. It's meant a great deal to me and to my students. Over the years, it's been a very, very helpful institution.

Rigelhaupt:

If we go backward, just to stay with the annuals a little bit, you said they were well attended. I'm wondering if you could describe what the setting was like, as you came to one of the openings for the Art Association Annuals.

01-00:12:36

Thiebaud:

The exhibition areas were then quite simple. Rather big open spaces. So they would pretty much fill that up with people and their families. It seems to me—I can't remember if they served anything or not. [chuckles] I don't know. They may have had some tables with cheese and crackers and things, and maybe some wine. But mostly, it was a chance to exchange ideas and gossip in the art world. It was just about that time when lots of institutions were growing and adding art departments. So there was a confluence of people from all over the states—people who had studied at Black Mountain College, people who came from the south; a lot of people from the east, that had attended places like Columbia University, with that strong emphasis on art education, with Vicker DaMicco and that group of educators.

The universities found themselves slowly filling up full of artist/teachers. As a result, the exhibitions were fairly lively and fairly reflective of what was going on all over the world. The exhibitions also, in addition, that the museum sponsored, a lot of them were survey shows from all over the place. One that I remember very specifically, say, new painting from France, for instance, or Europe. There would be people like Willie Baumeister, Manacea; from Italy came Afro Gatusso; from England came a particular painting I remember very specifically. It was by Francis Bacon, and it was this struggling dog trying to get across the street. It made a big impression on a lot of people, and I think a big influence on a lot of Bay Area painters. There was something in that manner of work—a lot to do with spontaneity, with a directness of application—that had a terrific influence on this area. So those exhibitions of surveys from Europe made a very lively thing. Those exhibitions were also much fancier. They were trying at that time, then, to develop collectors, and the museum really put out a lot of energy and time in trying to get people interested in joining the museum and contributing, donating and so on, so that

the artists at that time could meet some of the collectors. It also had that very positive functional aspect.

Rigelhaupt: So it sounds as though, from early on in your experience with SFMOMA, it served at least two purposes with the Art Association Annual: giving young artists opportunities, and at the same time, doing international shows to bring in modern art from around the world, that allowed artists and the community in general to view what was going on around the world. In your impression, has the museum [continued] fulfilling both of those purposes?

01-00:17:06

Thiebaud: I think it's changed dramatically. I think the major change was maybe, perhaps these annuals, which gave people opportunities. I know it's a very cumbersome project, and you can see why they have given it up. But as I got more involved and got some notoriety, I was invited to other places to judge exhibitions of that kind—in the Chicago area, southeastern exhibitions, southern California. You found yourself then able to have a much closer alignment with the artists in various areas, as well as giving young artists the same opportunity to be seen. So I think that part of the museum no longer functions effectively. I know they're struggling already, but when you consider what museums are composed of, which is works by people, their obligation, I think, might take a close look at their responsibility to somehow invest a little more time, energy, and money in somehow sponsoring more access to young artists. It's painful, it's cumbersome; but I think it's one of the most important things they should be doing.

01-00:19:13

I think there's another aspect of it, if I can continue, and that's if the museums had done that over the years—in other words, have exhibitions, purchase prizes which would allow them to select what they could consider then, in their area, significant work of some measure—I think if they had done that over the years, say a forty-year period, and each museum in every community had done that, it would give art historians access to information about how various conventions and stylistic preoccupations are generated and influenced and are effected and changed by that process. It would also give something very important to local aspects of a museum. That is, they would have been responsible to document somewhat what happened in that area, as opposed to in addition to international showpieces. That's something I think which would be a good thing to consider.

Rigelhaupt: It's a really interesting point. If SFMOMA had collected pieces—and I'm sure they *did* collect a number of works from the Art Association Annuals over the years—but thinking about the years they were there, had they collected a lot of the work from young artists that were in the annuals in the fifties and sixties, and an art historian went back now and looked at those works, what do you think they would tell you about artists working in the Bay Area in that era?

01-00:21:25

Thiebaud:

I think they'd tell you several things. One, on how any indigenous aspect of expression, visual expression, occurred within that area. The other would see how the exterior influences of major art historical developments also affected the area. I think you'd find an interesting dialectic of interesting scholarly and art information. You also would have had the benefit of striking it rich, in a way; of having obtained work which you could no longer obtain in the crazy art-market price structure. You could have had some [Nathan] Oliveira and [Robert] Bechtle and on and on. [David] Park, [Elmer] Bischoff, [Richard] Diebenkorn, [Paul] Wonner. You would have had, theoretically at least— Because all of those people, in my recollection, won prizes. Only some of them were purchase prizes. But nonetheless, that could have been also a significant part of their permanent collection.

Rigelhaupt:

So part of the exhibitions that you were part of, in 1965, the prints exhibition you mentioned. Could you describe what it was like working with SFMOMA at that time, and how interactions with curators, museum staff—how decisions were made about where your work was going to be exhibited?

01-00:23:56

Thiebaud:

Well, it seems to me that it was pretty much up to them. I guess I was so pleased and overwhelmed that they would have the exhibition, I didn't give much care [chuckles] about what they did with it. But generally, I think the installation of work is enough of a specialty for the curators to be able to do that. I'm not much inclined to worry about something like that. But I know, on the other hand, certain artists are very, very specific about what they need and want. It's understandable.

Let's say someone like Robert Irwin, an installation artist, would be very, very much possessed with the idea it has to be just as he envisioned it. But I think the big advantage of two-dimensional work is that there are a lot of options with that. I always had good feelings about working with people there. I didn't know them well; I knew them somewhat. Some of them were painters. That's an interesting question. I had not quite thought about that. When they had a later exhibition of the cityscapes, that was a very small exhibition and they put it in the rotunda, I think. I think there were only maybe five or six paintings. They did that all on their own. The director then, I think, was Henry Hopkins. We got to know each other somewhat. We even went someplace in, I think, Colorado to judge an exhibition together. So it was an easy relationship. He was very helpful and cooperative. When they had the retrospective, Mike McCone was then the director of operations, handling things like the union contracts and staff and so on. We became fairly good friends because he's a tennis player. We have since maintained our friendship. But Karen Tsujimoto did [the exhibition]. She was very, very helpful, very cooperative. She worked very hard. I have always had very good experiences with them. That continues pretty much with the succeeding directors, Jack Lane and then David Ross and— I didn't know him well. Since then, Neal Benezra, I knew slightly

because he came to Davis and studied art history. Then he went to the Hirshhorn [Museum and Sculpture Garden] under Jim Demetrian. And Jim Demetrian put together a very important exhibition for me, of Morandi, Giorgio Morandi, and he asked me to lecture there on the Morandi exhibition. Then subsequently, it went to New York and Hilton Kramer asked me to write a thing for the *New York Times* on Morandi. I remember we were on a vacation in Hawaii, and I had to do this damn time-deadline thing. My wife's never forgiven me. I stayed in the bathroom, writing this damn thing about Morandi.

Rigelhaupt: In the 1985 retrospective you did with Karen Tsujimoto, did you guys have any discussions about which pieces of your work would be in the exhibition?

01-00:29:08

Thiebaud:

I think so. She was very agreeable; I don't think we had any difficulties. I wanted her to choose things she thought were her most interesting works. The only thing that I asked for was to try and have a mixture of things, so there wasn't too much of an emphasis of this or that. She worked with another person, who was an early biographer. He was taking his doctoral work at USC. Oh, no, UCLA, I'm sorry. He proposed to write his doctoral thesis on my work and they said, "No, you can't do that." He said, "Well, he's not a bad artist. Why can't I do it?" He says, "He's not dead." So he said, "I either have to shoot you or go someplace else." So he went to USC. He did an awful lot of work that Karen used. He was very generous in opening up all of his files. He'd done a lot of exhibitions, also—or done *some* exhibitions—did an early catalog. So she was able to use a lot of that in transcripts and slides, and write a lot based on his early works, for which she was very grateful. And Gene Cooper was very generous. So that made it possible for me not to have to repeat a lot of things to her, and it went along fairly easily.

Rigelhaupt: In thinking backwards, in 1985, do you have any recollections about how you thought or felt at the time about how the museum had changed in that twenty-year period since you'd been part of the prints exhibition and then were having a retrospective in '85?

01-00:31:42

Thiebaud:

Well, the museum was slowly growing up. They were much more active, in terms of events. I remember one of the great events that I vividly remember was when Frank Lloyd Wright came out to offer an alternative bridge to the new Bay Bridge. It was called the Butterfly Bridge. Have you heard of that? It was essentially two arcs or two things, starting from the East Bay and coming up, meeting in the middle and going to the other side, with a wonderful social viewing and a little park where you'd—parking spaces and so on. It was a terrific idea, and there was a big model for it there. Well, it was publicized so well that the museum was absolutely packed. Every door was moving, [chuckles] full of people. I got there with my friend, later. I wanted so badly to see it. I had my sketchbook with me and I went up [chuckles] to the poor

usher and I said, “I’m from the *Sacramento Bee*, covering this event. I have to get up close to the place.” [laughs] It worked, so we went up.

Frank Lloyd Wright came out in his usual dramatic cape and hat and said, “I believe in honest arrogance. I hate hypocritical humility. I’m here because this bridge is the one you should have. I know you aren’t going to get it, because of the Bay Area.” He had this chance to just give everybody hell that his bridge was not going to be used. But the museum kept that beautiful model for a while. I wish they’d been able to keep it because it was quite a wonderful art form in itself. A lot of events. Like they had a speaking series of events that we’d all try to attend as much as possible. So the museum had changed pretty dramatically. It was also the time when those annuals, I think, dropped off. We no longer had those. But as a result, they did have more exhibitions of works from other places. The increase in membership and all of that made an enormous difference.

01-00:34:50

If I would have had my way, [chuckles] as long as we’re speaking about it, I wish very much they could have stayed in that building and used it in the way in which it could have been used, in the way in which it’s now being used, without the \$80 million building, which took all of the donations of money during that period of time, which could have been used for collection, theoretically. That’s one of my major points about museums generally. They build these elaborate architect vanity museums, and they have very little to put in it. They don’t establish collections which are significant enough to measure up to the ability of the museum. It’s a shame, in a way, when the major best collections in America were started with household collections that built into places like the Phillips Gallery, and on and on an on throughout the country. So somehow, I think that was a disappointment. But nonetheless, they have this elaborate new building, and should now maybe, perhaps have another—as I’m sure they’ll try to get some acquisition money and go on and upward.

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I have a quarrel with the collection, where they spend so much money on state-of-the-art, cutting-edge, in my judgment, publicity-generating artworks. While some of that might be all right, I think there’s far too much of it. They bought too many things at the peak of these extravagant, astonishing prices, to the detriment of really thinking about their collection and what they need to deepen or to widen and to build on the beginnings they have in some places.

For instance, a museum of modern art without a Cézanne? Or a Balthus, let’s say if we take the extremes of representational art and the origin of modernism, in a sense. That trend, I think, should be parallel. You should always have a representation of representational art of the strongest sort, in addition to all of the other manners of cutting-edge art and all of those so-called pieces of conceptual art, earth art, process art, video art, photographic art and so on. In my judgment, it’s unfair to kidnap the term “art” too early. Just because you call it art. We have got to be not so fast, because that’s going to take longer judgment, in terms of my experience. So a safer bet, I think, is

to get the very best of every convention, and make sure it isn't over-weighted in one way or another. I know it's difficult to do, but nonetheless, that's the responsibility of an imaginative, scholarly curator and director—for what it's worth.

Rigelhaupt: Are there any areas that SFMOMA is particularly strong?

01-00:39:29

Thiebaud: Well, if we're very honest about it, some fellow came out, as they often do, from New York [chuckles] and went around the area and looked around and so forth and said, "Well, you have got three museums here." He says, "If you put all of those collections together—the de Young, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, [chuckles] the Legion of Honor, you put all those together, you'd have one bad museum." Well, that's a typical New York chauvinist point of view. But in fact, we need an awful lot more collections here. They do need to be almost strengthened in so many areas. They have a pretty good collection of Bay Area art. I think they could have done more in that. Not so much my work. I was out there [in Sacramento]. I knew all those people and I was friendly and had great friendship with some of them, but I was not part of that, really. So what I'm saying is that just those major three—Bischoff, Park, and Diebenkorn—Oliveira, Paul Wonner, [William] Theophilus Brown, Joan Brown—those are all substantial people. But there's another whole level of maybe twenty-five other people who did marvelous works within that focus and convention of what's become known as Bay Area Figurative painting. So that would have been, I think, the one place in which they could have been known as having a strong collection in that. Oakland did quite well in some of that because they did have people like Jim Weeks and, I understand, more of that so-called second-level, whatever that means, works.

01-00:42:10

Let's see. Strong works? I know very little about their photography collection. The fellow who helped put that together, he was very central to photography [John Humphrey]. That may be a strong point, but I don't know what it is. I know very little about photography. But I guess the answer is no. [chuckles]

Rigelhaupt: Well, how do you think SFMOMA compares to other museums of modern art in the US?

01-00:43:00

Thiebaud: Let's see. What do I know about some of the others? That's difficult, because now they keep calling them contemporary art museums. Is that the same thing, for instance?

Rigelhaupt: I think I'd let you answer that question. In putting them in with contemporary art, if that's a way you think about it, that would be fine. I'd be hesitant to make that distinction, from my perspective.

01-00:43:30

Thiebaud:

I don't know, it's troubling to me that they have had to have a contemporary museum. It doesn't make sense to me, since museums are, as far as I can sense anything about museums, is those are supposed to be a refuge of our finest works. Let's see if I can get this right, so it makes sense. If we're going to call something art, it has to be based on some extremist position. That's a rare thing. It has to do with the extraordinary, the unusual, all of those characteristics which we think of in terms of a more golden word of art, let's say. So you have that. Museums are repositories of so much work that they can only show about a fifth of it at any one time. But it is a repository of all this stuff, in addition, which is a great archive. That seems to me to be the way to have a museum. Now, if you begin to have things like women's museums or ethnic— Let's say black art, women's art, feminist art—all those categories—I'm not sure those are museums, in terms of what we think of as museums. So why not call them galleries, where contemporary art galleries would show contemporary work, and get away from this, I think, unclear category of museum ideas?

So as far as I'm concerned, one of the problems with contemporary museums, as we have seen over the years, they have a hell of a time existing. So many of them come and go. Even a small town like Sacramento tries to have a contemporary art museum. It's [chuckles] just not happening. The reason is that that doesn't include a dimensional piece of the visual world. It's a special little category. That then means you're going to have, probably, a specialized audience. So that doesn't have anything to do, as far as I'm concerned, with a major museum. So I think the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is really more of an echo of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which tries to do that, in a way. I mean, if you look at the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, they have an enormous storage of contemporary art. They can bring it up periodically to enhance a certain aspect of contemporary preoccupations of one kind or another. High and low art show, or even in something like primitive art, they can include folk and outsider art. It makes a lot more sense to have that as an element within a museum structure than to separate out by itself. Unless you're just going to say, well, this is a showplace for what's going on now.

Rigelhaupt:

Other than the description of the combination of SFMOMA with other museums in San Francisco, by the person from New York, do you have a sense of how SFMOMA is perceived within an art community, both nationally and internationally?

01-00:48:30

Thiebaud:

I guess I really don't. I don't know enough about the museum world, so to speak. It'd be an interesting information to know how it does that way. But I just don't really have any insight.

Rigelhaupt: But then from the perspective of having been a part of California art and Bay Area artists and in an artist community for some time, from an artist's perspective, how is SFMOMA perceived?

01-00:49:11

Thiebaud: Younger artists and contemporary artists in the area, I think, view it variously. I think they're irritated that they don't have more to do with it, in terms of showing their work. I think they are very selective in the exhibitions they go to see. If they're having a show of cutting edge art of one kind or another and they're doing that art, [chuckles] they go and see it. So I think it's viewed pragmatically. But also I think there's a certain amount of pride in having it here and having a chance to see traveling exhibitions that are brought in to see. You have these little reproductions in magazines that they read and are aware of; and as we know, that is so very different from what the things actually are. So having the real thing, that's a real achievement, and one that should be, I think, celebrated and appreciated.

Rigelhaupt: Have you seen changes over the years as to how SFMOMA has interacted and formed relationships with artists in the Bay Area?

01-00:51:01

Thiebaud: Well, I think they always try. They give some exhibitions of local artists and document it. They, I think, still try to purchase works. Through a fund. They encourage collectors to donate works of people in the area, but also of any other modernist works that they have in their collection. Maybe largely, it's composed of that operation. They also are starting to celebrate artists a little more, doing what they call Bay Area Treasure artists. That's a nice series, I think, to recognize people. I think some of them were better than others, and I think Neal [Benezra] is doing a very good job. Henry Hopkins was very, very good. I haven't had a lot to do with some of the others. Let's see, Gerald Nordland was another. He, I think, would invite artists in to talk. He was a big fan of Richard Diebenkorn. So I think there have been some close relationships with the directors over the years. I wish I had known Grace L. McCann Morley better. I did not. That was too early for me to have much of a relationship. But I think she was admired in the area. [pause] You say you have talked to Bob Bechtle. So many of them have passed on, haven't they? Come to think of it. Like Joan Brown. Did you talk to a fellow, the Englishman who went to Detroit? Graham Beal. Because he was very good here. He and his wife, both. Then there was a person in the area of keeping care of paintings. Some woman that was very good there. Might be interesting. I can't remember her name, [chuckles] unfortunately.

Rigelhaupt: Was it Inge-Lise [Eckmann Lane]?

01-00:54:35

Thiebaud: That sounds familiar. What about Mrs. Bischoff?

Rigelhaupt: I don't know if she's—

01-00:54:46

Thiebaud: Adelaide Bischoff. She was the widow of Elmer Bischoff. She's also a painter. She might be one. I'm sure they want to talk to Phyllis Diebenkorn. Bill Brown would be good to talk to, Theophilus Brown. He and Paul Wonner were partners over a long period of time, and both of them [were] involved in the museum. He's still active. Mel Ramos, have you talked to him? He was a student of mine at the junior college, and was very involved in the annuals as a young student. Then of course, there's Peter Selz, who's probably on your list. I don't know. [laughs]

Rigelhaupt: Well, if we jump backward a little bit, it sounds like you did have some personal interactions with Grace McCann Morley.

01-00:56:19

Thiebaud: I think maybe just by telephone or letter, obtaining that Dali. We just put it in the back seat of the car and drove it up here. But we also got things from the de Young. We got a beautiful [Camille] Pissarro painting. [chuckles] So I couldn't say I really had any significant interactions with Grace Morley.

Rigelhaupt: Was her tenure as director something that was talked about amongst artists, about the direction she was taking the museum, exhibitions that were particularly strong?

01-00:57:12

Thiebaud: Not to my knowledge.

[Begin Audio File 2 01-03-2009.mp3]

Rigelhaupt: The directors, if you could just talk about any experiences you had with them—I'll throw out some names as we go—experiences you had with them, exhibitions that you can recall under their tenure, particular ways they were moving the museum—any of your impressions. So we talked a little bit about Grace McCann Morley. What about George Culler?

02-00:00:36

Thiebaud: Who?

Rigelhaupt: George Culler.

02-00:00:39

Thiebaud: Oh, George Culler. I remember very, very little about that. I'm no help at all, I'm afraid.

Rigelhaupt: Okay. Well, Gerald Nordland followed.

02-00:00:58

Thiebaud: Nope. For some reason, doesn't register. I didn't have a lot to do with directors, I guess, really. Outside of that friendship with Mike McCone, who was not having to do with the art part of it, anyway.

Rigelhaupt: Well, I know from what I have heard and read, that Henry Hopkins widened the scope of the types of exhibitions and certainly, tried to work with collectors more and expand SFMOMA. I'm wondering—you mentioned that you'd done a juried exhibition, or you juried an exhibition with Henry Hopkins—what your impression was of his tenure as director of SFMOMA?

02-00:02:08

Thiebaud: Well, I think he had a much wider point of view. He also was a painter and came from a different area and background. So we got along very well and when we'd judge, we had a lot of similar notations of what was happening. He had an elegance about him. We exchanged jokes. [laughs] But mostly, I think it was a distant relationship. [pause]

There's a fellow during that time. There's a [radio] station, KPFA, as you know about. There was a commentator on art, John Fitzgibbon. He came from teaching high school in Berkeley or Oakland, I can't remember. Berkeley High School, I think. An imaginative guy, very interested in the arts, very interested in reviewing the arts. He reviewed shows as they came up at the Museum of Modern Art. I listened to him frequently. We became friends. He was a tennis player, also, growing up in Berkeley. He came up here and is here now. He taught art history at Sac[ramento] State University. Then he became an artist, doing performance pieces up in the area. He'd get people like art historians from the east to come. He was very interested in having visiting people come all the time. But the reason you might talk to him is that he has a little collection of art. He was both critical and very straightforward [when] talking about some of the issues, which might give another whole side to the history of the museum. So John Fitzgibbon might be one to talk to.

Rigelhaupt: Then how do you recall the transition from Henry Hopkins to Jack Lane's directorship of the museum?

02-00:05:37

Thiebaud: Well, Jack Lane came and the first time I met him, as I recall, we were called together because they got a grant from Pritzker, the hotel people, to do a blow-up of one of the paintings which they'd acquired of a cityscape that I'd painted, to put up on maybe a six- or eight-story building. [chuckles] They were just finishing it up. So they wanted Jack Lane and I on one of those window-washing things, to be up on the— He was very, very hesitant about wanting to do that, but he was good sport enough to do it, so he and I found ourselves up on this high suspension board, talking about the mural project. So that was my acquaintance with Jack Lane. I [haven't had] too much to do with him since, although I think I maybe gave a lecture that he'd invited me to do. He was very instrumental, as you probably know, in developing the campaign for the new museum. His energies, I think, for the most part, needed to be directly mostly towards that. So the curatorial aspect of what was going on around that time, I really don't really know how that went, curatorially. But

he did get a lot of people interested and a lot of people gave. He got a lot of people to give money and the museum got going.

Rigelhaupt: Then David Ross followed Jack Lane's tenure. What do you recall about David Ross' time at SFMOMA?

02-00:08:05

Thiebaud: Well, there's some awful things about that, I'm afraid, what we heard [chuckles] by way of the grapevine. My art dealer and other people said that they were so glad to get rid of him, there were nine celebration parties to get him the hell out of New York, and we got him. [laughs] He was not someone who I was enthusiastic about. Part of it, I guess, was that his tastes and his interests were different from mine. In fairness to him, he was active and enthusiastic. But I didn't feel that he added a great deal to the museum, quite frankly.

Rigelhaupt: Were there any directions that David Ross took the museum that you thought were particularly successful or that you thought didn't really add much?

02-00:09:40

Thiebaud: Well, it's hard to know just who was so enthusiastic about some of the things which they purchased. I don't know how much was his and how much was other directors and the Director's Circle and all of that. So I can't really, in all fairness, either fault him or commend him on what happened during that time. I just frankly don't know. I have suspicions, but those will remain suspicions.

Rigelhaupt: Then what about Neal Benezra, who's the current director?

02-00:10:22

Thiebaud: Well, I like him very much and I think he's on the right track. I think he's got a lot of challenges. Everybody wants something else or something more or something other. But I think he's a very good person, very solid. I think his impulses are good. I think he's been a good director, as far as I can see it. So I applaud his efforts. He came in at a time when it was more difficult all the time to get things done. Problems of the rising rates of insurance and costs, which frustrate him enormously, I know. So he's, I think, just doing the best he can. I think that's admirable.

Rigelhaupt: Earlier—and correct me if I'm wrong in getting this impression—but you gave me the impression that SFMOMA and museums like that have to strike a balance between supporting local artists and interacting with a community of artists, of which they're a part, and then also bringing in national and international exhibitions; that they do serve a role to introduce that local art scene to what's going on around the world. But that's a difficult balance to strike.

02-00:12:05

Thiebaud: Very difficult, yeah. It's true.

Rigelhaupt: So thinking back over the directors that we have talked about, are there any that stand out in your mind as being particularly successful at that balancing act?

02-00:12:24

Thiebaud: Well, the ones that I suppose I know and feel that way about would be Henry Hopkins and particularly Neal Benezra. I don't really have a clear picture of what Gerald Nordland did. I do know that he was interested in the local artists and perhaps deserves credit, but I really don't have specific knowledge of that. We moved to this house in the city. We bought a little house in the city in 1972. That was the first time, I think, that I had a clear picture about what was going on in, let's say, the circles of SF Modern, Museum of Modern Art, with collectors and with other artists and so on. Before that, I was really more, as I said, on the fringe of information. So that was a time, from about mid-seventies on, off and on—because I went down every week to a drawing class and we went to lots more openings—a lot more relationship with the people who were interested in the museum. We got acquainted with some of the collectors, who were also on the board of the museum—people like Tom Weizel and others; some of the gallery directors—John Berggruen. So I had a little bit better information during that time than earlier on or even now, since we don't go as often anymore to the city.

Rigelhaupt: You mentioned going to openings at galleries. Do you recall if there were directors or curators that you knew from SFMOMA that regularly attended gallery openings in San Francisco or were very much a part of artist communities in San Francisco and the Bay Area?

02-00:15:03

Thiebaud: Well, I think Henry Hopkins came often to artist openings off and on. I think I saw Gerald Nordland at an exhibition. I just don't know very much about—Curators, yes, some of those. You might want to talk to a woman who now works for my son, who once worked in the collections, I think as— Was she an intern or not? But she had some knowledge of the relationship with the Paul Klee exhibition. Her name is Kelly Purcell. She might have a more intimate knowledge of some of those kinds of things because she lived there and worked every day at the museum.

Rigelhaupt: Could you describe your recollections about how some of your work has become part of SFMOMA's permanent collection?

02-00:16:30

Thiebaud: Let's see. The first thing that they purchased was, I think, a cityscape. They didn't have money to buy it. They had *some* money. Then they had a public— Like you could put money in a slot or something [chuckles] to buy this painting. They had a little reproduction of the painting and, "Would you help buy this painting?" The first one was given, I guess. That's the three cakes on stands. I don't know who gave that. It may possibly have been the Weintraubs, who were a Sacramento couple, and they purchased it. The delta

picture, the one of the river series painted in our area here, was purchased by friends of Phyllis Wattis. She had tried to buy a painting in auction, of a cake case. Early painting. She didn't buy that in auction; the price became too much. She then turned her attention to get the riverscape, and they somehow managed to do that. Subsequently, since they were so generous in collecting the work, we gave work to the museum out of thankfulness. I don't know how many. We gave a number of works, I don't know how many.

Rigelhaupt: Was this the gift in 1997?

02-00:18:43

Thiebaud: That sounds about right.

Rigelhaupt: It was a pretty significant gift.

02-00:18:49

Thiebaud: Well, some people might think so; others may not. [laughs]

Rigelhaupt: Well, *they* do. [laughs]

02-00:18:56

Thiebaud: What we tried to do was to give supporting things, like drawings and prints and sketches, that would help in the educational aspect of the work.

Rigelhaupt: Well, one of the things I was asked to ask about was the girl with pink hat, a piece you did from '73 to '76, which is going to become part of SFMOMA's permanent collection.

02-00:19:33

Thiebaud: Oh, is it? That's news to me. I know some woman from Sacramento or San Francisco was thinking about doing that. I hope they can do that. That would represent all the areas, anyway.

Rigelhaupt: Well, they asked me to ask who the model was.

02-00:19:56

Thiebaud: Oh, the model. A woman by the name of Nancy Jennings. [chuckles] A fairly interesting story. There's a print publisher by the name of Bob Feldman, Parasol Press. She was his fiancée. They had met and fell in love, apparently. In France, I think. He had sent me to do prints there at Valérie's, where Picasso made the linoleum prints, that thing. So that was the relationship between him and her. He asked me if I would do a portrait of her. I said, "Well, I don't do portraits, but if she wants to pose for a painting." So she came out and posed here in Sacramento, and I made two paintings of her. One fully dressed, in an usher's outfit, those costumes they used to wear in the thirties and forties that I remember, very head-on. Then I did her nude from the waist up, with a hat on, casting a shadow.

The reason that I don't do portraits is that I'm sure they'll never be satisfied with a portrait, because they're more about painting and design and the use of color and space. So that one was the one he liked enough to pay me for. Eventually, he gave it to her. Well, so the big [chuckles] end of the story was, she was coming back on one of those big ships, the *France* or something. She walked off the gangplank and told him that she didn't want to marry him, that she'd [chuckles] fallen in love with some count on the boat. Well, that made an enormous shockwave through the whole procedure. Then he didn't want to give her the painting, but she already had it. Then she finally sold it, I think through John Berggruen, I'm not sure, to this woman. That's the story of the woman with pink hat. [laughs]

Rigelhaupt: How would you talk about the importance of exposure in New York, as an artist?

02-00:23:28
Thiebaud:

Primary. Up until maybe very recently, people were surprised that I came from California, finally, in New York. [chuckles] It's almost like they didn't like it to happen that way. That's why they referred to Bay Area Figurative painting; they wanted to make it out there. They were always called the California painters. They called me a California painter, too, often. It's odd that that appellation is given. Painting is one thing. So it'd be like saying— [chuckles] California painting? That's like California mathematics. There ain't no such thing. It just doesn't happen that way. But the New Yorkers are very, very strange that way. Even the ones in New York that came from California. [laughs] They really call themselves New York artists. It's funny.

I asked one New Yorker— I remember one time, [this] fellow came out to be a visiting artist. I says, "What do you guys think about people out on the West Coast that paint?"

He was a pipe smoker. So he'd smoke the pipe a long time, and he says, "Well, I'd have to say I guess we never think about it." [laughs]

I asked [Willem] de Kooning, when I got to know him slightly in New York when I was back there for a year— He says, "You come from California?" "Yeah." He says, "There's a painter out there I like very much, Willy Bishop." I couldn't [think] who the hell he was talking about. He was talking about Elmer Bischoff. He says, "He's got interesting paintings. The figure looks almost like it's going to sink down, but it stays there. That's very difficult to do. Willy Bishop." I finally told him it was Elmer Bischoff.

But it's funny. When I went back there for a year, you can certainly see how that could happen, because they're always talking to themselves. It's always almost like an inner working machine of contacts and inter-support and anxieties about [chuckles] who's in which gallery, and whether that gallery is better than this gallery. It's a very volatile, interesting social interaction. I

finally got elected to what they call the American Academy of Arts and Letters. There were only two people, I think, on the West Coast. One was Diebenkorn and the other was a fellow up north. Paints birds. He's into Zen and all of that. I finally got this letter that I was in. It isn't something that you have anything to do with, they just finally come and tell you that you have been elected to this office, this place. I think it's only 200 or 250 people. Largely— I think 150 writers, 50 musicians, 50 visual artists. [chuckles] How you get elected or how you're into that, you never know. But the short of it was that when I was elected, then I wanted, obviously, to tell them about West Coast people. Dick and I, Dick Diebenkorn and I would harangue them about people. They said, "Oh, we just don't see their work. No, we don't know them at all." As a consequence, every year they have to publish, in this group, locations of where all the artists are. So you get this long column of the eastern people; and you have Midwest, maybe two people; and then West Coast, two people. [laughs] Oh, anyway. I'd give these impassioned speeches, talking about this. "You gave that speech last year. We don't want to hear that again." It's *amazing*. Amazing how they just don't know about it. You can't blame them, in a way, because all the publicity orientation, the publishing, the reviews are all in that circle of limited accessibility. [chuckles] Fascinating.

Rigelhaupt: Now, thinking back to the early 1960s, do you recall differences about how your work was received in New York and the Bay Area?

02-00:29:25

Thiebaud: Well, I'm just one of those lucky, serendipitous people. I showed the work out here at a little gallery. Alfred Frankenstein reviewed it favorably, but said something like, he's obviously the hungriest artist on the West Coast, or something like that. Alfred Frankenstein was a very kind man. So we had a show, had a little exhibition, and nothing sold. But he went to the opening and I had my mother out here. [chuckles] She came and a few people came to this. It was down in a little basement area, right across from John Berggruen's gallery now. They even had a little wine table and cheese. In wandered someone off the street, who obviously had had quite a bit to drink. But he saw the wine bottle, he went over and poured himself a drink. He was going to be responsible and look at the paintings. So he looked at the paintings. My mother was sitting in a chair near this painting of five hotdogs, I remember. [chuckles] He came up and he looked at it. He looked down, there's a sign, says, "*Five Hotdogs*, \$300." Looked at it, he says, "My God, that's \$50 a hotdog." So the reaction wasn't great. So Allan Stone showed the work then in 1962. [chuckles]

That was when the evidence of Pop Art was just starting. That, more than anything else, made people come to the gallery. So it was one of those very, very lucky, lucky events that I can take absolutely no credit for. The problem was then that that's all they wanted to talk about was the paintings of the pies. So I became known as the pie man painter. [chuckles] And Pop Art, which I don't even like Pop Art that much. I like the work of [Jasper] Johns, I like the

work of [Claes] Oldenburg. Much of that, I like. A few things by other people, but not much. Of course, I came from commercial art, so that, to me, is a strange anomaly, that I don't think enough has been sorted out about it, where all those images come from. It doesn't give the proper alliance and credit to those great graphic artists, cartoonists, illustrators, who do make high achievements in that manner of work, which largely is unaccounted for by the so-called fine-art aristocracy, so to speak. That needs to be sorted out, so that someone like George Herriman, who I think is one of the great geniuses of graphic art, cartooning, who was collected by people like Diebenkorn, Bischoff and Philip Guston, who really loved the work for what it is, as an astounding achievement; but also Picasso, who loved it for what it really is and can do, in terms of high art, as well as graphic art. That distinction is something that we have really got a lot of work to do on, in my opinion.

So let's see, what the hell were we talking about that made me get to that? Oh, anyway.

Rigelhaupt: The early sixties. I asked about reception of your work here and then in New York.

02-00:34:32

Thiebaud: Because I doubt, if I had shown a year or two earlier, that there would have been very little attention paid to it. It is work, I think, that is somehow transitional between various things. A lot of people just say, well, that can't possibly be fine art. It may not be. You have to face that fact. It's what it is. I have enormous respect for all kinds of achievement in visual art, so it doesn't have to be what you call museum art or fine art and all of that. Just like tribal art, for a long time, was always in ethnographic museums. It took a long time for it to come into the consciousness of how beautiful and how aesthetic it was. That's true of a lot of areas. We're getting better, I think, at it. We're showing more interest in outsider art and tribal art and things like the beauty of quilts and all of that. That's quite wonderful, I think.

Rigelhaupt: At that point, you formed a long relationship with Allan Stone.

02-00:36:12

Thiebaud: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: How would you characterize that relationship?

02-00:36:20

Thiebaud: I think it was, for me, one of the most important things in my life. We're like [godparents] to his girls. More than a friendship, it became familial. I know all of his daughters. He was the only dealer in New York I had. That existed for some forty-five years, until he passed away. But more than that, we had similar interests and controversial issues. We played a lot of tennis together and traveled together. He was very good about trying to keep away from the so-called art world. He thought the work should go on its own power, that you

shouldn't get too revved up with publicity and public relations machines. They constantly tried to make alliances with him. Particularly Leo Castelli, people like that, that wanted to bring the work more into a protected art cartel operation, which Allan, fortunately, thought was a dangerous enterprise. So he was very, very important in caring about the work, collecting the work himself—a lot of which he never sold, never would sell, until he passed away. So it was a very, very important relationship.

Rigelhaupt: Your retrospective that you had at the de Young in 2000, what do you recall about how that exhibition came to be? If you could talk about it, also as a part of the type of role the de Young plays as an institution in the Bay Area.

02-00:38:42

Thiebaud: A very important one, from several standpoints. They had ongoing exhibitions, as you know, that both coincided [with] and paralleled what the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art was doing. They had a show of Edvard Munch, they had a show of [Vincent] Van Gogh; they had a show of the watercolorists [Winslow] Homer, [John Singer] Sargent, very high quality works. The show there originated with a curator by the name of Ninfa Valvo who, during a summer, came to me and asked, in I think 1963, to have an exhibition. That was a very early and crucial exhibition for the Bay Area people to see, after the New York show. It was reviewed then, again by Alfred Frankenstein. He came to the exhibition early on and we talked to each other about the show. So that, in a way, paralleled the interest in the work that developed in New York, because the New York coverage was so extensive, with *Time* magazine, *Life* magazine, *Nation*, *New York Times* and others. So that echoed that exhibition. So the de Young was very important in that way. The curator there, Steve Nash, but the other— Who's the other fellow that's so big a favorite, who just left there, retired? [Robert Flynn Johnson?] But he and Steve Nash approached me with the idea of having an exhibition, and I was delighted to do it. Now, why the hell can't I remember his name? Great guy. He'd been at the Met, he'd been in Texas. He came here and was responsible for really upgrading the entire museum, and particularly the contemporary museum. I think I'll think of him in a minute.

Rigelhaupt: Do you think that both the de Young and SFMOMA are pretty similar?

02-00:42:03

Thiebaud: I think the audiences are similar. I think the social support is different. I think there's some interchange, obviously. But I think the de Young, interestingly, are a somewhat different group. Partially because, I think, of the historical aspect. French culture, for instance. Nan McEvoy, who is a de Young descendant. I think they think of themselves in terms of a hierarchy of older landed-gentry idea. But there are some similarities and close interchange, as well, certainly.

Rigelhaupt: Well, going back to Steve Nash, one of the things I noticed in his catalog essay for your 2000 exhibition was that he focused on three things. He focused on everyday objects, such as food; figures and figurative work; and San Francisco cityscapes. Now, do you think your work reflecting any one of those themes has been received differently in the Bay Area or at SFMOMA?

02-00:43:33

Thiebaud: I think most people have trouble with the figurative work. I think for a very good reason; it's probably a whole different thing and a difficult thing. I think probably figure painting is probably at the hierarchy of achievement, the most difficult. We know the figure so well that it's sometimes disturbing to see when things happen to it that are somehow uncomfortable. So that interests me a lot. It's probably the biggest challenge. I don't know if I'm very much aware of how the general selection of the work is achieved or looked at and understood and liked or disliked. My own hope is that they would see it, in some ways, having a sense of humor, as well as a serious concern. I say that also for another reason that I think somehow the tradition of fine art has always had quite a bit of trouble with the idea of humor. Yet for me, humor is one of the great inventions of the human spirit. But in addition to that, you can see stylistic derivations and evolution, from the standpoint of the way in which caricature is used. Not just size but say, for instance, a caricature of the figure; caricature of color; caricature of space, like cubism; caricature of tension, like expressionism. You could pretty much sense how caricature, humor, distortion is so much a part of the art historical tradition. So somehow or other in my own work, caricature is quite central to what it's about. That verges always, I think, on humor. Or at least I hope it does.

Rigelhaupt: How would you talk about SFMOMA's role as an educational institution? Was it a place that your students went, that you encouraged them to go? How would you talk about that?

02-00:46:54

Thiebaud: Well, I'd just say that it's one of their primary obligations and interests. I think they address it that way, to the effect of its achieved desired end. I don't know how to evaluate it. I don't know, I have lost track, for instance, of whether or not they're still doing any classes. I know they have an active docent program, which is a educational program. I would like to see more students be able to go there and copy works, in the old tradition. I think that's something that can be done. So education certainly is important. After all, the origin of art schools really were museum schools, where the artists were trained right next door or right in the proximity of the museum, so they could go in and see the original works, copy original works, draw from original works. That's largely gone out of practice, which I think is a real sadness. Because I have been very interested in teaching. That's been very much a part of my life and my interests. So I am interested in that and interested that the museums are responsible to keep on doing that. I would like, for instance, to know how they're doing in that area of works.

Rigelhaupt: Was SFMOMA, its exhibitions, were they talked about amongst you and your colleagues and your students at UC Davis?

02-00:49:31

Thiebaud: Oh, yeah. We'd take bus trips down and talk about it, introductory, in the class; and then seeing it; having students' interaction discussing works; picking out the work they liked and didn't like, and why. I think every painting student certainly is obliged to take on art history. We require it. That's, after all, I think, what we might refer to as a bureau of standards of excellent achievements. It's where we come from and who we're obliged to recognize.

[recording stops & re-starts]

Rigelhaupt: I was just asking about your impressions of the gallery scene in San Francisco in the sixties and seventies.

02-00:51:20

Thiebaud: Well, it was fairly small. There was places like the Lucien Labaudt Gallery, the Maxwell Galleries. My association with smaller galleries mostly was with Charlie Campbell, the Charles Campbell Gallery. I did go a lot to the Dilexi Gallery because they were showing a lot of the early people. There was the Rat Bastard Gallery, with people like Bruce Conner and that group. A lot of funk art, things with films and poetry readings. I don't know how much they interacted with the museum. I think there was some; I don't know how much and to what degree. It was pretty sparse. But we usually were pretty good about going to most of them and seeing people. People were traipsing around, seeing what they could.

Rigelhaupt: Could you discuss being awarded the 2006 Bay Area Treasure Award from SFMOMA?

02-00:53:00

Thiebaud: To make what a thing it is? I don't know. [chuckles] It's hard to say. Obviously, flattering. You always wonder if you deserve it. You feel strange because it comes to you, rather than, let's say, a whole group of artists. I think maybe that's one thing they might do one time, is to have, say, instead of one person, to have twenty-five people, and then another twenty-five people at some point. Might be an interesting way to do it. This, of course, is based on, I think, as people become what they call "known artists." What that does, realistically, is to make a point of having an event where they then can raise money, by having a luncheon or a banquet. I have done maybe six or eight or ten of those over the years. They're worthwhile and they bring people together, and they do something which I think helps the whole system. I'm glad to see they're continuing it now. They did Bob Bechtle, didn't they? I don't know what else they're [putting] on their agenda.

[End of Interview]

Jess Rigelhaupt is an assistant professor of history and American studies at the University of Mary Washington. At the time of this interview he was a postdoctoral research specialist in the Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) at the University of California, Berkeley. He received his Ph.D. from the Program in American Culture at the University of Michigan. His research focuses on California politics and culture. He is writing a book on mid-twentieth century progressive social movements and politics in the San Francisco Bay Area.