



**Artists Documentation Program  
Video Interview Transcript**

**WAYNE THIEBAUD**

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**Interviewed by:**

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**Whitney Museum of American Art**

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This interview is part of the Artists Documentation Program, a collaboration of the Menil Collection, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, Harvard Art Museums.

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## **About the Artists Documentation Program**

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, artists have experimented with an unprecedented range of new materials and technologies. The conceptual concerns underlying much of contemporary art render its conservation more complex than simply arresting physical change. As such, the artist's voice is essential to future conservation and presentation of his or her work.

In 1990, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a grant to the Menil Collection for Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, then Chief Conservator, to establish the Artists Documentation Program (ADP). Since that time, the ADP has recorded artists speaking candidly with conservators in front of their works. These engaging and informative interviews capture artists' attitudes toward the aging of their art and those aspects of its preservation that are of paramount importance to them.

The ADP has recorded interviews with such important artists as Frank Stella, Jasper Johns, and Cy Twombly. Originally designed for use by conservators and scholars at the Menil, the ADP has begun to appeal to a broader audience outside the Menil, and the collection has grown to include interviews from two partner institutions: the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, Harvard Art Museums. In 2009, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a grant to the Menil Collection to establish the ADP Archive, formalizing the multi-institutional partnership and making ADP interviews more widely available to researchers.

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**[Speakers (in order of appearance): Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Founding Director, Artists Documentation Program and Chief Conservator, The Menil Collection; Wayne Thiebaud, Artist.]**

**[BEGIN RECORDING]**

**[00:00:50]**

CM-U: I just wanted to thank you for coming. This is an honor for me. This is the first interview that I'm doing here at the Whitney.

W. Thiebaud: Ah.

CM-U: It's part of a program called The Artists Documentation Program, and the purpose is to document your views toward your work as you see it today.

W. Thiebaud: All right.

CM-U: And your thoughts about how they were made...

W. Thiebaud: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...and how they are aging, and how that suits you.

W. Thiebaud: All right.

CM-U: And the main drift, or the main wish is that future conservators and scholars will be able to look at these tapes and have a sense of you and questions that I might ask you with regard to conservation.

W. Thiebaud: I hope I don't ruin the whole series...

CM-U: No.

W. Thiebaud: ...by starting.

(laughter)

CM-U: I don't think so. I guess...

**[00:01:31]**

W. Thiebaud: I should tell you, I haven't been to art school, so I'm – it's pretty much learn on the job. I've tried to figure out things and tried to find out about things, but it's – I have very limited knowledge about materials, techniques, and so on.

CM-U: But your paintings have held up extraordinarily well. And I think it's probably as much due to the materials you've used, as well as your layering system.

W. Thiebaud: Well, I've been lucky. And I have tried to talk. I remember one time I was – in 1956, at the [National Arts] Club in New York.

CM-U: Um-hum.

W. Thiebaud: And they had a thing on conservation for New York Abstract Expressionists.

CM-U: So...

W. Thiebaud: And the fellow who came from some company – I can't remember which – who talked about the best way to ground the surface, and how you ensure that you have rabbitskin glue, and white lead paint, and went the whole process. And then they asked the people, and everybody agreed that they should be more responsible. Many people had not done that.

CM-U: (laughs)

W. Thiebaud: They turned to William de Kooning and asked him what he thought.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

W. Thiebaud: To which his answer was classic.

CM-U: Yeah.

W. Thiebaud: He said, "Well, I think the bad part about this is, we're gonna have a lot of God-damn ugly paintings gonna last forever."

CM-U: (laughs) I guess he was sort of right about that, too. Fortunately, his have done very well.

(laughter)

W. Thiebaud: Well, he was trained very well, wasn't he?

- CM-U: Yeah, he was.
- W. Thiebaud: So that's a different thing.
- CM-U: And he also – well, like you – used materials in a very measured way.
- W. Thiebaud: Uh-huh.
- CM-U: I mean, as I look at your work, I see primarily the use of oil paint over the years.
- W. Thiebaud: Mostly, yes. Um-hum.
- CM-U: And mixed in with different additives?
- W. Thiebaud: Different additives. Actually a kind – that new substitute for the Maroger technique – waxes and so on to extend. So if you are working with thick paint, you try to lighten it some, so it doesn't get too heavy.
- CM-U: Um-hum. And I think you told me when I met you a long time ago, you tend to use a mixture of stand – one-third linseed oil and...
- W. Thiebaud: One-third turpentine, linseed oil, and damar varnish, or stand oil.
- CM-U: And that's to make the paint more fluid?
- W. Thiebaud: Right.
- CM-U: To make the oil paint more fluid.
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah.
- [00:03:54]**
- CM-U: And I guess somewhere that I've read, but I've also seen on the paintings – or at least I wanted to ask you. I read somewhere about the use of the Grumbacher GEL medium as an additive.
- W. Thiebaud: Yes.
- CM-U: Is that right? What was that – what was your thought about that?

- W. Thiebaud: Two things – GEL and ZEC™. Both of those.
- CM-U: GEL and...
- W. Thiebaud: ZEC™.
- CM-U: ZEC™?
- W. Thiebaud: Z-E-C.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- W. Thiebaud: It's supposed to be sort of a substitute for that Maroger Technique, that one with beeswax and so on. And I've used that quite a bit.
- CM-U: To add volume to the paint?
- W. Thiebaud: Right.
- CM-U: Does it also affect...
- W. Thiebaud: And to lighten it.
- CM-U: And to lighten it?
- W. Thiebaud: It also lightens it.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- W. Thiebaud: It sort of aerates it and seems to make it somewhat – it dries a little bit more quickly. Is waxier. So that afterwards, usually you need to varnish it...
- CM-U: Uh, that was what I wanted to ask you that.
- W. Thiebaud: ...as it'll be – it will flat out the work pretty much, very often.
- CM-U: Were you using this as early as the 1962 works?
- W. Thiebaud: I was using the ZEC™ pretty early on some of those, particularly large, thickly painted pictures.

- CM-U: Um-hum. I was interested, because when I was looking carefully at them, I saw a kind of almost evaporation holes in the paint.
- W. Thiebaud: Ahh.
- CM-U: That's – that made me think it was something beyond just the oil paint. So maybe that is...
- W. Thiebaud: It may also be because the titanium white that we bought from Bay City Paints...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- W. Thiebaud: ...in the sixties. When we bought it, it was fairly viscous...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- W. Thiebaud: ...but to thin it, you need to sort of whip it.
- CM-U: Ah.
- W. Thiebaud: So I think whipping it up might have produced air pockets, and that may have caused those little air holes.
- CM-U: That makes perfect sense. But it has that wonderful look. It also has that kind of frothy, unctuous look.
- (laughter)
- CM-U: And so you didn't...
- W. Thiebaud: Trying to make it look like frosting.
- CM-U: Right, as a matter of fact.
- (laughter)
- CM-U: You didn't categorically varnish everything, is that right?
- W. Thiebaud: No, I didn't. It would depend a little bit maybe on how much of the medium was added, because sometimes that would, as you know, make it shiny, or make it glossy.

CM-U: By adding more of the Damar or more of the oil?

W. Thiebaud: Yeah.

CM-U: Um-hum.

W. Thiebaud: Um-hum.

CM-U: Hmm. Interesting.

**[00:06:20]**

CM-U: And then in the grounds, I remember your mentioning the white lead used with rabbitskin glue, I guess.

W. Thiebaud: Right.

CM-U: And you tend to prepare your own grounds? Or buy them prepared?

W. Thiebaud: Yes. At certain points. Although I'll also buy work pre-prepared. Lately, I've done a lot of work on panels...

CM-U: Hmm.

W. Thiebaud: ...and then they are gessoed with a sort of traditional gesso, and then \_\_\_\_\_ [phrase inaudible].

CM-U: Do you buy them gessoed already, or you do it yourself?

W. Thiebaud: Buy it readymade.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

W. Thiebaud: Um-hum.

CM-U: Um-hum. When you were using the white grounds with rabbitskin glue, is it a water-based white or lead white oil paint? I mean, what...

W. Thiebaud: Lead white oil paint.

CM-U: Um-hum. Oh, interesting. Yeah.



- W. Thiebaud: Yeah.
- CM-U: And what about...
- W. Thiebaud: We could only buy it at certain places after a certain point, I remember.
- CM-U: It's difficult, isn't it, when they change materials and...
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah.
- CM-U: I know. 'Cause you're used to getting a certain effect, and this can be very different.
- W. Thiebaud: Um-hum.
- CM-U: And have you normally used linen throughout the years?
- W. Thiebaud: Both. I used both linen and cotton duck.
- CM-U: Oh? Hmm. What made you choose one over the other?
- W. Thiebaud: I don't really know except maybe, uh, either maybe I didn't have enough money for linen at that point...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- W. Thiebaud: ...or – and certain points, we used sort of ir – what they call out in California, irrigation canvas.
- CM-U: Oh, what is that?
- W. Thiebaud: It's just a very big, tightly woven canvas that they use in irrigation to transfer water from one furrow to another. So it's a very stable kind of strong canvas. And I used some of that unprimed for the acrylic, the larger acrylic pictures. And they were like following Morris Louis with a stain method.
- CM-U: So it was kind of a more full-bodied fabric? So you required...
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah.
- CM-U: ...required a build-up of paint?

- W. Thiebaud: Um-hum.
- CM-U: It could withstand the build-up of paint?
- W. Thiebaud: Right. Yeah.
- CM-U: Yeah.
- W. Thiebaud: It's pretty substantial.
- CM-U: How interesting. Do you know if there are any paintings here in the exhibition that have it?
- W. Thiebaud: Yes. I think the *Coloma Ridge* [1967-68, Paul LeBaron Thiebaud]...
- CM-U: Oh, yeah, I was looking at that.
- W. Thiebaud: ...and the big diagonal [*Diagonal Ridge*, 1968, Courtesy of Allan Stone Gallery, New York]...
- CM-U: Fabulous.
- W. Thiebaud: ...with the – I think those are both that kind of canvas.
- CM-U: That's interesting, because there's a real different feel of the surface of those paintings. And I think that that might have to with that...
- W. Thiebaud: Yes, there is.
- CM-U: ...flatness of the support, maybe.
- W. Thiebaud: Maybe so.
- CM-U: As soon as I saw that, I wondered what that – interesting. And I was looking at *Grey City* [2000, Courtesy of LeBaron's Fine Art]. The newest one, I think; is it called *Grey City*?
- W. Thiebaud: Oh, yes.
- CM-U: Yeah. And I was looking at it, how the fabric is so much more visible, it seems. I mean, maybe it's that the paint is thinner...

W. Thiebaud: Ah.

CM-U: ...but the fabric seems to be more of a player in that painting than it is in some of your others.

W. Thiebaud: I'll have to look at it and see...

CM-U: (laughs) Okay, so it wasn't the most important thing on your mind?

W. Thiebaud: No.

(laughter)

W. Thiebaud: And – yes, I don't know what – that may have even been a prepared canvas \_\_\_\_\_ [word inaudible]...

CM-U: It looks like it. Looks...

W. Thiebaud: ...which may, would have been smoother, in fact.

CM-U: Yeah.

**[00:09:25]**

CM-U: Were you ever tempted to use the Magna Color that was so popular in the sixties? Or did...

W. Thiebaud: I didn't. I've never used them.

CM-U: Um-hum.

W. Thiebaud: People keep recommending them, and I – I should like to try them one time, particularly for – because I am an old teacher, I like to find out things for students. But that I haven't done. I've done quite a bit of work trying to figure out about things like acrylic, which still is a very odd medium for me. Particularly when you try to use it thickly, like oil paint. It's just not the same at all.

CM-U: It doesn't hold the form as well?

- W. Thiebaud: It doesn't hold the form. It changes color more drastically when it dries. You can get those nice furrows to stand up with the oil, but everything is round with the acrylic.
- CM-U: Um-hum. That's true. But they were designed to do that. Flatten out as they dry.
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah. Yeah. But then I've also tried those water-based oil paints.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- W. Thiebaud: Because a lot of students like to use those because they have trouble with the fumes. And those are another whole, strange thing, you know. I don't know – I don't know very much about them, but they certainly don't duplicate the oil with its regular viscosity and so on.
- CM-U: And probably don't hold the brush mark as well, do they? I mean, that's...
- W. Thiebaud: I think not. No.
- CM-U: That's so beautiful in your work, is the way that the feel of the brush is always apparent.
- W. Thiebaud: Oh, well. It's important in the sense of that age-old concept of the picture surface, and trying to make sure that people realize it's paint.
- CM-U: Hmm.
- W. Thiebaud: As opposed to sort of porcelain surfaces.
- CM-U: Right.
- W. Thiebaud: But on the other hand, when I saw the Vermeer show, I wish I could paint like that.
- (laughter)
- CM-U: I've heard you say that before. I know. They're pretty fantastic.
- W. Thiebaud: A wonder.
- CM-U: Have you had a chance since you've been here to go look?

W. Thiebaud: I did. I saw the Vermeer show when it was here. The Delft School [“Vermeer and the Delft School,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, March 8-May 27, 2001].

CM-U: Yeah.

W. Thiebaud: I didn’t see the original one that was in Washington.

CM-U: Uh-huh. Pretty amazing, it’s true.

W. Thiebaud: But I always go and pay an homage to that. Wherever they are.

CM-U: Well, you’re very generous in paying homage to your sources anyway, but I...

W. Thiebaud: Well, you art historians and conservators find out anyway.

CM-U: Well, I know.

W. Thiebaud: So I may as well.

CM-U: I suppose that’s true. You might as well admit it up front. Right.

(laughter)

**[00:11:54]**

CM-U: Let me see if there’s anything I specifically wanted to ask you. I noticed in some – like, if we think about the ’62 paintings, I noticed like in *The Bakery Counter* it’s very matte, whereas in *Toy Counter* it is very glossy. And you would say that part of that is probably attributable to your use of this medium or not?

W. Thiebaud: Right.

CM-U: Um-hum.

W. Thiebaud: And maybe varnishing as well.

CM-U: Uh-huh. And have you had problems over the years of people varnishing works of yours, that you didn’t intend to be varnished, in the process of restoration?

W. Thiebaud: I don't know about that, actually. I haven't had any dramatic experiences with that. So many times you don't see the picture again.

CM-U: Right.

W. Thiebaud: And some pictures that show up here, I haven't seen for forty years. And it's a little shocking to see some of those, and see what has happened to them.

CM-U: And have you seen some that come to mind that look very different to you, or as changed?

W. Thiebaud: There's one that's – yes, there is. There are two delicatessen pictures [*Delicatessen Counter (Bologna and Cheese)*, 1961; *Delicatessen Counter*, 1962, The Menil Collection, Houston], rather modest in size. They are similar, and I would like – I should look at the dates again – but one had a lot of painting underneath it, which now has been blanked out. And that was a very curious experience to see that, and to see in what way that blankness had changed. So I'd – I'll have to look at that again and see.

CM-U: We are going to go and look at that. I wanted to talk to you about the two delicatessen pictures. I assume they are both the same year, 1962.

W. Thiebaud: They are.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

W. Thiebaud: Ah.

CM-U: And I remember you were telling me about the one that you that I think you said was another design underneath it...

W. Thiebaud: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...that you think. Well, we can talk about that when we go in front of the paintings.

W. Thiebaud: All right.

CM-U: Okay. But I thought that was real interesting also.

**[00:13:45]**

- CM-U: What about the paper supports? The different papers you've chosen to use? Is there anything in particular...
- W. Thiebaud: I've used quite a few different kinds. Usually I try to isolate it with either a shellac or a gesso, or a varnish, so that – and paper, as you recognize painters will say, they love paper to work on as a surface for some reason.
- CM-U: Hmm.
- W. Thiebaud: But there's another paper that Saul Steinberg gave me, which is a German paper that's layered. It's three surfaces. The middle one is either a – he said a kind of either a plastic or a metallic center...
- CM-U: Huh!
- W. Thiebaud: ...so that the paper is then isolated in a whole different way.
- CM-U: Wow! So it's stronger probably. Dimensionally, more stable.
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah. And there's a painting here which has that, has used that paper. Maybe a couple of them.
- CM-U: Which? Can you think of which ones they are?
- W. Thiebaud: One is a rose in a box [*Boxed Rose*, 1984, Thiebaud Family Collection].
- CM-U: Oh, yeah. Sure.
- W. Thiebaud: And it's a very formidable paper.
- CM-U: And so it takes the paint in a different way, too, I would assume.
- W. Thiebaud: Yes. And it acts in a curious way. The buckling and so on. It's very hard to get it to lay down.
- CM-U: Oh, so it does just the opposite? I thought it would get more dimensionally stable.
- W. Thiebaud: You would think so. But it's a curious paper.
- CM-U: Huh.

- W. Thiebaud: I've tried to find it since. I used all the paper – he gave me, I think, three sheets, and I've used them all up, and I can't locate a source for it.
- CM-U: What appealed to you about it?
- W. Thiebaud: I think the fact that it had this layering.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- W. Thiebaud: And seemed then to be more substantive. That it would be more lasting.
- CM-U: Hmm. That's a really beautiful little work. Yeah, I also wanted to ask you about *Coloma Ridge*, since we were talking about it with the fabric. The mixture of media with it. I mean, I think it's both acrylic...
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah.
- CM-U: ...and pastel, is what our label reads. Is that...
- W. Thiebaud: Probably not a good idea, but...
- CM-U: No, it has held up beautifully.
- W. Thiebaud: ...couldn't resist it. It's – since that, I think there was another painting which unfortunately is not in the show, where I tried to imitate that with all acrylic. Staining first, and then working with more opaque, or strokes of acrylic. But I don't think there is any painting in this show like that, unfortunately.

**[00:16:12]**

- CM-U: So you're always experimenting then, really? I mean, is that kind of, mean...
- W. Thiebaud: Desperate. Desperate. (laughs)
- CM-U: Desperately experimenting. Coming very much out of your teaching? Or you just also from aesthetic need?
- W. Thiebaud: Some of that, yes. I really – teaching has always been very much a part of my life.
- CM-U: I know.



- W. Thiebaud: And I'm a kind of old-fashioned type teacher. And I try to get them grounded with very basic things. A lot of them run screaming from my classroom.
- CM-U: I doubt that.
- W. Thiebaud: Come to do art rather than painting. So...
- CM-U: So you do teach them very much, then, kind of ground-up technique that's not really available...
- W. Thiebaud: Pretty old-fashioned structural kind of procedures.
- CM-U: It's hard. It's not being taught widely. Even in my field, the conservators are not learning technique, which is our first step, because it's just not taught...
- W. Thiebaud: Ah.
- CM-U: ...very easily. So conservation schools are forced to do that, in which case what can we do?
- W. Thiebaud: That's sad to hear.
- CM-U: Yeah. Maybe there will be a swing back. And I keep hoping that that happens. The pendulum does swing, it seems.
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah.
- CM-U: I was interested in looking at some of the paintings about kind of the – or wondering, in what orientation you painted them. I see drips coming down the sides, and I don't know if that's more related to the application of the grounds, maybe, or the – would you paint upright?
- W. Thiebaud: Mostly upright, although I do turn the picture around an awful lot to look at it. And sometimes we'll work on it upside down. Or on its side.
- CM-U: Hmm.
- W. Thiebaud: Just to give it a different – you know, to get a different view or different take on it, trying to figure out what you can do. But I think the drips that you see maybe on the edge of the supports...
- CM-U: Um-hum.

W. Thiebaud: ...might be the result of the gessoing and the rabbitskin glue procedures.

CM-U: Um-hum.

W. Thiebaud: My son [Paul LeBaron Thiebaud] did a lot of those for me at one point.

CM-U: The preparation of the ground?

W. Thiebaud: Yeah.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

W. Thiebaud: And going through that traditional procedure. And sometimes I'll hire students to do it as well.

CM-U: Do you wash the canvases first, or do you not find that's necessary in this size?

W. Thiebaud: I don't.

CM-U: You don't?

W. Thiebaud: No.

CM-U: Um-hum.

W. Thiebaud: I usually stretch them – raw linen – and then apply the rabbitskin glue, a couple or three coats. And then the gesso, or the white lead, usually.

**[00:18:41]**

CM-U: Hmm. I can't help but notice and feel the kind of *alla prima* painting. I mean, it's just out there, and the application of the paint as you go through, and the thickness of the layers as well. And I'm really impressed that, over time, they've held up as well as they have, given their thickness. Because the thickness seems to have always been of interest to you in your application of them.

W. Thiebaud: There is that interest almost as a kind of bas relief aspect of the work, or the kind of mosaic aspect where you can – again, you continue always to remind others of that surface, that flatness.

- CM-U: That the surface is always in front of us...
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah.
- CM-U: ...coming in and going back.
- W. Thiebaud: Right.
- CM-U: And we are emerging in it at the same time.
- W. Thiebaud: Right.
- CM-U: Yeah.
- W. Thiebaud: But also, I think, the tactile aspect, that sort of physical characteristic, is always a kind of pleasure for me. It also gives you a chance to believe you're in the process of making, manufacturing the object or the thing a little bit. You can pretend that you are actually icing the cake, or that you are pushing on the form, or that you are feeling the surface of that machine, or you are heightening the metallic aspect of the gum ball machine, or the handle of the pin machine. You know. So there is that sort of playing with – a sense of reality transfer, a little bit. When I do a road, for instance, I really to like to think of it as going down it, or actually traversing it. Feeling its character. And if it's too clear, or too simplistic in its character, I'll draw over it with pencil or charcoal and then play with it with a kind of – a gel to encase the material in it a little bit. So, in a sense, sort of making a patina.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- W. Thiebaud: Or a sense of it having been used.
- CM-U: Um-hum. Is it always with a brush? Do you use a palette knife for your work?
- W. Thiebaud: I use sometimes palette knife. Sometimes the end of the brush. And sometimes, again, with charcoal or paint, and then fixing it or encasing it in a kind of glaze.
- CM-U: So the charcoal or the pastel acts in a certain way to kind of matte it out...
- W. Thiebaud: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...and then you seal it in some way?

W. Thiebaud: Right.

CM-U: And then move on with the paint around and above and around it.

W. Thiebaud: Right.

CM-U: Yeah. That's what I felt.

W. Thiebaud: Um-hum. Yeah.

**[00:21:40]**

CM-U: I was also interested in looking at other uses of the oil that you have, where, you know, you do the *Rabbit* – I mean, just have these very kind of, you know, very thin strokes. Oil seems so malleable in your hands that it can be both very smooth and very thin, and then very thick and very brush marked.

W. Thiebaud: Ah. But the *Rabbit* is as pastel...

CM-U: The *Rabbit* is not, in this case. But I was thinking...

W. Thiebaud: You're thinking about the oil *Rabbit*.

CM-U: Yeah.

W. Thiebaud: Yeah. It would be fun to see those two together. I don't think...

CM-U: It would be fun to see them.

W. Thiebaud: I don't think I've ever seen them together. Well, that is that, uh, the character, characterologic [sounds like], or the character of form – I think painting is interesting when there is as much variety as you can get to it, in the same way that you try to use every kind of visual process. You use the, say, a squint, and then a sharp focus, and then a peripheral kind of sense of vision. Even a kind of myopic. And then you try to get those to come together in some way so that the painting, hopefully, is enriched by that process. The wonderful thing about someone like Eakins, for instance, is, he'll build these almost models in paint; and you'll think, "God, he's just going to do everything so carefully..." And all of a sudden there'll be this funny, washy tree, or water,

way back. And it's so marvelous because you then are juxtaposing opposites, in a way...

CM-U: Um-hum.

W. Thiebaud: ...and it makes it all the more like life. It's much more involved. As opposed to a kind of simplistic visual recording, which is, I think, never very interesting, again, until it comes from Vermeer, and then he's a real fox, of course.

CM-U: But even at that, I mean, the basic is the human appreciation and the human spirit behind it.

W. Thiebaud: Yeah.

CM-U: It's not photography.

W. Thiebaud: (laughs) \_\_\_\_\_ [word inaudible]

CM-U: No, that's what's so wonderful.

W. Thiebaud: I'll say. Should say not.

**[Break in video]**

**[00:23:50]**

CM-U: I just wanted to talk a little bit about this picture, just because it kind of embodies what we were talking about with the additives in the paint, I think. Kind of building up...

W. Thiebaud: Uh-huh.

CM-U: Kind of building up with the impasto and the thickness of it. And I...

W. Thiebaud: Well, I started really sort of – at this point, most of the time they were started with these color lines, like drawing with a brush. And you can sort of see underneath some of the *pentimenti*, which is underneath...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

W. Thiebaud: ...and it usually starts fairly thin...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

W. Thiebaud: ...and then each color sort of becomes part of the drawing. It starts with a yellow, kind of a light yellow. And then a more orange yellow. So the palette is pretty much two yellows; two reds, warm and cool; two blues; and then a green and some ochre colors, and black and white. So there's an attempt to always get a sort of spectral range of the colors. It isn't so evident in these as it is in the later works, I think, like that.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

W. Thiebaud: But that's the way these started. So you see a lot of the drawing left...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

W. Thiebaud: ...and then, as they are applied over that, sometimes they get washed out. Sometimes they're just left.

CM-U: So the drawings would be put in in different color? In this painting [sounds like].

W. Thiebaud: Yeah. And then usually the drawing – sometimes you go back with a line, like these. A lot of it is sort of sequential in terms of its – like, underneath you can still see the original drawing of this, and the colors over it. So it's a pretty direct kind of series of sequences. Not much going back and fussing with it, at this point, at least.

CM-U: Um-hum.

**[00:25:56]**

W. Thiebaud: Quite a number of the pictures get these kind of things (points toward work) when...

CM-U: Yeah, I was going to...

W. Thiebaud: ...they have children with balls \_\_\_\_\_ [word inaudible].

CM-U: Oh.

W. Thiebaud: Balls get thrown against them.

- CM-U: Mechanical crackle. The human element again. Right.
- (laughter)
- CM-U: I've seen it here. We saw it on *Revue Girls* [*Revue Girl*, 1963, Robert S. Colman] as well.
- W. Thiebaud: That's right, yeah.
- CM-U: Have you had those – have you seen them treated in other ways [sounds like]?
- W. Thiebaud: I haven't. When they did the big *Cakes* ["The Icing on the Cake: Selected Prints by Wayne Thiebaud," Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, February 3-April 22, 2001] at Washington, they were in the process of working on that one. But it didn't have this. It had other things. I think having the painting been dropped on the corner...
- CM-U: Hmm.
- W. Thiebaud: ...in shipping. And there are these...
- CM-U: Diagonal cracks.
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah.
- CM-U: Yeah? Yeah. Is that the sort of damage that you've seen on your paintings? Mainly cracks?
- W. Thiebaud: Mostly that kind. Some kind, there – often if there is too much medium, you'll get a discoloration. I don't see it here, but I've seen it in some of the early things...
- CM-U: Like an oil stain or something? No.
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah. Sort of a brownish staining.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- W. Thiebaud: That I think comes from maybe not having a proper third, third, third, maybe. Or something. Maybe just too much of it, you know.

CM-U: I've seen what I think is a painting that's been lined, that has had another canvas put on the back to kind of minimize this cracking.

W. Thiebaud: Oh, yeah. Just on part of it, like a patch?

CM-U: Well, no, actually overall.

W. Thiebaud: Oh, the whole thing?

CM-U: The whole – overall. And I think that would be difficult on your work, given that the wonderful impasto, and also the variety of the stroke, where you come from something so matte to something shiny as you move your way up.

W. Thiebaud: Ah.

CM-U: So I'm happy I haven't seen much of that.

W. Thiebaud: That's what they said about the *Cakes* in Washington. They didn't want to reline it for that reason.

CM-U: Right.

W. Thiebaud: They thought it would just flatten it out.

CM-U: Right. And it would have. I'm sure it would have.

W. Thiebaud: Yeah.

CM-U: I mean, it's really remarkable, and wonderful, and a tribute to you, in how vital these works look still. Really.

W. Thiebaud: I've been pretty lucky, I guess.

CM-U: No, I think you've been more than lucky.

**[Break in video]**

**[00:27:55]**

CM-U: I think you told me this one [*Delicatessen Counter*, 1962, The Menil Collection, Houston] had a green underground. Does that sound right to you?



- W. Thiebaud: Ah, that's possible. That's very possible. Under here...
- CM-U: I remember remarking about...
- W. Thiebaud: ...under here, yeah.
- CM-U: ...yes, under here. I remember remarking about these vertical strokes.
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah. I think you're right. Yeah. And then these were painted after.
- CM-U: Yeah.
- W. Thiebaud: Yup.
- CM-U: I think that's what you told me.
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah.
- CM-U: You told me that...
- W. Thiebaud: That's right.
- CM-U: ...this hadn't – you didn't – this was just painted in and left.
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah.
- CM-U: That this was dark green...
- W. Thiebaud: That's right.
- CM-U: ...and something here. And then you changed your mind.
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah. That's the one.
- CM-U: Has...
- W. Thiebaud: Now the other one, I don't know about. That's a puzzle now. 'Cause I had somehow confused the two of them, I think. But I thought at one point there was something underneath here. But it doesn't look like there's anything there, does it?
- CM-U: It looks awfully straight and even.

- W. Thiebaud: Yeah. I'm afraid I've made a misjudgment.
- CM-U: This looks pretty straight. And actually looks as thinly applied. The layering looks similar to what's above.
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah, it does. It looks pretty – yeah. Well, I think that's – and the other thing that makes me believe it is, that these things here...
- CM-U: Now why is that?
- W. Thiebaud: Almost like part of the structure...
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- W. Thiebaud: ...you know, of the case. So I didn't have anything in here. This is a result of thinking about that as the sort of coming down like meat counters...
- CM-U: Right.
- W. Thiebaud: ...the way they do.
- CM-U: Yes. Right. That makes sense to me. What about the color of this? This white is noticeably less white than the other delicatessen counter. That's the way it was painted?
- W. Thiebaud: I think probably it is just a dirtier white.
- CM-U: Um-hum. I mean, originally.
- W. Thiebaud: I don't – yeah. I don't think – I think a lot of the whites were different in character during this period of time.
- CM-U: Oh, you're just saying this would have been just another tube of it. I mean, just a different – or you would have mixed, probably mixed it...
- W. Thiebaud: Well, I had a big pile of it. You know, I always had big piles of it that were a width – so I think sometimes dipping into it, and then mixing another pot of it, that it may have just changed. But I may have also wanted a nuanced change.
- CM-U: Um-hum. I can certainly see that, especially with regard to the other colors...
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah.

- CM-U: ...the other whites in it. It's wonderful. It looks absolutely wonderful.
- W. Thiebaud: Hmm.
- CM-U: And your signatures are usually in pencil, kind of dragged through [sounds like]?
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah. Um-hum.
- CM-U: Um-hum. Um-hum. How does it look to you?
- W. Thiebaud: (laughs)
- CM-U: You didn't think I was going to give you all the easy questions.
- W. Thiebaud: I should tell you that I'm not too fond of my own work.
- CM-U: (laughs)
- W. Thiebaud: Would that be...
- CM-U: Well, I meant in terms of physical characteristics.  
(laughter)
- W. Thiebaud: I see. Well, it looks like it held up pretty well. It looks – I was wondering if this has been, I think, glazed over that? Or if that was just some stuff in there. It looks a little like it was glazed over or something, doesn't it?
- CM-U: You mean another color put on top? Like in the glaze in there.
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah.
- CM-U: Yeah, it does kind of...
- W. Thiebaud: Trying to get it, maybe, to match a little closer. I don't know.
- CM-U: Uh-huh. I see it in here, too.
- W. Thiebaud: But this is a very Cubist kind of thing, trying to keep these planes always fairly immediate.

- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- W. Thiebaud: So in that sense, it – the biggest problem is the volume that you try to keep planal [sounds like], and that’s always a fascinating contradiction.
- CM-U: It is.
- W. Thiebaud: So that thing sort of bothers me there. If I had cut it, maybe...
- CM-U: It has too much volume for you?
- W. Thiebaud: Yes.
- CM-U: Yeah. You wanted it to – yeah.
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah. Fortunately it’s held down with this flying buttress or whatever.
- (laughter)
- CM-U: Yeah.
- W. Thiebaud: Looks a little dirty on the top. I don’t know; maybe it’s...
- CM-U: We did attempt a little surface cleaning of this.
- W. Thiebaud: Did you?
- CM-U: And I think it’s just the colors...
- W. Thiebaud: Just the color itself, yeah. That’s very – probably true.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- [00:32:39]**
- CM-U: Let’s go back and take a look at some of the...
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah.
- CM-U: ...some of the others as we move along. I wanted to ask you about this one [*Candy Counter*, 1962, Collection of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson],

too. Not that I, you know, totally expect memory; but it seems that there's a darker tone that kind of got brushed into here. Darker gray.

W. Thiebaud: Hmm. Well, I think – yeah, there is some of that. I think – again, to try and get a distinction between this and that plane a bit.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

W. Thiebaud: In the same way, this is slightly darker than the background, indicating a kind of glass, or different environment, let's say, for these than that.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

W. Thiebaud: So I remember consciously remembering that, to try to get a distinction between these – some sort of subtle distinction between these two, so that it gave a kind of enclosure idea.

CM-U: Makes perfect sense. And works. This is also very matte compared to the one we were just looking at.

W. Thiebaud: It is. And I think that's the result of that additive we talked about. That ZEC™. I had a friend who I taught with at Davis, Roland Peterson...

CM-U: Um-hum.

W. Thiebaud: ...do you know his work? And he is the one that introduced me to ZEC™.

CM-U: How do you spell ZEC™?

W. Thiebaud: Z-E-C.

CM-U: Is it Z-E-C, just the way it sounds?

W. Thiebaud: Yeah.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

W. Thiebaud: And as a result, he got so excited because he was doing a research project on Maroger, finding out how he made his. And Grumbacher promised him that this was a good example of that, or a counterpart. So he ordered it in 50-gallon drums...

CM-U: (laughing) My word!

W. Thiebaud: ...and asked me if I would help...

CM-U: Want to share some?

W. Thiebaud: So he gave me a big pickle jar full of – and that's when I started using it.

CM-U: And that would have been around in '61...

W. Thiebaud: Sixty.

CM-U: ... '61? Sixties?

W. Thiebaud: Yeah. I think it started even in – as late as early as '59, '60, maybe.

CM-U: And it also made the paint dry faster, is that right?

W. Thiebaud: Yeah, it did.

CM-U: Yeah. So that was an advantage, yeah.

W. Thiebaud: That's right.

**[00:34:49]**

CM-U: I'm really impressed by what perfect plane the pictures have stayed in, given the weight of the paint. You know, so many canvases that are not prepared in a certain way would have tended to sag, especially along the stretcher bars.

W. Thiebaud: Yeah.

CM-U: And I haven't seen that in your work. And I suspect it's attributable to the ground you described, the rabbitskin glue and then build up.

W. Thiebaud: Do you also want to talk about that irrigation canvas?

CM-U: Yes. Yes. Can we do that?

W. Thiebaud: Sure. This [*Coloma Ridge*] is the one with the pastel and the Morris Louis staining. And that canvas is the one that was called irrigation canvas.

- CM-U: Well, look at the beautiful smooth – I mean, you really get a very – of course I guess that’s as much related to your ground as anything else.
- W. Thiebaud: It’s got quite a bit of nubbing, but...
- CM-U: Yeah.
- W. Thiebaud: ...it’s not bothersome, I don’t think.
- CM-U: Nuh-uh. Is it a cotton fabric primarily?
- W. Thiebaud: Um-hum.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah.
- CM-U: And then the pastel takes very well to it as well.
- W. Thiebaud: It seemed to.
- CM-U: Yeah. And so now have you – you told me that you interlayer. So you’ve sealed this in some way, this pastel.
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah. Just with fixative.
- CM-U: Um-hum. You just spray it on?
- W. Thiebaud: I use that – oh, Jack Beal told me that he thought Weber Fixative was the best.
- CM-U: Yeah.
- W. Thiebaud: So I used that.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- W. Thiebaud: Now it’s hard to get. I can’t find it.
- CM-U: That’s the problem. These things come and go.
- W. Thiebaud: Yeah.

- CM-U: Just when you get used to using something, and you've learned how to use it well, they move on. And so the acrylic is kind of painted in, around, mixed in. How was it...
- W. Thiebaud: It was painted first actually.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- W. Thiebaud: Most of it was acrylic first, and then on top of that was put the pastel.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- W. Thiebaud: And charcoal. Charcoal and pastel.
- CM-U: It's beautiful, absolutely. And it's in such beautiful condition.
- W. Thiebaud: It was taken from a little painting, done on the spot in Coloma, about this big. And then the format was slightly different. But I used that as a sort of model for a while, and then made the bigger one.
- W. Thiebaud: And this one [*Diagonal Ridge*] is all acrylic, as far as I – although I'm not – I better look and make sure. I thought it was. No, it looks like it's got pastel, too. Yeah.
- CM-U: I'm not sure. Does it? Yeah, yeah, it...
- W. Thiebaud: It looks like it does have pastel, yeah.
- CM-U: I think it does. I can tell in here [sounds like].
- W. Thiebaud: Oh, and sometimes, I remember putting pastels, like here, and then washing over it with acrylic.
- CM-U: I noticed on *Coloma* these kind of vertical bands, and I thought maybe that had to do with washing over.
- W. Thiebaud: It might have been. Yeah, it might very well have been.
- [00:37:57]**
- W. Thiebaud: Originally, these were painted tacked on a wall.



CM-U: Oh, I'm glad you mentioned that.

W. Thiebaud: Yeah.

CM-U: I forgot to ask you that.

W. Thiebaud: That's right.

CM-U: Do you tend to paint on the wall, as opposed to stretched...

W. Thiebaud: Usually not. But these big ones were put on a wall and painted on the wall, and then stretched after.

CM-U: So you got this very smooth surface, in that way...

W. Thiebaud: Yeah.

CM-U: ...to press against something hard as you were working.

W. Thiebaud: Right. Exactly. Um-hum.

CM-U: Where did you get your stretchers?

W. Thiebaud: My what?

CM-U: Did you have stretchers made for you? Or did you...

W. Thiebaud: Yes. Um-hum.

CM-U: Is there a stretcher maker in California?

W. Thiebaud: Uh, they were just students, I think.

CM-U: Uh-huh?

W. Thiebaud: And then I think Allan [Stone] stretched some of them.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

W. Thiebaud: I'd send them back rolled up, and he got them stretched back here. Allan Stone. You know him, don't you?

- CM-U: Sure. Um-hum.
- W. Thiebaud: So I think that's probably what this was. Because that's not my frame either. So I think Allan must have done that.
- CM-U: Do you have a feeling about frames, one way or the other, about...
- W. Thiebaud: I think the best ones are the ones you don't notice, maybe. (laughs)
- CM-U: Right. The ones that go away. So we can stay focused on the work.
- W. Thiebaud: Yes.
- CM-U: Well, thank you. This has been really super.
- W. Thiebaud: Oh, you're very welcome.
- CM-U: I really appreciate...
- W. Thiebaud: Thank you for your interest.
- CM-U: ...your spending the time. Thank you.
- W. Thiebaud: Pleasure.

**[END RECORDING]**