

# VAN DOREN WAXTER

## Diebenkorn in Between

By David Littlejohn | July 17, 2013

*San Francisco*

The career of Richard Diebenkorn (1922-1993) famously divides into three parts: In his early maturity he was an Abstract Expressionist; from the early 1950s to the mid '60s he worked in a style that combined elements of figuration and abstraction; in his final three decades he embraced abstraction wholeheartedly in the famous "Ocean Park" series, works that form the basis of so much of his reputation today. The de Young Museum has now organized "Richard Diebenkorn: The Berkeley Years, 1953-1966," a show, curated by Timothy Burgard and Stephen Nash, that redirects attention to this middle phase in a survey of nearly 150 paintings and works on paper.



The Richard Diebenkorn Foundation

'Recollections of a Visit to Leningrad' (1965).

After drawing and painting during his college years at Stanford in a realistic style that recalls the work of Edward Hopper, Diebenkorn adopted the ruling mode of Abstract Expressionism during his next 10 years, as an art student and instructor at art schools and universities in Berkeley, San Francisco, Albuquerque and Urbana, Illinois. It was a style that extended into his first two years back in Berkeley, to which he and his family returned in 1953. But in the mellow, carefully composed abstractions of those first two years back home, one can sense a growing presence of landscape. Many of his early Berkeley abstracts divide into aerially viewed bands of land, sea and sky, with rectangles that could be rural or urban tracts divided by white or blue lines one may read as roads or rivers.

One day late in 1955, while out driving in a nearby East Bay suburb, Diebenkorn spotted a house and decided to paint it. "Chabot Valley" (1955) shows the house not as a deformed

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abstraction, or a blue rectangle "based" on it, but as it appeared to his eye, with its windows and roofline, neighboring rooftops, green hills at the skyline, a blue-and-gray sky above. He later told an interviewer that the decision was made "entirely on the spot." A few touches—a long, yellow line above the house and a flat, red triangle below it, the paint freely and loosely applied—remind us that he wasn't really a "realist." But for the next 11 years, there was no turning back: Clement Greenberg and the other "Ab-Ex Rules" New York critics be damned, he was going to paint houses, landscapes, still lifes, interiors and people.

When Diebenkorn made the leap to recognizable land- and city-scapes (although these were all studio creations, a blend of memory and imagination), he maintained the satisfyingly structured compositions, the fieldlike patches of color and the freely stroked layers of paint of his abstract years. "Seawall" (1957) and "Cityscape I" (1963) represent an almost ideal coming together of his two styles. In each case, the right half of the painting represents the natural landscape expressed as pure paint; the left is an exquisite composition of the works of man. The roads that divide them (Highway 1 heading north in "Seawall"; in "Cityscape I" the kind of steep San Francisco street that Wayne Thiebaud would later take up) are mystical creations of the artist's.

Having put aside pure abstraction for a decade, Diebenkorn rediscovered some of its best qualities in interiors. One angle of his studio ("Interior With Doorway," 1962) is a minor masterpiece. An open door on the left pulls light into a darkened blue room. Outside the narrow door is a sunlit sidewalk, an empty street, a gas station across the street. Inside, the open door casts a line of pale light across the dark floor and onto the seat of a folding chair.

The prize interior-exterior is "Recollections of a Visit to Leningrad" (1965). It commemorates a trip Diebenkorn and his wife, Phyllis, made to Leningrad and Moscow to see the Matisse there. This flawless 6-by-7-foot painting is divided between a dark blue, semiabstract rectangle of room, with a white panel of floral spirals in the upper center suggestive of a curtain or windowshade on the left, and an open door or window on the right that reveals a flat pattern of tan beach, green lawn, blue sea and sky—all set diagonally—to contrast with the dark rectangularity of the room.

Other interiors depict corners of his studio, or domestic still lifes—heavily painted coffee cups, ashtrays, place settings, scissors and scattered papers that just happened to be there, as well as a precisely posed jar of orange poppies on a black table, a perfectly positioned knife in a glass of water. Interiors also served as an excuse to draw land- and city-scapes through large imaginary windows in the manner of Henri Matisse.

In the best works of this last group he includes a solid, anonymous, pensive woman, either looking toward or away from the spreading horizontal vista visible through glass walls sharply divided by vertical mullions. (There are also two self-portraits of the artist sketching his wife in an empty room.) "Woman in Profile" (1958) and "Woman by the Ocean" (1956) are especially fine.

Elsewhere, Diebenkorn would dispense with the window and place the woman outside on a porch or sitting in a chair or on the sand, with the same near-abstract horizontal areas and bands of tan, gray, green, blue—and in one stunning case, orange-yellow—around her.

Diebenkorn could be a perceptive, sympathetic painter of a woman alone, either dressed (as 15 are here) or nude (18), in works sometimes intentionally left unfinished. Most of the nudes are in charcoal, their subjects' limbs twisted and writhing. The clothed women seem more

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sympathetic and moving, particularly "Untitled" of the early 1960s and "Seated Woman With Head in Hand" (1966)—both probably of his wife.

These works here from 1955 to 1966 include many of the best from the peak of Diebenkorn's career, when he mastered the art of combining abstraction and figuration as had no artist since Paul Cézanne. The Ocean Park series was what he needed and wanted to do next, perhaps inspired in part by his new home in Santa Monica. But what a lot of human content he had to abandon to achieve its minimalist geometrical purity.

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