

The New Criterion

Pieces of Ocean Park

by Amy Beth Wright | February 3, 2020

Tracing six of Diebenkorn's works on paper to their origins in the south of France, 1978.

For many years, it was thought that Richard Diebenkorn did little to no work on his Ocean Park series outside of California. By that stage of his career, the argument went, considerable productivity outside of the habit-driven clockwork structure Diebenkorn had created in his Santa Monica studio was highly improbable. Aside from intimate landscape sketches, often views from the homes of close friends, few finished drawings from Diebenkorn's travels in this period have survived. And yet, newly located archival material—letters and photographs from 1978 and 1979—has turned the presumption that Diebenkorn only created consequential work from the Ocean Park period in California on its head.

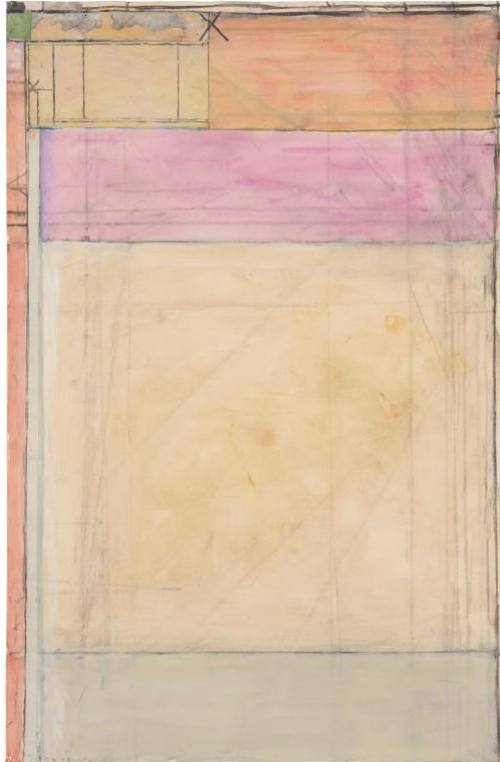
Here is the story: In 1945, while stationed in Honolulu, Diebenkorn met fellow Marine Bill Davenport at a public library. The two formed a lifelong friendship, explains Daisy Murray Holman, the Head of Archives at the Richard Diebenkorn Foundation. Roselle, Bill's wife, was also an artist. More than thirty years later, in 1978, during a four-month visit to the Davenport home in Régusse, Provence, Diebenkorn worked in Roselle's studio. Gerald Nordland, a scholar and friend of Diebenkorn and the author of Rizzoli's 1993 *Richard Diebenkorn*, once suggested that the artist destroyed all of the works made from this particular time because the light, Diebenkorn reportedly felt, "was too French."



A 1978 photo of Roselle Davenport's studio in Régusse, Provence, featuring a number of works considered part of the Ocean Park series. © Richard Diebenkorn Foundation, courtesy of the Davenport Family.

But Kay Davenport, the daughter-in-law of Bill and Roselle Davenport, recently shared a sizable file of archival materials with the Richard Diebenkorn Foundation, putting into motion a sequence of connections that led to, in Holman's words, "one of those moments where things click into focus."

Within Davenport's file were three photographs of Roselle's studio, taken during the Diebenkorn's 1978 visit. Before, the foundation had known of just one photo. The new images included six additional Ocean Park works, all of which also appear in photographs of Diebenkorn's studio wall in Santa Monica in 1979. Holman notes that the 1978 works created in Provence employ Ocean Park tropes—an arch, lines painted over in gouache, stripes of color along the upper edge, washy areas of pastel and primary colors varying in density, and the “scaffolding” nature of the lines across the paper. One meaningful revelation was that the painting used to illustrate the cover of the new 2019 Rizzoli monograph, *Richard Diebenkorn: A Retrospective*, was begun in Roselle's studio in 1978—a fact not known when the work was selected. After scrutinizing the new photographs from Kay Davenport and combing the foundation's database, Holman and her colleagues discovered that Diebenkorn, after returning from France, reworked the upper section of the drawing entirely (painting over, for instance, a blue triangle and introducing a series of horizontal and vertical charcoal marks). The photographs suggest that, contrary to what had previously been assumed, “wherever he was, Ocean Park existed,” said Holman.



Richard Diebenkorn, Untitled, 1978, Acrylic, charcoal, crayon, and pasted paper on joined paper. An earlier version of the work is visible in the 1978 photo of the Davenport studio above. © Richard Diebenkorn Foundation

Of the Ocean Park series, and in regard to place, John Elderfield writes in the catalogue to the moma's 1988 exhibition “The Drawings of Richard Diebenkorn”:

Much has been written about how the geometry of this series refers to the beach architecture of that part of Santa Monica. What is most striking about such a comparison, however, is just how unlike that environment the Ocean Park works are. As Susan Larsen has observed: “Nowhere in Ocean Park, a crowded but affable district of small shops, apartments, and older residential buildings, will one find the towering vertical planes, sweeping diagonal thrusts of color, and calligraphic interstices typical of Diebenkorn's paintings; that sensibility belongs to the artist who brought it with him when he came here.”

The discovery that Diebenkorn created, or at least began, seven Ocean Park works while abroad is a tiny key to the understanding that, per Elderfield, “The relationships, not the decipherable elements, embody the true internal subject of the work and describe underlying preferences about the very shape of reality.” Put simply, what matters most are the specific formal relationships within the works themselves, rather than a supposed external link to the observed California landscape.



Richard Diebenkorn, *Untitled*, 1978, Gouache, graphite, and charcoal on paper. © Richard Diebenkorn Foundation

Jane Livingston, the author of Diebenkorn's *catalogue raisonné* (Yale University Press, 2016), estimates that Diebenkorn created approximately 5,500 works in his lifetime, including an enormous number of works on paper of various sizes—notebooks, sketchbooks, collaged paper, and private works—that he never signed and never dated. The catalogue raisonné defied easy chronological sequencing, she recalls, whereby work might be “juxtaposed in ways that begin to seem inevitable, almost dictated by the artist.” In a March 2017 talk at the San Francisco Art Institute, she explained: “In a lifetime of dealers, sales, and the ordinary chaos of anyone’s life, works get scattered, works get lost, and works certainly get separated from one another.”

But, she noted, there might be another reason for the chronological ambiguities: Diebenkorn’s inclination towards “always [giving] himself the option to return to a work.” Elderfield likens Diebenkorn to Cézanne, noting their shared “model of hermetic perfection that makes each work a long and painful struggle to produce.” Commenting on Diebenkorn’s process, Elderfield describes the Ocean Park works as “composed additively, in which Diebenkorn builds networks of relationships, cancels relationships that do not seem meant, and where the indefinite gradually concedes to the definite.” As the Davenport photographs of Diebenkorn’s Provence studio attest, the evolution of a painting could span both years and continents.



Richard Diebenkorn, Untitled, 1978, Gouache, acrylic, and crayon on joined paper. © Richard Diebenkorn Foundation

If the work of an archivist and foundation is to augment an artist's legacy and encourage the continued appreciation of his work, every facet of the timeline is essential. "It reinforces our understanding," Holman notes, "of the way in which he would move throughout his space, a private space where he really did not have many people visit and that was very separate from his home. He would put the works up and move them around over and over again until things would click." She adds that Diebenkorn was reticent to describe what that particular "click" moment was like. Livingston similarly characterizes Diebenkorn's process as elusive, citing the brevity of his studio notes. Far from an explanation, these notes are merely another clue to place alongside imagery, letters, photographs, and recorded habits, routines, and rituals to get a sense of Diebenkorn's artistic practice. Kay Davenport's newly disclosed photographs testify to how the story of a person's life, and the impact of its legacy, is never fully resolved.