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Great Works, In Focus
Perspective

Shadows and slanted light

There may be no more beautiful painting of California than this 1963 work by Richard Diebenkorn

By Sebastian Smee July 7, 2020



Richard Diebenkorn, Cityscape #1, 1963, oil on canvas, 60 ¼ x 50 ½ inches

A fair proportion of the early and midcareer work of Richard Diebenkorn feels wonderful, fresh, better than most things around it, yet not quite indisputably great. At a certain point, however, something happens and — *ka-pow!* — you look back and it's suddenly *all* great, you can't get enough. It's as if your clammy, goose-fleshed body has stepped in to a hot, high-pressure shower after 10 days on a foggy mountain trail.

And perhaps because you sense, as you look at the breakthrough work, that it has a complicated history — that it's the result of years of fumbling rehearsal, endless revision and constant correction — almost all the work that leads up to it is retroactively folded into its nimbus of greatness, like whipped egg whites into a cake mixture, and you just think, “Oh, my God, I totally love Richard Diebenkorn.”

(I think I am describing many people's experience. But if it is just my own, I apologize.)

The great part begins in 1968, when Diebenkorn starts painting his "Ocean Park" series — stately, abstract evocations of the intersections of buildings, beach, sea and sky in Santa Monica, Calif. But there are many ravishing things in Diebenkorn's oeuvre before this. And one of them — perhaps the finest — is "Cityscape #1," which he painted in 1963 and which hangs in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Diebenkorn's attention to the emotional as well as the perceptual effects of slanting light and colored shadow shares a lot with Edward Hopper. (One day I'd love to see an exhibition that demonstrates their affinity.)

The "Ocean Park" paintings are abstract. Their broad swaths of denim blues and sandy yellows are subdivided near the edges into smaller and smaller rectangles, like plots of land on a third-generation estate. "Cityscape #1," on the other hand, depicts a view: a hilly, California road lined with houses on one side and a patchwork of fields on the other. There is a clear horizon line. On the left, low-slung buildings — some flashing bright local color — cast long shadows, implying a light source and, since that source is obviously the sun, a time of day.

And yet the picture — so fresh and redolent of California space and light — has a strikingly flat look, thanks to the high horizon and the fact that both foreground and background have steep inclines, tilting them toward the picture plane, and eliding a dip in the middle.

It's as if — like one of Hopper's empty hotel rooms catching lozenges of pastel-colored morning light — the painting secretly longs to be abstract. And it's why some of the internal details anticipate the austere geometries of the "Ocean Park" paintings.

A big part of any artistic breakthrough is dumb luck. But luck sprouts out of continual striving. Everything Diebenkorn did was hard won. And this painting, made in the year of John F. Kennedy's assassination and five years before the "Ocean Park" breakthrough, is no exception. Like Matisse, Diebenkorn's artistic true north, the artist embraced obstacles. He knew that erasing and correcting were as creatively fecund as the vaunted "first rush of inspiration."

"I want painting to be difficult to do," he once said. Three years after painting "Cityscape," Diebenkorn began compiling a list of artistic intentions. No. 3 was: "Do search. But in order to find other than what is searched for." No. 6: "Somehow, don't be bored — but if you must, use it in action. Use its destructive potential." No. 10: "Be careful only in a perverse way."

I like to imagine Diebenkorn standing before an unfinished canvas, toying with these crunchy phrases, then picking up his brush — or better yet, his palette knife — carefully and perversely to scrape the paint back.