

VAN DOREN WAXTER

Richard Diebenkorn

Figures and Faces

May 2 – June 28, 2024



Richard Diebenkorn in the Stanford Studio, Stanford University, Palo Alto, Calif., 1963.
Photograph by Leo Holub, Courtesy Estate of Leo Holub

“With the small paintings of heads, I would like the expression of the whole surface to be felt as the nature of the subject’s character (as opposed to the facial expression and the facial form presenting the character).” – Richard Diebenkorn

Van Doren Waxter is pleased to announce *Richard Diebenkorn: Faces and Figures* on view from May 2 to June 28, 2024 at the gallery’s 1907 townhouse at 23 East 73rd Street. Organized with the Richard Diebenkorn Foundation, the exhibition includes a sweep of taut, psychologically complex portraits made during the distinguished American painter, draftsman, and printmaker’s mature representational period, an output that Jane Livingston, writing in the artist’s catalogue raisonné, remarks “exceeds in number that of almost every other group of drawings and paintings he made, even in the prolific Ocean Park period.” The artist has been represented by Van Doren Waxter since its founding 25 years ago in 1999, with the gallery’s inaugural exhibition devoted to his paintings from his epic Ocean Park cycle.

The presentation includes seven paintings and fourteen works on paper made by the artist between 1955 and 1967, including a rare acrylic painted on a 1964 poster promoting the artist’s drawing exhibition at Stanford University Art Gallery that year. A must-see for aficionados of Richard Diebenkorn, the show marks the first time his rarely seen *Two Nudes*, 1960—a beguiling, seven foot tall oil that anticipates the scale of the monumental Ocean Park abstractions he would begin in 1967—has been on view in 60 years. “A meandering blue background,” enthuses art historian Stephanie Lebas Huber in the show’s accompanying essay, “sculpts the figural pair by cutting into the flesh-tones with layers of blue, in some cases even defining their bodies with a contour line of the same hue.” Huber writes that Henri Matisse’s “long-standing influence over Diebenkorn’s color palette and subject matter is evident,” noting that he began looking at the painter in the 1940s during trips to the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. and had viewed a 1952 Matisse retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Art that included his hero’s coloristic *Male Model*, c. 1900 and the sublime *The Dance*, 1909.



Girl with Glasses (CR no 3358), 1963, oil on canvas, 14 3/4 x 10 7/8 in (37.5 x 27.6 cm)

A young Richard Diebenkorn and his family returned from living in the southwest, midwest, and briefly, New York City, to California in 1953, which “allowed the artist to see with fresh eyes a familiar structure that centered itself on a perpetual state of becoming,” writes Huber, “...the flicker of an eye, or the turn of a nose drawn from the immediacy of his intuitive brushwork.” In the enigmatic 1963 oil, *Girl with Glasses*, which was most recently reproduced in the monograph *Richard Diebenkorn: A Retrospective* (Rizzoli, 2019), “the subject’s helmet-like mass of hair is lacquered in a grey glaze; her black lenses are blotted out by an abbreviated reflection.” The artist’s indelible figures from this period “stand behind masks,” Huber suggests, but “occasionally the figure penetrates the mask,” as in the 1958 canvas *Head (Portrait of a Friend)*, in which “the sitter’s eyes appear open and accessible beneath a shelf of violet; the mask seems to be coming loose, no longer integral to the face.”



David Park on a Hot Day (CR no. 2083), 1956, oil on canvas, 13 3/4 x 17 in (34.9 x 43.2 cm)

A glowing portrait of *David Park on a Hot Day*, 1956, was painted a year after he and the Bay Area Figurative legend formed a weekly drawing session from the live model. “A sun that is felt but not seen cuts through the fog,” Huber asserts of the oil. “The atmospheric temporality transforms Park, bleaching the sitter’s torso.” In his lifetime, Richard Diebenkorn remarked of his close friend, “he was the complete painter, besides which he had a first rate mind—critically, intellectually, ethically—and he had a strong, if quirky, sense of and appreciation for people which begins to explain his power with human figures.”

The exhibition includes several arresting examples of the artist's nudes, a subject matter so relentless for the artist that Livingston in the catalogue raisonné described him as "tireless, exhaustive, in his life drawing of the human body." An emotionally charged and visually electric charcoal and ink on paper (c. 1955–67) depicts a female nude figure seated on a chair with a leg crossed, and prefigures the lyrical geometry that is to come in the artist's eventual return to abstraction.

An enduring partnership

The widow of Richard Diebenkorn, the late Phyllis Diebenkorn, entrusted the stewardship of the artist's legacy to the gallery in 1999. Then Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren, the gallery's inaugural exhibition, *Richard Diebenkorn: Ocean Park Paintings*, took place at its former home at 730 Fifth Avenue. John Van Doren and Dorsey Waxter later formed Van Doren Waxter on the piano nobile of a converted historic townhouse at 23 East 73rd Street designed to privilege art and the viewing experience. Together with the family of the artist and ultimately, the Richard Diebenkorn Foundation, Van Doren Waxter has contributed to the study and understanding of the artist through a twenty-five year arc of exhibitions, programs, and fresh scholarship of every period, medium, and body of work. More recently in 2020, the gallery mounted an exhibition devoted to the artist's early stylistic and technical origins in oil, watercolor, gouache, ink, crayon, and collage that had never been shown in the Northeast and served as host for the debut of the artist's monograph, *Richard Diebenkorn: A Retrospective* (Rizzoli, 2019). And with a special loan of archival material from the Foundation, a sumptuous retrospective of the artist's work on paper took place during Diebenkorn's centennial celebration across all floors of the gallery that included rarely seen drawings evincing his love of mark marking and use of paper as a medium.

About the artist

Richard Diebenkorn was born in Portland, Oregon in 1922. He attended Stanford University from 1940 to 1943 and was awarded his Bachelor of Arts in 1949. He studied at the University of California, Berkeley in 1943 and attended California School of Fine Arts in 1946. He received his Master of Arts from the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque in 1951. The artist's earliest abstractions were made while he lived in Sausalito, California (1946–1949), Albuquerque (1950–1952) and Urbana, Illinois (1952–1953). In 1953 he moved to Berkeley, continuing his work in abstraction. The year 1955 marks the beginning of a period of more than a decade that the artist worked from direct observation making figurative works from a model, along with still lifes, landscapes, and interiors. From 1966 to 1988 he lived in Santa Monica, taught at the University of California, Los Angeles from 1966 to 1973, and began his Ocean Park cycle in 1967. He moved to Healdsburg, California in 1988 where he worked exclusively on drawings and prints until his death in 1993.

Recent museum exhibitions include *Richard Diebenkorn: The Sketchbooks Revealed* (2015–2016), Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University; *Matisse/Diebenkorn* (2016–2017), organized by the Baltimore Museum of Art and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and *Richard Diebenkorn: Beginnings, 1942–1955* (2017–2019), organized by the Richard Diebenkorn Foundation in Berkeley in conjunction with the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, which traveled to David Owsley Museum of Art, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana; Portland Art Museum, Oregon; Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art, Pepperdine University, Malibu, California; and Academy Art Museum, Easton, Maryland.

Richard Diebenkorn: The Catalogue Raisonné (Yale University Press), the definitive resource of the artist's sketches; drawings; paintings on paper, board, canvas; and sculptural objects, was published in 2016. Forthcoming in 2025, *Richard Diebenkorn: The Catalogue Raisonné of Prints* (Yale University Press) will be the first comprehensive examination of the artist's printmaking output spanning 1946 to 1992.

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