

The New York Times

Art in Review
By Roberta Smith
June 25, 2010

RICHARD DIEBENKORN: Paintings and Works on Paper, 1949-1955

Greenberg Van Doren Gallery
730 Fifth Avenue, at 57th Street

RICHARD DIEBENKORN
'Richard Diebenkorn in Context: 1949-1952'

Leslie Feely Fine Art
33 East 68th Street, Manhattan

The strength and originality of Richard Diebenkorn's early work was driven home by the exhibition "Diebenkorn in New Mexico," at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University in 2008. Now two shows — one quirky, one lavish — expand upon this period, providing additional glimpses of an artist who learned from nature while keeping abreast of the latest developments in abstraction, assimilating everything with a fluid drawing ability that moved effortlessly from calligraphic to cartoonish and beyond.

"Richard Diebenkorn in Context: 1949-1952" at Leslie Feely considers somewhat unclearly Diebenkorn's affinities with various East Coast Abstract Expressionists. Along with 15 Diebenkorns, mostly gouaches and ink drawings, it includes works by Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston and others.

One of several Diebenkorn surprises is an untitled and unfussy painting from 1949 that resembles an orange punching bag. Another is "Albuquerque 22" (1951), its crackled white-cream surface sparsely punctuated with a few black lines, an asterisk and a small rectangle that evokes Cy Twombly or Robert Rauschenberg (neither of whom is represented). It hangs next to Robert Motherwell's "In the Summer Sun," a small, angular and exceptionally strong collagelike painting from 1950.

A 1951 Diebenkorn sculpture in welded scrap iron from around 1951 shares a calligraphic energy with David Smith's "Hudson River Landscape" and "Australia" from 1951 (neither is present), as well as with a 1959 ink drawing by Smith included in the show.

"Richard Diebenkorn: Paintings and Works on Paper, 1949-1955" at Greenberg Van Doren features 32 densely hung works. It verifies in stunning ways Diebenkorn's range as a draftsman as he moved from ink to gouache to painting.

Several works here have never been exhibited before. In a roughly worked 1949 painting, a bulge of deep green intrudes into a field of orange amid scattered ovals that suggest eyes. "Albuquerque 5" from 1951 would make a good addition to the show at Feely, paired with a painting from Peter Saul's Pop phase of the mid-1960s, which it presages. **ROBERTA SMITH**