

VAN DOREN
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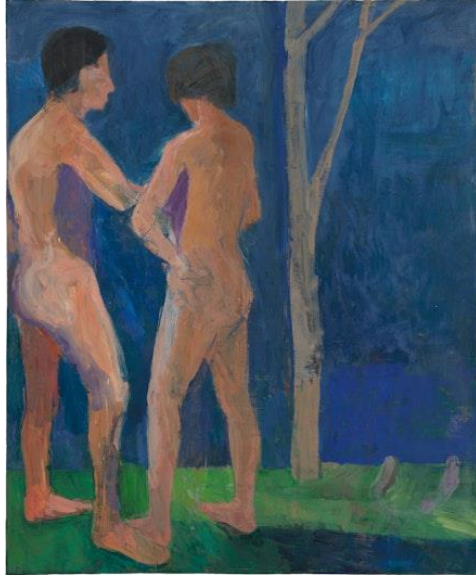
Richard Diebenkorn: Figures and Faces

By [Ekin Erkan](#) | June 2024



Richard Diebenkorn, *Untitled*, ca. 1963. Ink and graphite on paper, 13 3/8 x 15 3/8 inches. © Richard Diebenkorn Foundation. Courtesy the artist and Van Doren Waxter.

Richard Diebenkorn's oeuvre is often divided into an early Abstract Expressionist period (ca. 1947–55), a figurative or representational period (ca. 1955–66), and finally a pair of later abstract periods (ca. 1967–88 and 1988–92). As most of the works in *Richard Diebenkorn: Figures and Faces* are drawn from the middle years of 1955–1967—with an outlier watercolor of three brightly painted derbies from 1984—the Van Doren Waxter exhibition need not concern itself with any dramatic artistic evolution or turn. Instead, as the title suggests, the show primarily deals with Diebenkorn's distillation of the human form. This focus is clarified by the inclusion of several charcoal, ink, and graphite works on paper that depict Diebenkorn's studio sitters and figure models. It is further underscored by two hand-written studio notes. One dated 1956–59 reads "when I select a subject to work from I seem to include one element or thing that is all wrong—which works against the total feeling or unity." The other, written during the same period, deals with what Diebenkorn calls his "small heads," cropped portraits of which nine are on view here. Reflecting on these works, Diebenkorn writes that his "only intention is to bring to them what to me is a human look." He adds that this quality intuitively unspools, as it is "not preconceived. Often in mid-process I realize that this is all that I want from the canvas."



Richard Diebenkorn, *Two Nudes*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 84 x 69 1/2 inches. © Richard Diebenkorn Foundation. Courtesy the artist and Van Doren Waxter.

If it is Diebenkorn's search for a "total feeling or unity," as particularized in the human figure, that the show is ultimately concerned with, then it is unevenly dispatched. Alongside portraits and exterior figure paintings, the exhibition includes a fair share of interior scenes and studies that focus inwards, on Diebenkorn's studio itself. These are far removed from the artist's psychological concentration on the figure and, unaccompanied by Diebenkorn's verdant California freeways and aqueducts, they are cast in a somewhat desultory light. Studio studies like *Untitled* (ca. 1963) betray Diebenkorn's characteristically rectangular parceling of space and his distaste for clearly defined dominant objects. But they also avoid the human figure entirely and, in so doing, renounce the psychological potency that Diebenkorn so adeptly handled in his most successful works—including some that examine blank studio ennui more effectively. The most resonant works in the show have less to do with any guiding thread undergirding the Diebenkorn figures and faces included here. Instead, they remind us of the definitive influence of Matisse's stripped-down austerity, echoing the perspective of the co-organized 2016 Baltimore and San Francisco Museum exhibition, *Matisse/Diebenkorn*. This influence is most striking in the *Edenic Two Nudes* (ca. 1960) where the contrast of the titular figures' clay-amber skin with their deep azure ground readily recalls the ringlet promenade in Matisse's *Dance (I)* (1909). In Diebenkorn's "small head" portraits, too, Matisse's example is both retained and ultimately overcome or sublated. It is here that the show provides viewers with genuine insights.

After a three-year period (1950–53) spent in Albuquerque and Urbana, Diebenkorn returned to the Bay Area, where he had previously resided, and, shortly thereafter, to a figurative vernacular. Diebenkorn and his Bay Area Figurative School compatriot, David Park, attended weekly life drawing sessions in Berkeley. This is indexed by David Park on a *Hot Day* (1956), a portrait showing Park with a sketchbook and pencil in hand. In 1952, Diebenkorn visited the 1951–52 traveling retrospective, *Henri Matisse*. The retrospective was curated, as Alfred Barr writes in the catalogue's introduction, to "present a highly selective review of Matisse's paintings" ranging from 1890 to the artist's later still lifes, the latter executed with an increasingly restrained palette. Alongside reliefs, bronze busts, and lithographs from the 1920s, this review of Matisse's graphic oeuvre included portraits and interiors like *Male Model* (ca. 1900), *Guitarist* (1903), *The Blue Nude* (1907), *Dance—Study* (1909), *The Girl with Green Eyes* (1908), *Goldfish and Sculpture* (1911), and *Interior with Goldfish* (1914). Filled with windows that open onto motley cityscapes and sitters' faces tightly bordered by perspectively contracted vases, ornaments, and background furniture, these works found Matisse progressively moving away from the divisionist brush-stroke of Cézanne and Seurat. For Matisse, it was now color that licensed the division of constructed space, both interior

and exterior. These studies of isolated figures cast in airy, quivering lines seem to have had an indelible effect on Diebenkorn. In *Untitled* (ca. 1964), Diebenkorn at once demarcates his almond-eyed sitter's sandy skin from her forest-green dress, daffodil-yellow divan, and the room's ultramarine walls. The black rectangular lintel block flanking the painting's bottom further spatially contracts the sitter's post. The painting echoes Diebenkorn's rapprochement of inside and outside spaces, one of the Matisse-inflected devices that he overtly advanced in his 1955 return to figuration.



Installation view: Richard Diebenkorn: *Figures and Faces*, Van Doren Waxter, New York, 2024. © Richard Diebenkorn Foundation. Courtesy Van Doren Waxter. Photo: Lance Brewer.

The ashen glaze of *Head of a Woman* (1958) and the gray-lacquered washes of *Untitled* (1960) and *Girl with Glasses* (1963) distinguish Diebenkorn's portraiture decisively from those Matisse he admired in 1952. In Diebenkorn's "small heads," sunlight is never pictured, though it cuts the somber Bay Area fog that so often laminates his sitter's forehead or torso. Built-up identical strokes come to conceal earlier marks, a surface manipulation of heavy impasto that endows Diebenkorn's faces with a blariness freighted by the suggestion of movement. As two of the most engaging portraits on view, these "small head" portraits make movement out of pentimenti, the brushstrokes too thick, rounded, and washed to recall the coruscating dashes of Post-Impressionism with any real specificity. Diebenkorn's facture of this period grants his subjects, like the amorphous sitters of *Untitled* (ca. 1957–63) and *Untitled* (ca. 1960–66), a salmon-pink fleshiness. Diebenkorn's rhythmic strokes efface any identifying minutia (e.g., birthmarks, eye color, teeth), a device in sharp tension with his adumbrated parceling-out of the sitter's triangular nose, widow's peak hairline, and hollowed eye sockets. By eschewing the head-on, static pinning of his subjects, Diebenkorn's blotted nostrils, fungible ears, and undefined eyebrows quiver into the portrait's surface area. His figures' faces veer closer to masks.

In Susan Larsen's oral history interview with Diebenkorn, conducted between May 1, 1985 and December 15, 1987, Larsen notes that there is a sympathy between Edward Hopper's and Diebenkorn's figures. Diebenkorn responds that, even so, Hopper's figures "were simply a bit too stiff, so I preferred the pure, I guess." Their discussion turning to his Bay Area return, Diebenkorn remarks, "I've just never been as aware of room spaces as I have since I've been in California." The psychological potency of Diebenkorn's sitters is not allegorical, as it is for Hopper. It also has little to do with how we view the figure in empirical-perceptual terms. This is clarified in both the artist's response to Larsen and in the aforementioned note where he cites his inclusion of an element that is "all wrong" and provides the work tension. This "wrongness" is a formal device, one Diebenkorn shares with Elaine de Kooning (especially in her portraits of Aristodimos Kaldis). At its best, this show, which will reward Diebenkorn

completionists most richly, discloses the figure in terms of such spatial tension. It is a simple endeavor but one that Diebenkorn mastered.