Cool, Sublime, Idealistic Diebenkorn

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Matisse/Diebenkorn
an exhibition at the
Baltimore Museum of Art,
October 23, 2016–January 29, 2017;
and the San Francisco Museum of
Modern Art, March 11–May 29, 2017.
Catalog of the exhibition by edited by
Janet Bishop and Katherine Rothkopf.
Baltimore Museum of Art/San
Francisco Museum of Modern Art/
DelMonico/Prestel, 183 pp., $49.95

Richard Diebenkorn:
The Catalogue Raisonné
edited by Jane Livingston
and Andrea Liguori.
Richard Diebenkorn Foundation/
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco/
Yale University Press,
four volumes, 2,176 pp., $400.00

Richard Diebenkorn:
The Sketchbooks Revealed
edited by the Cantor Arts Center.
Stanford University Press,
296 pp., $45.00

Universal acceptance, however desired, has its problems. The critics and historians, as they heap on the praise and outdo one another in feats of analytical subtlety, can smooth out the quirks and complexities that give an artist's work its stand-alone power. Richard Diebenkorn was beginning to receive this kind of bland adulation even before he died in 1993 at the age of seventy. His achievement, so full of surprises and perplexities, has been muffled and sanitized. His evolution from the jagged melancholy of the figures and landscapes that he painted in the 1950s to the quietism of his later *Ocean Park* abstractions has been fast-tracked into an Olympian ascent. He's been enshrined in the museums. I worry that an artist of whom nothing negative can be thought, much less said, is an artist who doesn't really matter.

Diebenkorn's reputation has never been loftier than it is right now. "Matisse/Diebenkorn"—organized by the Baltimore Museum of Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and currently in Baltimore—thrusts the artist into a face-off with one of the founding fathers of modernist painting. This is a confrontation that Diebenkorn himself might have found not only immensely flattering but also rather daunting and maybe even a little disconcerting. A sumptuous, four-volume catalogue raisonné of Diebenkorn's paintings and works on paper has just been published, edited by Jane Livingston and Andrea Liguori. Here we have our first opportunity to see his career complete, with Diebenkorn's enormous output of works on paper gathered around his contemporaneous oil paintings. His printmaking, another considerable achievement, will be the subject of a separate volume.

A valuable companion to the catalogue raisonné is *The Sketchbooks Revealed*, which is based on a gift of twenty-nine sketchbooks from the artist's widow, Phyllis Diebenkorn, and the Diebenkorn Foundation to the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University. The publication of the sketchbooks, by an institution where Diebenkorn studied as an undergraduate, offers an unprecedented opportunity to observe his imagination at its most unfettered and adventuresome.

Richard Diebenkorn: Window, *92 x 80 inches, 1967*

Iris & Gerald B. Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University

The catalogue raisonné presents Diebenkorn's career in three distinct phases. The artist's most ardent admirers probably regard his achievement as having a thesis-antithesis-synthesis shape, although I'm not sure that anybody has made the case in so many words. In the catalogue raisonné each period has its own volume; an introductory volume contains critical essays and an extensive chronology and bibliography.

The abstractions that Diebenkorn painted from the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, very much under the influence of the meandering, exploratory brushwork of Willem de Kooning, are the thesis. The antithesis arrives with the unabashed embrace of representational imagery in the figures, interiors, and landscapes that Diebenkorn worked on from the mid-1950s into the second half of the 1960s. And the synthesis is the *Ocean Park* paintings that began to appear in the later 1960s, in which impressions of the beach, ocean, and sky of Southern California are transformed into enigmatic geometries. Diebenkorn's studio was the setting for what some have come to regard as near-philosophical meditations on color and space, with the straight lines and clean angles often muffled and misted over, as if the artist were exploring Platonic essences on a fog-bound yet mysteriously light-filled Santa Monica morning.

Diebenkorn, as much as any artist of his generation, bears the stamp of the time and place in which he came of age. Although he was born in Oregon, he grew up and spent much of his early adulthood in the Bay Area, in San Francisco, Palo Alto, Sausalito, and Berkeley, and after twenty years in Southern California he returned for his last five years to Northern California. His art, whether representational or abstract, is suffused with an independent, exploratory spirit that reflects, at least so I believe, the Barbary Coast bohemianism of San Francisco and the Bay Area in the 1940s and 1950s. Diebenkorn's work is by turns sensuous, imperious, quirky, mellow, melancholy, sybaritic, beguiling, seductive, obtuse, and grandiose. He's very much the intellectual, but an intellectual who finally trusts only his own thought processes. Such singularity can be a source of strength for an artist. It also has its dangers.

The San Francisco Bay Area, with some of the most glorious vistas, vegetation, and light in the United States, is a gift that all too few important painters have ever really embraced. Diebenkorn saw the possibilities; so did a few other artists who were starting out in San Francisco in the late 1940s, when the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA), under the inspired direction of Douglas MacAgy, was becoming a hothouse for experimentation, often with surrealist and abstract images, techniques, and ideas. Diebenkorn first studied and then taught at CSFA. The visiting instructors included painters who were beginning to be recognized as pioneers of what Clement Greenberg would soon refer to as "'American-Type' Painting."

The most prominent among them were Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still; Diebenkorn missed meeting Rothko but had some contact with Still. Among Diebenkorn's contemporaries and friends at CSFA were David Park, Frank Lobdell, and Elmer Bischoff. Although Diebenkorn was painting abstractly in the late 1940s, at CSFA he taught figure drawing and sometimes participated in a life drawing group with his friends. After graduate studies in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and a first teaching job in Urbana, Illinois, he returned to Berkeley to live. There, while immersed in a series of compositions in which landscape forms were reimagined as abstract forms, he participated in life drawing sessions with Park and Bischoff. He began to feel that Abstract Expressionism had become, as he later observed, "a stylistic straightjacket. I felt that perhaps I had too many rules, that there was too much Abstract Expressionism hanging over my head."

Diebenkorn became a representational artist, at least for a decade. He was emboldened by all the beauties of the Bay Area life he was living. His sketchbooks, drawings, watercolors, and paintings overflow with experiences of the time: the camaraderie of artist friends sharing drawing sessions with long-legged models; the easygoing good looks of his wife, Phyllis, who had a career in psychology and frequently posed for him; the mornings and afternoons passed in shadowy Berkeley living rooms or on sun-splashed redwood decks; the verdant vistas in communities all around the Bay Area; and, somewhat farther afield, the light bouncing off rooftops near the ocean. The volume of the catalogue raisonné covering this period—roughly 1955 to 1965—is the thickest of the four. Here, and in the sketchbooks now at Stanford, Diebenkorn is invigorated and emboldened by his appetite for reality. Only Fairfield Porter, working on the East Coast in the same years, was as attentive to so many different aspects of the world.

Marshaling pencil, charcoal, watercolor, gouache, and ink with pen or brush, Diebenkorn explored over and over again his wife's pensive gaze, the corners of his studio, the views from the Berkeley hills, and the helter-skelter arrangements of flowers, cups and saucers, books, magazines, and scissors on a table. Everywhere, he caught the mellowness of Bay Area life in the academic and bohemian circles he knew best. In a couple of works, Diebenkorn focused on two women conversing, and revealed a short-story writer's gift for the telling incident or encounter. There's something of Édouard Vuillard's fin-de-siècle intimism in these scenes of Northern California life. I see echoes of Vuillard's great friend Misia Sert, the muse of the circle around *La Revue blanche*, in Diebenkorn's studies of women whose faces are half-obscured by broad-brimmed hats. I am reminded that since the nineteenth century San Francisco had been referred to as the Paris of the West; the city had an ease and elegance some regarded as more European than American.

In some of the still-life and landscape paintings from what have come

to be regarded as the Berkeley years, Diebenkorn uses his rich, virtuosic brushwork to celebrate naturalistic motifs; a knife in a glass of water or a pair of scissors lying on a table is presented with uncanny immediacy. In larger figure paintings, whether set in a landscape or an interior, Diebenkorn pushes even harder. He rejects the easy-going naturalism of his figure drawings and smaller still-life paintings. He constructs puzzle-like configurations. The woman in question becomes an iconic or talismanic form almost imprisoned by her surroundings. "Attempt what is not certain," he wrote at one point. "Certainty may or may not come later. It may then be a valuable delusion." Faces are obscured and torsos, arms, and legs are treated as if they were signs or semaphores.

Some of these paintings, which gave Diebenkorn his first truly national recognition, were included in the Museum of Modern Art's 1959 exhibition "New Images of Man." What linked the very different works in that exhibition (included were twenty-three artists, among them Francis Bacon, Leonard Baskin, Alberto Giacometti, and Leon Golub) was a sense that they were, in the words of Paul Tillich in a catalog note, "mirrors of our predicament"—the existential predicament of the person struggling to find meaning in what might be a meaningless world.

The finest of Diebenkorn's figure paintings are hymns to uncertainty. I would point to *Woman on a Porch* (1958) and *Coffee* (1959), both of which are not so much affirmations of the natural world as they are highly idiosyncratic symbolist experiments. The figures in these paintings are compressed, the woman on the porch enclosed in bright bands of color that suggest not so much a landscape as the mood of a landscape, while the woman who holds her cup of coffee is locked in an emptied interior that opens on an equally emptied landscape. The figure has been abstracted through a process that's at least as much psychological as formal. Nature hasn't been transformed so much as it's been put at a distance, refracted, even obfuscated—remade to accord with the artist's (or perhaps the model's) state of mind. Diebenkorn creates a spatial illegibility that suggests emotional instability or immobility. The result is a thwarted lyricism. "Tolerate chaos" is a phrase found among Diebenkorn's studio notes. That contemplation of chaos may be another aspect of Bay Area bohemianism—a contemplative state that can be cathartic but also immobilizing.

Even Diebenkorn's lifelong reverence for Matisse has a Northern California dimension, winding back as it does to Gertrude, Leo, and Michael Stein, who grew up in Oakland and then, while living in Paris in the early years of the twentieth century, became among the very first collectors of Matisse's work. Michael's wife, Sarah, ended up living in Palo Alto in the 1940s. And Diebenkorn, while he was still an undergraduate at Stanford, was taken by a professor to Sarah Stein's house, where, as he later recalled, "right there I made contact with Matisse, and it has just stuck with me all the way."

"Matisse/Diebenkorn" is an intelligently organized, beautifully paced show. The curators in charge, Janet Bishop of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Katherine Rothkopf of the Baltimore Museum of Art, have made the strongest possible case for some sort of meeting of minds or imaginations. Drawings and paintings by the two artists are gracefully woven together; in a series of display cases the curators have included a selection of books about Matisse from Diebenkorn's own library, which, although by no means unusual or rare, do thicken the biographical aspects of the exhibition. Important loans from New York's Museum of Modern Art and other major institutions only add to the extraordinary group of works by Matisse in the Baltimore Museum of Art's Cone Collection. This includes paintings that Claribel and Etta Cone purchased from their friends the Steins; the sisters eventually became close to Matisse.

There can be no question that Diebenkorn's painterly experimentalism owes much to Matisse. And Diebenkorn definitely borrowed certain motifs and devices from the great Frenchman. The curators of "Matisse/Diebenkorn" bring an impressively clearheaded passion to this project. But when taken as a whole the exhibition seems to me to emphasize what divides these two artists rather than what unites them. I find myself wondering if Diebenkorn is as close to Matisse as many critics and historians imagine—and, indeed, as the artist himself probably imagined.

New Orleans Museum of Art

Richard Diebenkorn: Woman on a Porch, *72 x 72 inches, 1958*

In an essay in the catalog of "Matisse/Diebenkorn," John Elderfield, who over the years has organized landmark exhibitions devoted to both Matisse and Diebenkorn at the Museum of Modern Art, argues that "their most important practical commonality may be a quality of alertness, a mixture of judgment and vigilance, about what happens in the process of making a painting." Taken at face value, that sounds like a fairly modest claim. But the more time I spent with the paintings and drawings at the Baltimore Museum of Art, the more Matisse and Diebenkorn struck me as being alert in entirely different ways. What it comes down to is that Matisse's attention is omnivorous while Diebenkorn's is narrower, perhaps cooler.

Matisse challenges the inherent flatness of the canvas in a great variety of ways. He complicates the primary plane with boldly modeled volumes, with passages of dizzying naturalism, and with dissonant color orchestrations. Diebenkorn prefers to embrace that inherent flatness, with lines that run from one end of the canvas to the other, with the insistent simplification of his forms, and with color combinations that are tamped-down and self-evidently harmonious. Matisse wants to see how many different ways he can deal with the flat rectangle. He's the cosmopolitan spirit who embraces all the possibilities without ever losing his bearings. Diebenkorn is a more single-minded artist. He bears down on a problem. He insists.

An exhibition such as "Matisse/Diebenkorn," which juxtaposes the work of two very different artists, has a way of fueling invidious comparisons. At the end of the show, a selection of Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park* paintings nearly overwhelms the much smaller works by Matisse, which include one of his most radically simplified canvases, *View of Notre Dame* (1914). There's no doubt that the *Ocean Park* paintings give museumgoers a lift. They're the largest works of Diebenkorn's career, and the sprawling planes of thinly applied color can be bright and beguiling. Even Diebenkorn's grays have a luminosity. He frames and bisects these shimmering planes with crisscrossing black lines. Many of the lines are rather freely brushed, with uneven edges and the paint sometimes thinned so as to register as gray rather than black.

It seems clear that Diebenkorn, in working on his *Ocean Park* paintings, was forever in Matisse's debt for the black lines that the Frenchman inscribed on a thin wash of blue in his *View of Notre Dame*. Elderfield would say that Diebenkorn took the implicit abstraction of Matisse's enigmatic *View of Notre Dame*—a painting Matisse never exhibited—and imagined a new kind of abstraction. But what is easy-going, free-spirited, and speculative in Matisse's work becomes all too insistent and determinative in Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park* paintings. Diebenkorn has a way of hammering at a subject that may be both his greatest strength and his greatest weakness. With the *Ocean Park* abstractions, he's hammering ever so softly, but hammering nonetheless.

Elderfield's essay in the "Matisse/Diebenkorn" catalog is scattered with brief quotations from John Keats, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Elizabeth Bishop. Those aren't the poetic voices that come to mind when I think about Richard Diebenkorn. If his work suggests a poet, it's not the classicizing lyric perfection of the writers whom Elderfield cites, but something closer to Walt Whitman and his "Song of Myself." Diebenkorn aims for sublimity, but he lacks the nineteenth-century poet's booming optimism. His crisscrossing black lines, although as cool as a jazzman's seasoned riffs, don't take us anywhere. He brings to the *Ocean Park* paintings none of the full-speed-ahead idealism that gives Mondrian's black lines or Malevich's black rectangles their cathartic energy. The *Ocean Park* paintings are haunted by Diebenkorn's unfulfilled yearning for a grand design.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Diebenkorn was by no means the only artist who was trying to figure out how he felt about the masters of modern art, who were by and large Europeans. At the time there was a good deal of discussion about what in art was inherently American, what was inherently European, and what was universal. Harold Rosenberg, in his essay "a Parable of American Painting," published in 1953, saw a conflict between the fundamentally orderly nature of Old World tradition, which he referred to as "Redcoatism," and the more pragmatic approach that he recognized in the best new American art and referred to as "Coonskinism."

Like any good parable, Rosenberg's was something of an exaggeration. But if I were to summarize Diebenkorn's situation, I would say that he was a Coonskin who in some respects always wanted to be a Redcoat. Diebenkorn yearned to be, like Matisse, a revolutionary who was somehow simultaneously working within a great tradition. But he was largely immune to the ideological crosscurrents that fueled Matisse's contradictory yearnings. Diebenkorn was too much the rugged individualist to seriously entertain any ideology, whether of the avant-garde or the academy.

Diebenkorn's finest work has a present-tense vehemence. When he's at the top of his form he's absorbed not in some general principle or idea but in what Rosenberg, writing about Coonskinism, described as "the particular problem to be solved" and "the principle that applies, even if it applies only once." Diebenkorn opts for a one-off impact; he brings a guerrilla fighter's tactile concentration to the resolution of a pictorial problem.

Two of his finest paintings in "Matisse/Diebenkorn," *Interior with Doorway* (1962) and *Window* (1967), feature the humblest of folding chairs. There's something almost aggressively American about making a folding chair the subject of a large painting. At "Matisse/Diebenkorn," the Californian's dark-toned *Interior with Doorway* is juxtaposed with Matisse's equally dramatic *Interior with a Violin* (1918). Matisse, who played the violin, offers a glancing reference to another great tradition—to classical music. I admire Diebenkorn for trading the Old World comforts of Matisse's violin, its lustrous wooden form set ever so snugly in a velvet-lined case, for the blunt, no-nonsense power of an inexpensive folding chair. That folding chair, so Diebenkorn seems to be telling us, is all he has to work with. And damned if he doesn't make it work. □