

VAN DOREN WAXTER

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ART WORLD

The Heir to Matisse With a Dose of California Cool

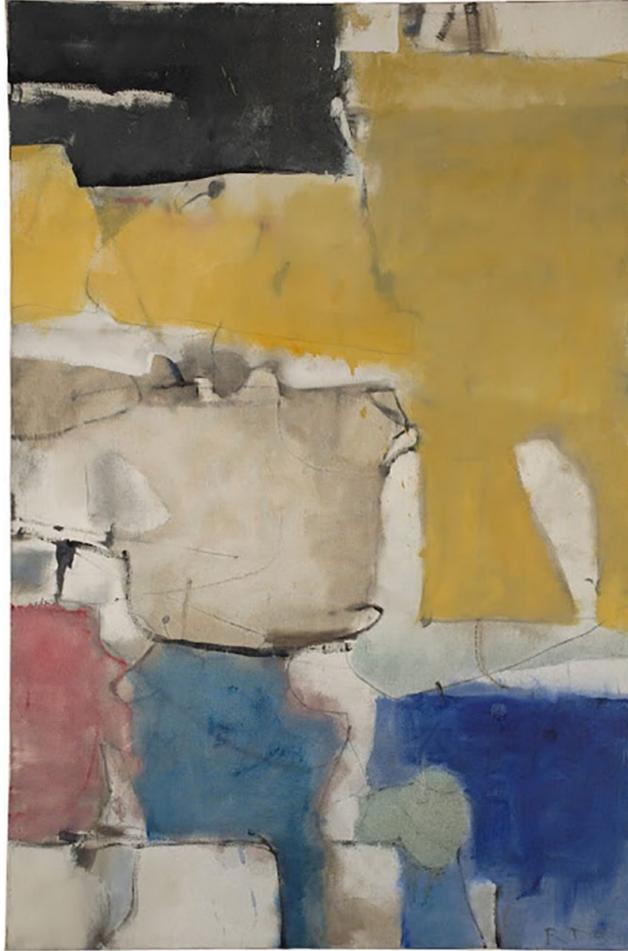
There's nothing like seeing one of Richard Diebenkorn's joyful Ocean Park paintings in real life—but a new catalogue of his work comes close.

By Malcolm Jones | 01.08.17

In the new luxe catalogue raisonné from Yale University Press showcasing the work of artist Richard Diebenkorn, there is something for anyone who cares at all for visual art. Painting, drawing, etching, portraiture, landscape, still life, representation, and abstraction—in a long, peripatetic career stretching across the last half of the last century, he did it all and did it well.

Although he was exceedingly proficient as a technician, Diebenkorn always wanted you to see the oil paint, the charcoal, the gouache—he never lets you forget that you are staring at a made object, be it painting or drawing. That may sound like a simpleminded thing to say about an artist, but think of the artists, and not just realists, who subvert or disguise the act of putting paint on canvas or charcoal on paper. Even in the representational work—whether it be his monumental California landscapes, the thousands of nude studies, or the intimate still life's of cutlery, vegetables, and fruit—Diebenkorn reminds us at every turn that these hills, scissors, arms, and chairs are constructed of paint or pencil. And not just constructed but constructed joyfully. If his work is “about” anything, it's about the sheer pleasure of seeing and rendering what's seen, with an accent on the rendering.

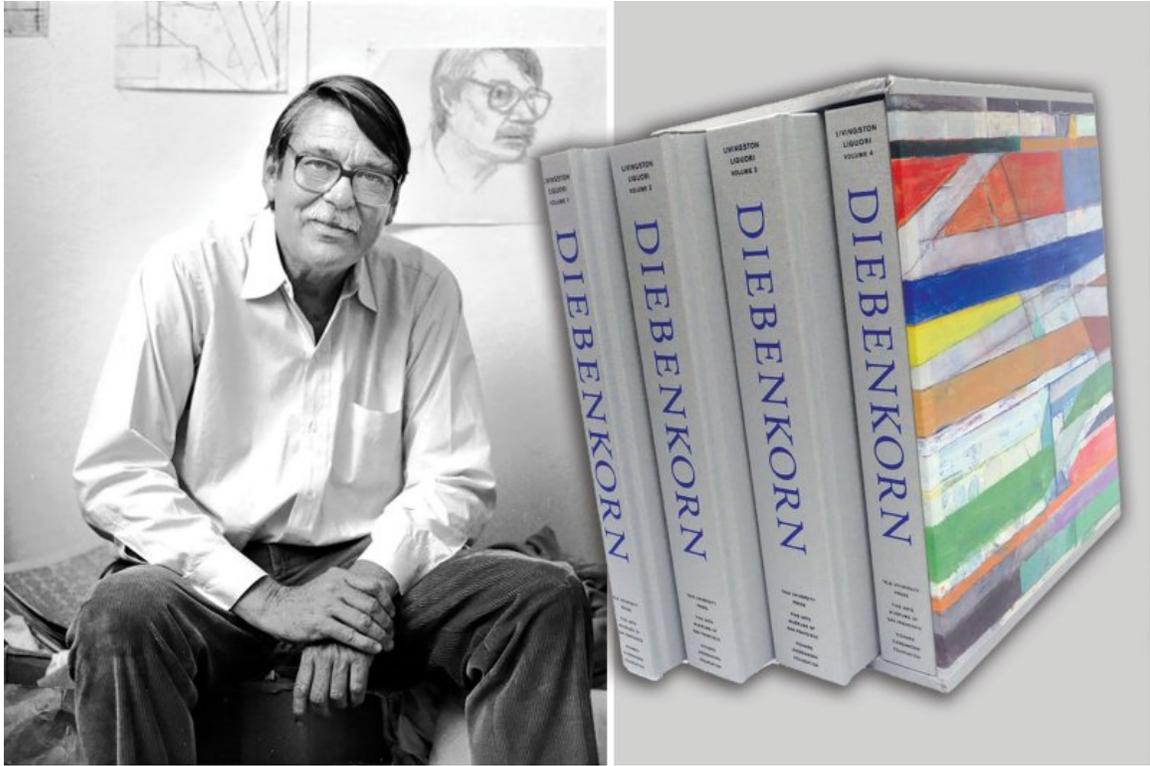
There is no through line in Diebenkorn's career. He began in abstraction, then enjoyed a productive spell as a figurative artist, then returned to abstraction with the dazzling Ocean Park paintings for which he is probably best known. Even his disparate influences—Matisse, Pollock—become consonant when joined in his work. But if there is no apparent logic to his path, there is surely inevitability. He would not have been the realist he was without the abstracts he painted first, and the Ocean Park paintings would be unthinkable had he not spent those years spent on landscapes. Everything he did informed what came next. Geometry hovers over the early, wilder abstracts, while the mid-period landscapes and nudes threaten at every turn to abandon natural form for something abstract, and all of it, somehow, winds up in a beautiful, exact tension in the Ocean Park period, each one of which is like some magic trick where the magician shows you how he does the trick even as he's doing it, and you still wind up mystified.



The Ocean Park paintings to me always look like thinking with paint. There's not a story to the thinking, because there is no beginning or end to these works, or if there is a story, it's recursive. You don't know where he started, or exactly how he wound up where he did in any particular image. But there on the surface of the painting, everything, past and present, lingers and exists with equal force. You can see the change in one direction, or where one color partially obscures another laid down previously, but then a former color or shape or line asserts itself elsewhere on the painting plane to obscure any hint of progress or development. And somehow all this maneuvering—the overpainting, the lines that peter out and then reassert themselves—all exists democratically across the face of the image's intricate geometry, shimmering in equal measure. The Ocean Parks are the greatest argument for second-guessing that I've ever seen.



The biggest surprise in this enormous four-volume undertaking, ably edited and annotated by Jane Livingston and Andrea Liguori, are the thousands of drawings included in the three volumes of images (the first volume is devoted to essays and analysis by the likes of John Elderfield and Ruth Fine). The second surprise is that Diebenkorn never gave up figurative drawing, even late in life. The human figure possessed his imagination throughout his life. But again, this somehow makes sense in retrospect: an artist obsessed with synthesizing all of what he knew in his major work, whatever its style, was not surprisingly concerned with pursuing the same images that obsessed him early and late. The drawings—and man, that cat could draw—are likewise a testament to fun, to the sheer enjoyment of drawing that sizzles even in the juvenile drawings of cowboys and action figures included in this collection.



Richard Diebenkorn: The Catalogue Raisonné is a monumental testament to the printer's art. Few books of any kind are made with this kind of meticulous care. Any fan—even a casual fan—would covet this gorgeous, slipcased edition. And yet, all these pages combined are not equal to even one of the Ocean Park paintings. Because there is simply nothing to compare to standing in front of one of Diebenkorn's paintings and drinking it in. Not even the best reproduction can compete with the physical thing there on the wall.



Perhaps that's because the paintings themselves are so much about the thrill of seeing, a thrill that time and again they capture and make immortal. To see an actual Diebenkorn, no matter how often you may have seen it before, is like seeing something new and wonderful—something so vivid and electric that it's almost alive—for the first time. Not that I'm not over the moon at owning this collection. Original Diebenkorns are pretty scarce around my house. So while I wait for my next fix, this collection will salve my yearning very nicely indeed.