

# RA

# Richard Diebenkorn

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# An Introduction to the Exhibition for Teachers and Students

*Written by Ben Street*

For the Learning Department  
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## Richard Diebenkorn

*The Sackler Wing of Galleries*

14 March – 7 June 2015

FRONT COVER  
Diebenkorn at his Hillcrest studio, Berkeley, California, 1959 (detail).  
Photograph © Fred Lyon

BACK COVER  
The window in the Ocean Park studio, 1968 (detail).  
Photograph by Richard M. Grant. © 2015 The Richard Diebenkorn Foundation

**RA** Royal  
Academy  
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**'Now, the idea is to get everything right – it's not just colour or form or space or line – it's everything all at once!'**

Richard Diebenkorn, 'Richard Diebenkorn: The Idea is to Get Everything Right', John Gruen, *Art News*, November 1986

## Introduction

Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993) was one of the most influential and groundbreaking American artists of the post-Second World War era. Unlike many of his peers who dedicated themselves entirely to abstraction, Diebenkorn moved between abstract and figurative painting, exploring one style for several years before shifting to the next with equal success. His paintings fused European and American approaches to modern art, and were sensitive responses to the light and location of the different studios in which he worked and their geographical environment. Each time he and his family moved across the USA, his work transformed accordingly, most famously in his late paintings from southern California, known as the Ocean Park series. This exhibition at the Royal Academy showcases three principal periods within Diebenkorn's mature career, each corresponding to a specific location: firstly, abstraction in New Mexico, Illinois and northern California, followed by a figurative period in northern California and, finally, his return to abstraction in southern California.

In sharp distinction to, and against the grain of, the aims of many of his contemporaries during the mid-to-late 1950s, Diebenkorn was committed to the traditions of Western art and explored the classical genres of figure painting, landscape and still life. However, he was no conservative, and thanks to his early years as an abstract artist he breathed new life into these conventions. Throughout his career, he remained fascinated by the interactions of line, colour and gesture across the surface of the paper or canvas. He embraced periods of abstraction and figuration in his work, and was as critically successful in each of them. His unwillingness to be pinned down to any particular approach makes Diebenkorn a difficult artist to characterise. He had an aversion to being pigeonholed, preferring instead to move between approaches as he saw fit, all of which contributed to his singularity as an artist.

Although Diebenkorn was highly regarded in this country and was made an honorary Royal Academician in 1992, this exhibition is only the second of its kind to be held in the United Kingdom since then, and is the first museum survey of his work since 1997. This long overdue exhibition seeks to reaffirm Diebenkorn's position as one of the most engaging, innovative and consistently exciting American artists of the twentieth century.

## Early life and career

Richard Clifford Diebenkorn was born on 22 April 1922 in Portland, Oregon, although his childhood was spent in the San Francisco Bay Area of California, a part of the world to which he would return in later life. While his parents had little or no interest in art, Diebenkorn's maternal grandmother, Florence McCarthy Stephens, an amateur landscape painter, encouraged his youthful interest in drawing. Florence introduced the young Diebenkorn to visual influences such as heraldic symbols and playing cards that were to recur throughout his mature work. He had a particular interest in the Bayeux Tapestry and medieval iconography, and some of his earliest drawings depict horsemen, archers and soldiers in armour.

Diebenkorn's interest in art blossomed at school and, in 1940, led to his enrolment at Stanford University in Palo Alto, where he studied liberal arts, taking life drawing and watercolour classes. He also studied art history, discovering through his teachers the work of American painters such as Arthur Dove (1880–1946), Edward Hopper (1882–1967) and Charles Sheeler (1883–1965). Hopper's haunting paintings of urban and rural America were to influence Diebenkorn's deep engagement with the American landscape. As important was the work of Sheeler and Dove, whose explorations of European abstraction, and the links between abstraction and figure painting, were to anticipate Diebenkorn's own radical approaches in the 1950s.

Equally significant for the young Diebenkorn was exposure to the great innovations of the European modernists. Through his teacher Daniel Mendelowitz (1905–1980), Diebenkorn visited the home of wealthy art collector Sarah Stein (1870–1953) in Palo Alto. Stein, who had lived in Paris from 1903 to 1935 with her husband Michael Stein (brother of the poet Gertrude and collector Leo), had accrued a collection of works of extraordinary quality by artists not then seen in many American museums, with especial emphasis on the work of Henri Matisse (1869–1954), including *Woman with a Hat*, 1905, and *The Bay of Nice*, 1918. Diebenkorn's firsthand exposure to Matisse's work affected him deeply and became a touchstone to which he would return throughout the rest of his life.

In his third year at Stanford, Diebenkorn was called up by the US Marine Corps as an active reservist, and soon after married his girlfriend Phyllis Gilman, a fellow student. As part of his training, he was transferred to the University of California, Berkeley, where for one semester he continued to study life drawing, painting and art history. The following year, he was stationed in Quantico, Virginia, eventually serving as a mapmaker in the Photographic Section. Diebenkorn took full advantage of his new location in the eastern United States and made regular visits to the Phillips Collection in Washington DC. He was also able to visit other art institutions, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. At each of these venues, he deepened his understanding of and relationship to the great European modern artists, and furthered his fascination for the work of Matisse,

as well as that of Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) and Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947). Bonnard's *The Open Window* (fig. 1) was of particular importance to Diebenkorn. Its juxtapositions – of interior and exterior, the natural and the man-made, the straight edge and the curve – were to inform many of the great leaps he made in his mature painting.

Due to his military service, Diebenkorn's education in art was an itinerant one. He completed his undergraduate studies after returning from military service, having by that time taken classes at Stanford, Berkeley and the California School of Fine Arts. While serving in the military, he had brought his art materials with him and continued to develop his style during various posts, inspired by the works of art to which he was exposed and the variety of landscape settings in which he lived. After the war, which ended in 1945, his work was galvanised by the influence of a new generation of artists then emerging in New York: the Abstract Expressionists, including Mark Rothko (1903–1970), Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), Clyfford Still (1904–1980), Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) and Barnett Newman (1905–1970). After the war, Diebenkorn's work took a decisive turn into abstraction when, in 1947, as a student at the California School of Fine Arts, he was awarded an Albert Bender Grant-in-Aid. With the proceeds of the award, he chose to move to New York City, then to Woodstock, New York, where he spent seven months working in the studio and became acquainted with the work of

**Fig. 1**  
Pierre Bonnard  
*The Open Window*, 1921  
Oil on canvas  
118.1 × 95.9 cm

Acquired 1930  
The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC  
© ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London  
2015



**Cat. 1**

*The Disintegrating Pig,*  
1950

Oil on canvas,  
92.7 × 120 cm

Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for  
Visual Arts at Stanford University.  
Gift of Gretchen and Richard Grant.  
© 2015 The Richard Diebenkorn  
Foundation



many of the leading lights of what was termed 'the New York School'. A surge in economic and cultural confidence following the Second World War had led to the emergence of a distinctly American kind of modern art, which brought together the automatic mark-making of the Surrealists and the broken perspectives of Cubism, with the grand scale and individualistic emphasis of a vast country buoyed with the self-confidence of recent victory. Clyfford Still, who moved to San Francisco to teach in the late 1940s and became an acquaintance, was especially important to Diebenkorn, who certainly fed off this outpouring of creative energy. Diebenkorn's early abstract work was remarkably successful. His first solo exhibition took place at the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco in 1948, when he was only 26 years old.

Yet Diebenkorn would remain removed from the Abstract Expressionism of the New York School. Two years earlier, while studying at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco (where he would subsequently teach from 1947) he had met the painter David Park (1911–1960), an expressionistic painter who transitioned from figurative to abstract work in the early 1950s, preceding Diebenkorn's return to figurative painting in the mid-1950s. Like Park, Diebenkorn found his distinctive voice on the fault line between figuration and abstraction.

## The Albuquerque series, 1950–52

In January 1950, Diebenkorn enrolled in the Master of Arts programme at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. He and his wife Phyllis and their two children Gretchen (b. 1945) and Christopher (b. 1947) lived there for two and a half years. In contrast to their life in San Francisco they at first lived on the outskirts of the city, in a caretaker's house surrounded by animals on farmland, before moving to an adobe (mud-brick) house closer to town. His closeness to nature may have given Diebenkorn's work a looser, airier feel than that of other abstract painters of his time. The arid landscape, mountainous setting and sharp, strong desert light (Albuquerque has 300 days of sunshine per year) were to bring about important changes in his work. While there, Diebenkorn produced about 500 works of art, of which 44 were paintings and the remainder mostly works on paper, which he invariably referred to as 'drawings', irrespective of the medium used. His avowed focus was on abstraction, yet recognisable imagery did creep in, regardless of his intention.

**Cat. 1** In conversation with Paul Harris, a fellow graduate student in Albuquerque, Diebenkorn advised, 'if you get an image, try to destroy it'. Diebenkorn's commitment to abstraction during this period was such that he warned his family not to see any images within his work, even in paintings that tipped over into figuration. Diebenkorn would routinely reject and destroy paintings that owed too much to the visible world. However, he did acknowledge

the presence of what he called 'animal imagery', inspired by the surroundings of Albuquerque. *The Disintegrating Pig* is one such painting with recognisable imagery, which was made after the family had visited the New Mexico State Fair, where they saw prize pigs for the first time. Diebenkorn later talked about the 'humanoid aspects' of these animals, and compared them to 'big, hairy, fat men sitting around'. This comic vision may in part derive from the artist's interest in cartoons, especially *Krazy Kat* by George Herriman (1880–1944). There may also be traces of his being influenced by de Kooning, whose work Diebenkorn particularly admired, and whose oscillation between the figurative and abstract had certain parallels with Diebenkorn's own career.

A swathe of black paint fills much of the surface area of the painting, around which floating elements, highlighted in greys and whites, appear to have broken away. Only the title gives a clear sense of its figurative origin, and there are few clues to the referenced pig. Diebenkorn himself said that the pig is visible if the painting is viewed upside-down. In fact, the sloping profile of a cartoonish pig is legible from that angle, as the twin protrusions at the bottom of the painting become its ears and one can more readily identify its snout. The unattached ovals, then, take the place of limbs and plump teats breaking away from the body. By turning the image on its head, Diebenkorn creates an additional sense of 'disintegration', allowing the viewer to experience the work as an abstraction first, and as a figurative painting second, if at all. Our comprehension is delayed. The work, an important step towards Diebenkorn's reconciliation of the figurative and the abstract, was shown in his MA thesis exhibition in the spring of 1951.

**Does knowing the title of a work of art affect your experience of it? How so?**

## The land from the air

**Cat. 2** In late spring of 1951, Diebenkorn took a flight from Albuquerque to San Francisco, where he visited an exhibition of the work of Arshile Gorky (1904–1948), the Armenian-born Surrealist painter, at the San Francisco Museum of Art. The flight itself would prove to have a deep influence on Diebenkorn's work. Dipping low across the western terrain, the plane revealed the landscape laid out flat in a succession of patchwork arrangements. For the artist, this was a revelation, and in his works he increasingly embraced flattened compositions that juxtaposed curved, organic forms with others that were angular and apparently man-made. For Diebenkorn, the experience of seeing a landscape from such an elevated angle revealed its intrinsically abstract qualities.

In *Albuquerque #4*, Diebenkorn may have been responding to the agricultural practices he saw from his aerial perspective, whereas we see the canvas as having been worked on, much like tilled fields, or construction sites. He fills the canvas using a variety of approaches: flat, roughly filled-in areas of green, lilac and ochre are divided by loosely applied lines of paint or defined by strips of unpainted

**'I guess it was the combination of desert and agriculture that really turned me on, because it has so many things that I wanted in my paintings... It was all like a flat design – and everything was usually in the form of an irregular grid.'**

Richard Diebenkorn,  
*The Berkeley Years*  
1953–1966

canvas. Punctuating this expanse are forms that recall letters or symbols. These elements may well stem from Diebenkorn's childhood interest in heraldry, recalling as they do the simplified forms of flags or shields. The hints of letters – X, O, T and Z – echo de Kooning's black-and-white paintings, such as *Zurich*, 1947 (fig. 2). The fusion of modern influences with the indirect influence of landscape as a way to capture process is characteristic of Diebenkorn's work, and distinguishes him from his contemporaries such as Rothko, Pollock and Still, who at the time were making their most celebrated breakthroughs in total abstraction. Diebenkorn's openness to the world beyond – particularly the organic world of animals and plants even as he pursued abstraction – marked him out, even at this stage, as an artist unlike any other.

**In *Albuquerque #4*, Diebenkorn subverts the tradition of landscape painting by completely avoiding the horizon. Discuss the difference in effect, by comparing it to a more traditional painting.**

**How did specific landscapes affect Diebenkorn's approach?**



**Fig. 2**  
 Willem de Kooning  
*Zurich*, 1947  
 Oil and enamel on paper  
 mounted on fibreboard  
 91.4 x 61.3 cm

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture  
 Garden, Smithsonian Institution, The  
 Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest, 1981  
 Photography by Cathy Carver

**'Temperamentally, perhaps, I had always been a landscape painter but I was fighting the landscape feeling!'**  
 Richard Diebenkorn,  
*Bay Area Figurative Art: 1950–1965*



**Cat. 2**  
*Albuquerque #4*, 1951  
 Oil on canvas,  
 128.9 x 116.2 cm

Saint Louis Art Museum.  
 Gift of Joseph Pulitzer Jr.  
 © 2015 The Richard Diebenkorn  
 Foundation



**Cat. 8**  
*Urbana #2 (The Archer)*,  
 1953  
 Oil on canvas,  
 163.8 × 120.7 cm

Private collection  
 © 2015 The Richard Diebenkorn  
 Foundation

**'I felt that perhaps I had too many rules, that there was too much Abstract Expressionism hanging over my head, and so [...] there was a need for change.'**

Richard Diebenkorn,  
*The Berkeley Years, 1953–1966*

## Diebenkorn in Urbana

**Cat. 8** In autumn, 1952, Diebenkorn and his family moved again, this time to Urbana, Illinois, in the Midwestern United States, where he took up a position at the University of Illinois, teaching drawing to architecture students. They lived in Urbana only for the academic year 1952–53, but Diebenkorn's Urbana series is considered a significant period in his work. Unlike Albuquerque, the teaching experience and the environment of Illinois failed to inspire Diebenkorn. There is an occasional darkness to his works from this period – and in some of them an unprecedented dominance of black – which may reflect the stark winter landscape. Nonetheless, the Urbana series likewise represents a deeper engagement with rich, sensual colours in Diebenkorn's compositions, driven from within, and independent of the immediate Midwestern landscape and environment.

In the summer of 1952, Diebenkorn visited the Los Angeles Municipal Art Galleries, where he saw a Matisse retrospective curated by Alfred Barr, director of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. This exposure to a wider range of the artist's work than he had previously seen may have led Diebenkorn to adopt a deeper, more sensual colour range than he had done in his earlier work. In *Urbana #2* (also known as *The Archer*) the influence of Matisse is evident in a number of ways, especially in the visible *pentimenti*, the underdrawings that are conventionally painted over, but became recognised components of Matisse's work. Here, we can see black painted lines, especially at the top of the painting, which resemble the build-up of marks in a charcoal drawing. These marks cohere to suggest the archer of the title, an abstracted figure in profile whose bow strains in a curve, seemingly aimed at a target outside the painting. This is a rare example of a figurative element creeping in during the Urbana period, a time when he was generally continuing to eschew representation. Diebenkorn had depicted archers in his very earliest drawings, and this painting, like some of his Albuquerque paintings from the previous couple of years, may reflect the interest in heraldic imagery that he'd had since childhood.

**Discuss the 'unfinished' effect of this work. Why would Diebenkorn have deliberately left areas of the canvas exposed, or loosely and roughly applied the paint?**

## Into Figuration: Berkeley, 1956–66

Between 1956 and 1966, Richard Diebenkorn embraced figurative painting in an apparently dramatic about-turn. At the time, it was almost unheard of for an abstract painter to return to depicting the figure – with the notable exception of Jackson Pollock on the East Coast, who did dabble in recognisable imagery just before his death in 1956. The narrative of contemporary abstraction was that it

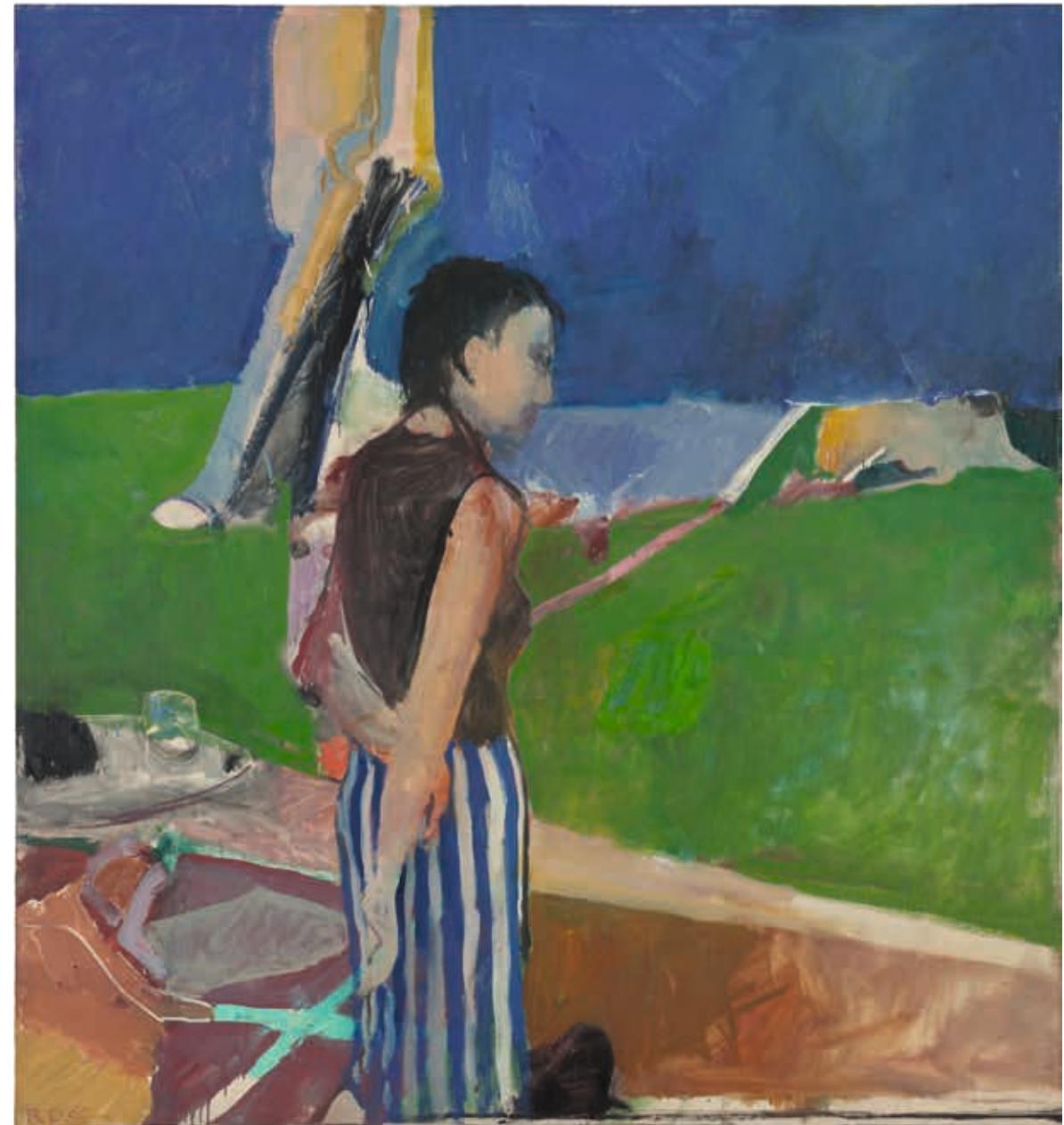
was truer and nobler than the figurative, because abstraction could depict the mystical and the sublime, whereas realism was bound to the mundane world of everyday appearances. The major figures of American abstract painting – Franz Kline (1910–1962), Rothko, Newman and Still – had all worked through early periods of figuration before dedicating themselves utterly to large-scale abstraction. Diebenkorn was, as so often, going against the contemporary grain by shifting his focus to figuration.

Upon leaving Urbana, Diebenkorn and his family made a brief trip to the East Coast. In New York, he met some of the best-known Abstract Expressionists, including de Kooning and Kline. Diebenkorn then returned to Berkeley in the San Francisco Bay Area of northern California. Here, the atmosphere and geography was a world away from the harsh winters of Illinois. A mild climate and clear, bright light inspired a new palette in his work. Perhaps as important was his re-acquaintance with old friends David Park and Elmer Bischoff (1916–1991), who he had met in the mid-1940s while at the California School of Fine Arts. Diebenkorn joined them in their Wednesday evening life drawing classes, while continuing to paint abstractions in his home studio. In 1954, Diebenkorn again began to experiment with figurative painting, and in 1956 he dedicated himself to it entirely. He worked in a figurative style for the next decade.

Diebenkorn's work along with that of Park and Bischoff became known as the 'Bay Area Figurative School', the title and timing implying a rejection of the Abstract Expressionism then predominant in New York. During the early 1950s, Diebenkorn had generally been considered the leading exponent of a West Coast form of Abstract Expressionism and as such had attained considerable art world success. In 1952, he had his first solo exhibition at a commercial gallery and by 1954 was showing in galleries in Chicago and Los Angeles, and at major museums in New York, Seattle and San Francisco. The transformation to figuration came about in part because of Diebenkorn's notion that Abstract Expressionism had become too mannered, almost academic, a 'stylistic straightjacket'. He needed, he said, 'something to come up against'. He needed friction.

**Cat. 21** *Girl on a Terrace* introduces one of the principal themes of Diebenkorn's figurative work: a single figure, often female, depicted in either an interior or exterior space with a window or view of the landscape outside. The notion of a juxtaposed interior and exterior suggests a variety of thematic possibilities: freedom versus containment, the controlled versus the chaotic, culture versus nature.

Very often, the figure's face is obscured, turned away, or so abstracted as to be unidentifiable. Despite the fact that the artist's wife or some acquaintance may have served as models, none of these life drawings are meant as a portrait *per se*. Of greater importance are Diebenkorn's consideration of line and the relationship of each figure to its environment. In fact, the terrace depicted here, with its folded



**Cat. 21**  
*Girl on a Terrace*, 1956  
Oil on canvas,  
179.1 × 166.1 cm

Collection Neuberger Museum of Art,  
Purchase College, State University of  
New York, Gift of Roy R. Neuberger.  
© 2015 The Richard Diebenkorn  
Foundation



chair and round table, may allude to the large outdoor deck at the Diebenkorn's house in Berkeley, from which they enjoyed gazing at the landscape. However, Diebenkorn's figurative period is by no means illustrative. His interest in diverse mark-making, the relationships of colour and scale, and the consideration of space are as crucial in his figurative work as in his earlier abstracts.

**What advantages might figurative painting have over abstraction?**

**What effect does the artist's use of pattern in *Girl on a Terrace* have on the overall composition of the painting?**

**Does it make a difference that the subject of the painting may be a close friend of the artist?**

## A return to landscape

**Cat. 32** Unlike Diebenkorn's figurative works from this period, which generally have a muted, even meditative quality – a psychological element not evident in his abstract work – his landscapes often hum with energy. In *Cityscape #1*, 1963, we the viewers are positioned as if looking down from a steep incline at a straight road that slices upwards to meet the horizon at the top. Strong light characteristic of northern California blasts a row of suburban houses on the left-hand side, their long shadows reach across the street and touch the open fields on the other side.

At this time, Diebenkorn would occasionally drive around the streets of Berkeley in search of a suitable scene to paint. Here, he has combined reality with the imaginary, leaving out buildings that actually existed on the right and introducing a network of patchwork fields and golden lots. As in the interiors, he juxtaposes the natural and the man-made. Diebenkorn's large land- and cityscapes seem a natural extension of the abstract compositions that preceded them, and give emphasis to colour, line, shape and form. The colours and atmosphere of these landscapes are clear, crystalline and bright.

**Consider the use of perspective in the painting *Cityscape #1*. What would change if it were depicted from a different position?**

**Why do you think Diebenkorn chose to paint it from this point of view?**

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### **Cat. 32**

*Cityscape #1*, 1963

Oil on canvas,

153 × 128.3 cm

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.  
Purchase with funds from Trustees and  
friends in memory of Hector Escobosa,  
Brayton Wilbur, and J.D. Zellerbach  
© 2015 The Richard Diebenkorn  
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## Drawing the figure

**Cat. 39** For Diebenkorn, drawing had a specific role, not as a rehearsal for a finished work but as an independent practice in its own right. A key distinction is that his figure drawings were invariably done from life, whereas his paintings rarely were. In *Seated Woman*, Diebenkorn has worked and reworked the figure in charcoal, keeping his *pentimenti* or 'changes of mind' visible. They are found especially around the head, neck and shoulders of the figure, suggesting both a sense of uncertainty and of the figure's own movement as she shifts in her chair. No attention has been paid to the woman's facial features or other identifying characteristics; rather, Diebenkorn seems more interested in the figure's relationship to the space and her movement within it. The forms of the body and the X-shaped chair legs are repeated, pattern-like, in other areas of the painting. By contrast, he generates a sense of mass through the aggressively applied grey acrylic, which builds up in the figure's torso and thighs to create a powerful sense of presence at odds with the skittish charcoal outlines.

**What are Diebenkorn's principal interests in this drawing?**

## Back to the Abstract: Ocean Park, 1967–88

In 1966, Diebenkorn and his family moved to Santa Monica, in southern California, and he found himself a studio space in the Ocean Park neighbourhood. The move brought them into another distinctive environment, with a Mediterranean-like climate very different from that of Berkeley, and expanses of sandy beaches abutting a network of streets. In 1967, inspired by the new setting, he began the Ocean Park series. This, the longest and most celebrated series of works by Diebenkorn, occupied him until he moved to northern California in 1988. During this period, he produced nearly 500 works on paper and at least 145 paintings. The Ocean Park series represents another turning point in his work. Rather than creating images that directly allude to the landscape, as he had done in Berkeley, the Ocean Park paintings are abstractions that may draw on his experience of the landscape, especially its distinctive light, without documenting it outright. Their principal concerns are internal, not external. While for many viewers, the Ocean Park works are quintessentially southern Californian paintings, encapsulating the region's gentle climate and atmosphere, for Diebenkorn, they were abstract compositions, never intended as landscapes, and he was relatively unaware of his sensitivity to his surroundings while he was making the works. They represent Diebenkorn's final, unexpected swerve back into abstract painting. Just as he had rejected abstraction in the early 1950s as a style that constrained his freedom as an artist, in the mid-1960s he, in turn, renounced the figurative, stating that it was 'not relevant to what I wanted to do'.

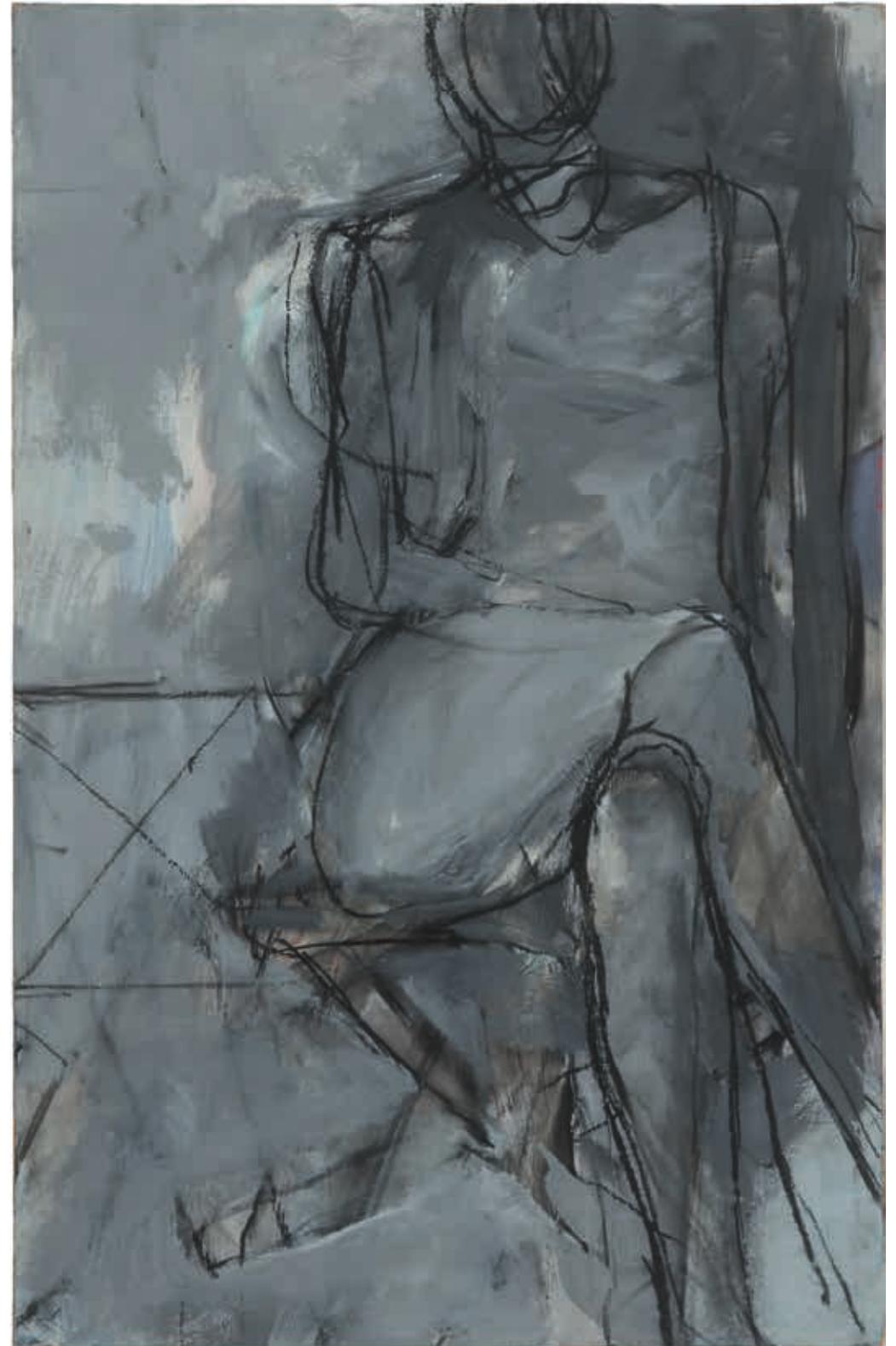
**Cat. 39**  
*Untitled (Seated Woman)*, 1966

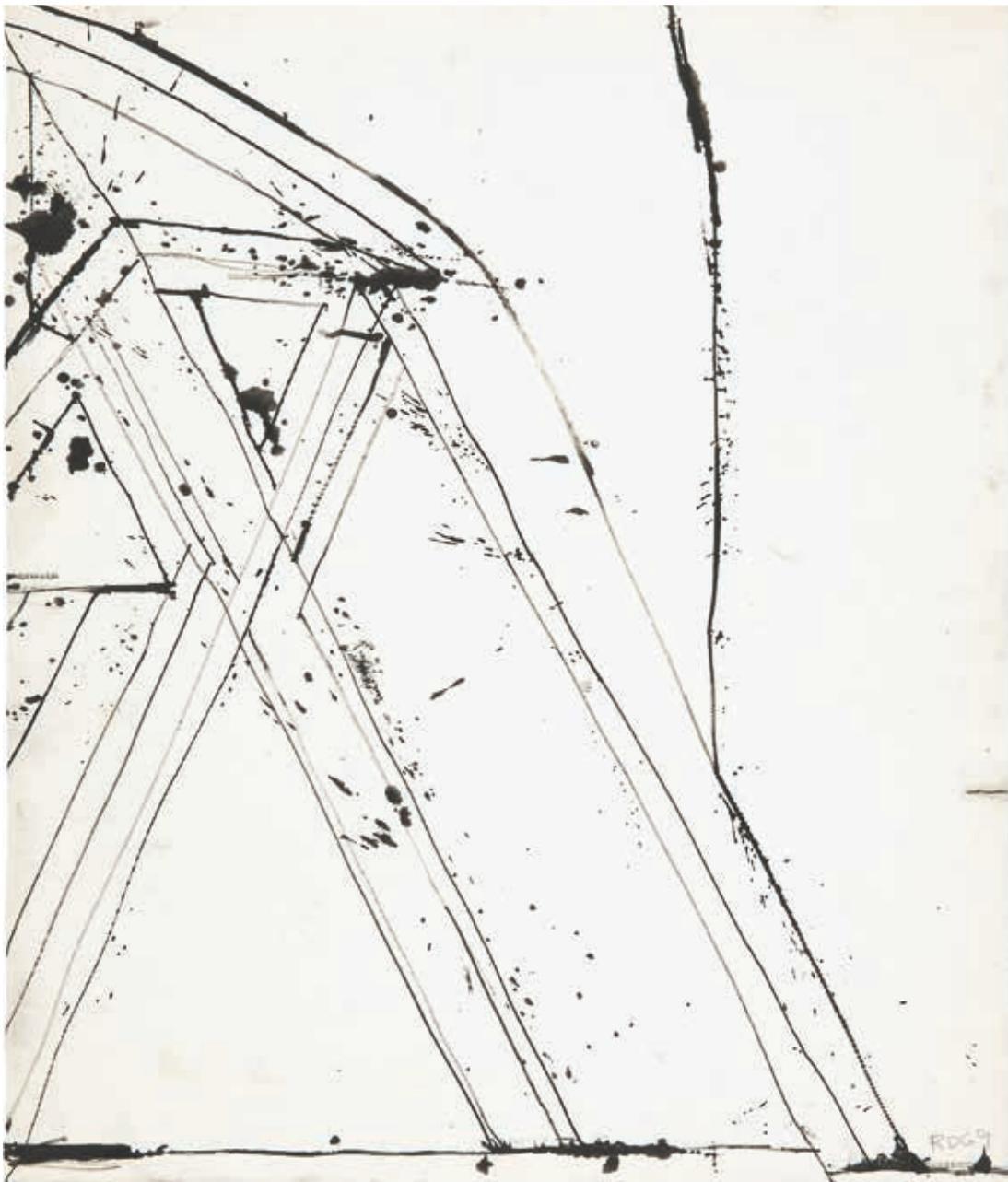
Synthetic polymer paint and charcoal on board, 78.8 × 50.4 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Gift of the artist, 1990  
© 2015 The Richard Diebenkorn Foundation

**'Maybe someone from the outside observing what I was doing would have known what was about to happen. But I didn't. I didn't see the signs. Then, one day, I was thinking about abstract painting again. As soon as I moved into Sam's space, I did about four large canvases – still representational, but, again, much flatter. Then, suddenly, I abandoned the figure altogether.'**

Richard Diebenkorn  
interviewed by John Gruen,  
*The Artist Observed: 28 Interviews with Contemporary Artists*, 1991





**Cat. 51**  
*Untitled*, 1969  
 Ink on paper,  
 40.6 × 34.9 cm

Richard Diebenkorn Foundation  
 © 2015 The Richard Diebenkorn  
 Foundation

**‘Non-painters often say, “what a lovely light here”, but I myself don’t see it ... My own approach is very different. I see the light only at the end of working on a painting. I mean, I discover the light of a place gradually, and only through painting it!’**

Richard Diebenkorn in conversation with Dan Hofstadter, in Dan Hofstadter, ‘Profiles: Almost Free of the Mirror [Richard Diebenkorn]’, *The New Yorker*, 1987

**Cat. 51** Early Ocean Park works embrace a degree of experimentation and variety and in this *Untitled* work from 1969, we see Diebenkorn play with line and form. The modest size of the paper is taken up with diagonal lines that meet off-centre. Running in contrast to this ruled precision is the spattered ink that collects in clusters, or dribbles away to the edge. Here, the medium of drawing and the small size of the paper allow Diebenkorn greater freedom of expression and experimentation. The composition has a force and grandeur of scale that belies its size.

**Compare this *Untitled* work with the earlier figurative drawing, *Seated Woman*, by Diebenkorn. What has changed, or stayed the same, within his drawing practice?**

**Cat. 47** In his Ocean Park series, Diebenkorn synthesised the influences of the artistic precursors that had preoccupied him since early in his career. When looking at a succession of works from this period, it is possible to trace the continuity of certain key influences: the off-kilter grids of Mondrian, the sense of internal and external space of Bonnard and, especially, the *pentimenti*, sensual colour and scumbled surfaces of Matisse. In 1966, Diebenkorn visited a Matisse exhibition at the University of California Art Gallery, Los Angeles. The exhibition included two works that had never before been shown in America: *View of Notre Dame* (fig. 3) and *French Window, Collioure*, both from 1914. These must have been a revelation for Diebenkorn, anticipating as they do so much of his own interests in painting.

Even so, there is much in the Ocean Park series that represents a new advance in Diebenkorn’s work, perhaps especially the size of the canvases and their grid-like qualities, made with a combination of ruled lines and freely drawn marks. By the mid-1970s, most works in the series had crystallised into compositions of horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines grouped along the top and one side of the painting, with expanses of reworked canvas at the centre. In *Ocean Park #79*, a classic example from the heart of the series, right angles cluster towards the upper-left edge like overlaid panes of coloured glass. The work’s subtle interplay of pastel blues, greens and yellows, with a contrasting red strip that pulls the eye towards the top edge, recalls harmonic compositions in music. Diebenkorn had a particular interest in Bach and Mozart, and some of his works evoke their sense of airy harmony. Despite this cool balance, the work retains the marks of its making; in certain areas, the paint drips and spatters, revealing the spontaneity of its construction, without preparatory drawings or sketches to guide its structure.

**To what extent could *Ocean Park #79* be considered a landscape painting?**

**'Matisse for me... can somehow make a consistent kind of indoor/outdoor... And there isn't the break between outdoor/indoor... except in the drawing and the idea.'**

Interview of Richard Diebenkorn by Susan Larsen for the Archives of American Art, 1985–87



**Cat. 47**

*Ocean Park #79*, 1975  
Oil on canvas,  
236.2 x 205.7 cm

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Purchased with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and with funds contributed by private donors, 1977.  
© 2015 The Richard Diebenkorn Foundation

**Fig. 3**

Henri Matisse  
*View of Notre Dame*,  
1914

Oil on canvas,  
147.3 x 94.3 cm

Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest, and the Henry H. and Mrs. A. Conger Goodyear, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Sinclair Funds, and the Anna Erickson Levene Bequest given in memory of her husband, Dr. Phoebus Aaron Theodor Levene.  
Digital image © 2015, The Museum of Modern Art/Scala, Florence





**Cat. 54**  
*Cigar Box Lid #4*, 1976  
Oil and graphite on wood  
(cigar box lid),  
21.3 × 18.1 cm

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## Diebenkorn and scale

**Cat. 54** In the mid-to-late 1970s, Diebenkorn made thirteen paintings on cigar-box lids. As a smoker, Diebenkorn would purchase or be given boxes of cigars, the wooden or cardboard lids of which subsequently became surfaces for intimate works made for family and friends. The compositions clearly belong to the Ocean Park series: in one work, right angles gather in one corner, leaving areas of open space opposite it; the palette of another involves dusty creams, yellows and blues. The surface becomes a positive element in the cigar box lid, as here in *Cigar Box Lid #4* its printed lettering remains visible beneath layers of oil paint. As in the larger Ocean Park paintings, this work is a record of its own making, a series of overlaid decisions and revisions that feels both expansive and intimate.

**Discuss the difference between scale and size. How can a small work of art seem large?**

## Conclusion

In 1988, the Diebenkorns moved from Santa Monica to Healdsburg in northern California, a rural setting where Richard Diebenkorn continued to work, albeit at a smaller scale. A series of operations, including two rounds of open-heart surgery, had affected his movements so profoundly that he could no longer work on the scale of his previous paintings. Some of these late works continue in the Ocean Park format and style; others were figurative, including images of clubs and spades derived from playing cards, which hark back to his early days at his grandmother's knee and appear frequently in works throughout his career. Diebenkorn maintained a modest output for the rest of his years, embracing both the figurative and the abstract at will, and died at the age of 70, on 30 March 1993 in Berkeley, due to the complications of emphysema.

Despite his oscillation between figurative and abstract approaches during the major periods of his career – sometimes surprising even himself – Richard Diebenkorn maintained critical and commercial success throughout his life. He emerged at a moment when painters (with some notable exceptions, such as Willem de Kooning) generally identified themselves as either figurative or abstract, with the emphasis very much on the latter in the 1950s. While no rebel – he described himself as ‘really a traditional painter, not avant-garde at all’ – Diebenkorn’s unwillingness to be bracketed as one particular kind of artist led him to create some of the most significant works of American art in the second half of the twentieth century. Surveying his mature output it becomes evident that although he undertook many transformations, certain threads ran throughout his career, from the earliest work to the last. In them one sees a unique

responsiveness to landscape, a fascination for retaining visual interest across the entire surface of the canvas, and, fundamentally, a sense of bringing together European and American influences while maintaining a barometer-like sensitivity to the natural world. As he himself put it, 'I wanted to follow a tradition and extend it.' Diebenkorn's work is a testament to the way the traditions of art are both maintained and transformed, illuminating the past and beating a track into the future.

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Cat. 8  
*Urbana #2 (The Archer)*,  
1953  
Detail

