

# RA

Royal Academy of Arts

## Art Detectives

A guide for  
young visitors

Art Detectives are supported  
by the Flow Foundation



Richard  
Diebenkorn

You will need  
a pencil to  
write and draw

## Introduction

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Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993) was an American artist, and interestingly, worked as both an abstract and figurative painter. This means that he switched painting styles during his life, and while some of his paintings showed recognisable objects (figurative), he also made paintings with shapes and colours that do not resemble anything in the natural world (abstract). Diebenkorn moved back and forth between these different types of art rather than sticking with just one kind, which was extremely rare.

This exhibition shows three periods within Diebenkorn's career, each displayed in its own room. We start with his early abstract works, which were mostly painted in New Mexico, Illinois and north California, then figurative works created in Berkeley, then finally the Ocean Park series, completed in southern California. We'll see how location was a major influence on Diebenkorn's paintings.

**Let's explore...**

## Section 1. Early Abstract Works

Find number 1:

*Disintegrating Pig, 1950*

It was rare for Diebenkorn to give his paintings a title. We think that this work was inspired by a visit he made with his family to the New Mexico State Fair, where he saw enormous prize-winning pigs.

Can you see the pig in this painting?  
Try tilting your head, turning it upside down...

Try drawing a pig 'figuratively' (as you would draw it from real life, in a way that's easy to recognise) in the space below.



## Section 1. (continued)

Find number 1:

*Disintegrating Pig, 1950*

Now in the space below, try and draw the pig in an 'abstract' manner. You might like to think about the different shapes that make up the pig – its pointy ears, fat belly and upturned snout. Abstract art can be more about what you feel or think rather than see.



Is it harder or easier to draw the pig true to life, or in a way that doesn't resemble the real animal? Why?

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## Find number 2: *Albuquerque #4, 1951*

Diebenkorn was a soldier in World War Two, and worked as a cartographer – someone who makes maps. In order to work out the routes for the maps, he would fly over areas of land. The flat patterns of the landscape that he saw from the air influenced his art.

How would you describe the artist's viewpoint in this work? What could he be looking down on?

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There are some interesting symbols amongst the flat expanses of colour. Can you find the shape of a cross? What else?

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# Section 1 (continued)

Find number 8:  
*Urbana #2, 1953*

In 1952 Diebenkorn and his family moved from New Mexico to Illinois, which is in the Midwestern United States.

This painting is also sometimes known as 'The Archer'. Can you guess why that might be the case?

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Are there any shapes that remind you of an archer, with his bow and arrow?

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How would you describe the colours in this painting?

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## Section 2. Figurative Work, Berkeley

Find number 40:

*Untitled (Striped Blouse)*, 1966

In this room, we now see Diebenkorn's move from abstraction to figuration. Here you'll find images of landscapes, still-lives, and the human form. This was a surprising move for Diebenkorn, as he was one of the leading Abstract artists at that time.

The woman in this drawing is wearing a striped blouse. There is another painting in this room of a woman wearing a similar top. Can you find it? Write its number here:

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Do you think the model in both paintings is the same woman? Why or why not?

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Section 2. (continued)

Find number 32:  
*Cityscape #1*, 1963

This painting is a landscape influenced by the northern part of California. It is divided into colourful rectangles and stripes, but the scene is recognisable, not abstract.

Can you describe where we as the viewer are positioned in this painting? Are we looking down at the road or up at it? How can you tell?

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Looking at the painting in three sections: the left, the middle and the right. Describe what you can see in each section and how they are different.

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Can you tell what the weather is supposed to be like in this image? How?

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# Section 3. Ocean Park

Find number 45:  
*Ocean Park #27, 1970*

In the 1960s, Diebenkorn returned to an abstract style of painting after nearly ten years of painting figuratively. This period of his life was partly inspired by a new studio he had in Ocean Park, a neighbourhood in southern California. The studio had big windows and let in a lot of light.

Would you describe this work as:

Structured                      Controlled  
Light    Unfinished    Spontaneous  
Calm                      Beautiful

Some people have compared this painting to stained glass, like the kind you might find in a church window. Can you see a similarity? Why or why not?

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## Section 3. (continued)

Find number 47:  
*Ocean Park #79, 1975*

Look carefully at this work for a long time, starting at the left and working your way across to the right. Which area of colour stands out the most to you? Why?

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If you look closely at the painting, do the areas of colour appear flat and uniform to you, or can you see where the artist has built up layers of colour?

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Why do you think Diebenkorn has chosen to show us his process in this way?

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Find number 54:  
*Cigar Box Lid #4, 1976*



How is this similar to the other Ocean Park works  
we've looked at in this room?

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Does size have an effect on the impact  
of a work like this?  
Why?

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If you would like to see your drawings on the RA website, please hand in your completed Art Detective at the Reception Desk. Alternatively, if you would like to work on your picture at home and send it to us later, you can post it to:

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#Diebenkorn