

Painting As If From the Model: Richard Diebenkorn's Ocean Park Series
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“The continuity of Diebenkorn's art . . . the unity of his achievement proceeds from a relationship between abstraction and representation, and between imagination and reality.”

John Elderfield

In 1943 Richard Diebenkorn, who then was twenty-one, was stationed at Officer Candidate School in Virginia. He paid close attention to Henri Matisse's *Studio, Quai St. Michel* (1916) nearby in the Phillips Collection, Washington D.C. Painted at a dark moment during the previous world war, it shows an image of his model Lorette in progress on the easel. “She had a theatrical gift for transformation, switching from ethereal purity to luxuriant abandon, seeming to change mood, age, even size as readily as she tried on costumes.”ⁱ “Nothing like this had ever happened,” Hilary Spurling adds, “in Matisse's studio before.” In 1916, he was making a difficult artistic and personal transition. Having done his boldest experimental art, he was unsure about how to proceed. Three years later he moved south, leaving behind his family, turning to focus on representing life within his studio.

The window in *Studio, Quai St. Michel* shows gray central Paris. Like *Studio, Quai St. Michel*, *Ocean Park N. 90* (1976) has a diagonal running upwards to the right hand top corner, opening the picture just as the view on Paris opens Matisse's studio scene. Both paintings have intense deep red, fleshy pink (that color fills much of Diebenkorn's painting), and blue and gray rectangles. *Studio, Quai St. Michel* shows the model posing for a painting in progress on the easel. We see the back wall of Matisse's studio and look out at an angle through the windows. The entirely abstract *Ocean Park N. 90* depicts neither a studio nor windows. But subtract Matisse's model and the studio, and you have the bare structure of all the Ocean Parks, with their bands of color organized around a diagonal.ⁱⁱ

These Diebenkorns, Arthur Danto rightly says, “are more than abstractions.”ⁱⁱⁱ They are less about Ocean Park “than about the act of painting, as if the works had become more and more their own subjects.” Or as Diebenkorn put it:

All paintings start out of a mood, out of a relationship with things or people. To call this impression abstract seems to me often to confuse the issue. *Abstract* means literally to draw from or separate. In this sense, every artist is abstract.^{iv} He opens the picture up with his diagonals, whether they be a line across the center as in *Ocean Park No. 19* (1968) or the triangle at the upper right hand corner in *Ocean Park No. 115* (1979) as if we were looking through an open window. Diebenkorn wants that we imagine looking out of his pictures into a vast space. No wonder he chose not to move to New York. He needed the open horizons of California.

You don’t need much biographical information or social history to admire these self-sufficient aesthetic works of art. But identifying their context will, still, help you better see their distinctive qualities. Painting the Ocean Parks as if working from a model, Diebenkorn thus established a relationship of continuity with his earlier figurative paintings. Set *Woman in Profile* (1958) alongside *Ocean Park No. 7* (1968), with the landscape behind her akin to the abstract Ocean Park structure and you see this. He started the Ocean Parks when he moved to Santa Monica, and ceased to make them when he left. Of course, they don’t depict Southern California. But the Ocean Parks are tied to that site, as Matisse was tied to his individual models. And just as Matisse dismissed a model when he exhausted her usefulness for his art, so Diebenkorn eventually worked through Ocean Park and moved on. “The presence of the model is not only her own presence,” Elderfield writes of Matisse, “it is also the culture’s presence.”^v Ocean Park, one might say, was Diebenkorn’s Lorette. Note how many of the Ocean Parks, No. 67 and No. 87 are good examples, have large flesh colored areas.

Matisse preferred human figures to landscapes because they best allowed him to express an “almost religious awe towards life.”^{vi} The emotional interest aroused in him by pretty models, he added, “is perhaps sublimated sensual pleasure, which may not yet be perceived by everyone.”^{vii} This use of the model is not different in kind from Giorgione’s in his *Sleeping Venus* (1507-8), in which the reclining nude stands for nature, her sensuousness inspiring the artist. When Matisse said,

I dream of . . . an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter . . . something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue,^{viii}

he set himself for accusations of being an escapist. The same complaint has been made about Diebenkorn, whose style formed in the 1940s and 50s had nothing to do with the most influential movements of the 1960s, minimalism and pop art, which responded to contemporary politics, nor with later developments which during his lifetime radically transformed the canon. He thus is like Matisse, who had no relationship with the leading movements of his long later life-- dada, surrealism, and, in the 1950s, Abstract Expressionism. By 1993, the year of his death, Diebenkorn seemed a figure of the distant past. The abstractions of Ellsworth Kelly, Gerhard Richter and Robert Ryman have a place in the recent survey *Art Since 1900* by the most influential group of American art historians, the scholars associated with *October*. Diebenkorn's art does not.

At each year's end, Robert Mangold sends friends a little print. In 1997 it depicted ellipses within a container, in 2005 an orange tree-like abstraction, and in 2006 a graceful curve on a green-and-red background. Born in 1937, only fifteen years after Diebenkorn, Mangold belongs to a very different visual culture. Unlike Diebenkorn, who made rectangular pictures, he uses shaped canvases and flat color with no pentimenti. For Mangold, Diebenkorn's paintings must look like works of art in progress. The title of his *Curved Plane/Figure VII* (1995) describes the geometry of this curve containing his oval figures. *Ocean Park No. 120* (1979) also divides the canvas, but where Diebenkorn's picture shares colors with its successor, *Ocean Park No. 125* (1980), which does not contain a vertical dividing line, the structure of Mangold's *Curved Plane/Figure VIII* (1995) is closely allied to that of its predecessor. Diebenkorn painted in his Ocean Park series on a place, while Mangold does variations on a structure. Mangold's move some decades ago from Manhattan to upstate New York did not change his style.

And yet, like Diebenkorn, Mangold works in series. Sometimes, indeed, his titles reflect identify his repeated motif, as in the *Attic Series* (1990), which alludes to a classic Greek vase. This is a distinctive modernist procedure. Raphael did not paint saints nor did Caravaggio show martyrs in series. But one important precedent is provided by J. S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*, and Frederic Rzewski's

The People United Will Never Be Defeated (1975), 36 variations on a Chilean tune, his tribute to Allende's anti-Fascists. Bach, Beethoven, and Rzewski create many variations on a theme, returning at the end to that starting point. We can hear the theme through its variations just as, in looking at varied Ocean Parks, *No. 11* (1968), which is horizontally oriented, *No. 22* (1969) with its green trapezoid at the center, and the late, mostly blue *No. 129* (1984) we see the same structure. Just as we hear Bach's, Beethoven's and Rzewski's compositions as variations on one melody, so we see that whilst changing his canvas shape and palette, Diebenkorn presents many variations on a theme, pictures whose visual relationship is unmistakable.

Matisse returned again and again to the same model, but he never worked in series. Each of his successive pictures is a distinctive work of art. Developing many variations, Mangold pursues a motif until he is done with it. Diebenkorn proceeds in a very different way. Like Matisse, he makes art about making art. And just as his predecessor shows himself working in the studio, so Diebenkorn wants us to see him working out his abstractions. But unlike Matisse, he reveals that process within the finished picture. Elderfield describes this working process.

The activity of drawing is what sustains the activity of painting by forming a contrast and complement to the spreading of areas of paint . . . the artist changes pace as he is painting, addressing the spread of the surface then dividing it, enlarging and opening space then contrasting it, destroying an image then restoring it.^{ix}

He adds: "I have never watched Diebenkorn working: it is the history contained in his pictures themselves that suggests this account of what their making requires." The Ocean Parks seduce viewers into imagining the process of their creation.

Often Matisse's paintings use mirrors to bring the viewer into his picture. And some drawings explore this motif in a more daring way when, for example, *Reclining Nude in the Studio* (1935) shows at the right front edge the artist's hand drawing that model. Seeing these Matisses, we imaginatively become a creator of the art we experience, as if we were making the very picture we see. (Already we see this effect in *Studio, Quai St. Michel*, turning from the incomplete image on the easel to Lorette.) Of course this is only an illusion. But it is a seductive illusion. Diebenkorn's Ocean Parks

play with the same effect. By including in the completed painting traces of its making, he wants that we imagine watching him paint. Hans Namuth's photographs of Jackson Pollock painting, which became as influential as those paintings, suggested that what matters is the process of art making, not just the product. Allan Kaprow, Robert Morris, Claes Oldenburg and Richard Serra learned from these photographs how to create works of art. The Ocean Parks build upon the same way of thinking, but with a longer-range historical perspective. Where Matisse shows images-in-progress of his model, Diebenkorn shows us the process of painting abstractly as such. In that way, he is most visually sophisticated heir to Pollock.

In ways Diebenkorn himself could not have anticipated, his deeply traditional visual style thus opened the way to the future, as at least one of his peers understands.

Diebenkorn is so often . . . compared to Matisse, because his works are a monument to hesitation and revision. As if the conventional role of European and American model were reversed (Sean Scully).^x

Europeans probe and revise, but most American artists act decisively: that is the true cliché. Occasionally Diebenkorn's images are frontal, *Ocean Park No. 128* (1984) is an example. But more typically, see *Ocean Park No. 140* (1985), he shows the world as if at an angle, in the figurative pictures as in the Ocean Parks, a point of view linked to his fascination with hesitation and revision. Showing things straight on was not Diebenkorn's style. That he was very moody, that was the basis for his essential strength.

In the 1980s in his abstract paintings Scully's opposing fields of stripes come together sometimes harmoniously, but often in opposition. Frequently conflict is shown but not altogether resolved. Harmony, generally precarious, mostly tentative, was always subject to revision. But in the 1990s Scully's Walls of Light present a very different aesthetic. No longer doing abstract narratives, Scully identifies his pictures by reference to places, times of day and colors. In *Chelsea Wall I* (1999), the first painting made in his new Manhattan studio, conflict, division, and strife have been left behind. Like *Ocean Park No. 30* (1970), this picture is composed of vertically set rectangles of color. The Walls of Light too are abstract paintings tied to very specific places. But unlike Diebenkorn, who chose to live and work for a long period in Santa Monica, Scully travels widely, identifying the location, place of time of day of his picture in the title, as in *Wall*

of Light Peru (2000). And although there are many Walls of Light, all with a similar structure, built from rectangles of color shown frontally, they are not a series.

Dan Hofstadter offers a marvelous characterization of Diebenkorn:

Misgivings, disenchantments, indirections; residues of excitement or ennui; the feeling of being lost and like it; sudden intimations that this beginning is also a perfect end; remaking the rules as one goes along; trembling on the verge of a revelation without the faintest desire to know what that revelation might be—these, it seemed, were the painful pleasures of Diebenkorn country.^{xi}

No doubt many of us have such feelings, but who else who made great art from uncertainty? Diebenkorn did because he is a Janus-faced figure. Always intensely fascinated by Matisse, when he turned himself into an abstract painter working in series he demonstrated how a great artist can look backward historically even as he magnificently moves toward the future. Often Diebenkorn is identified as a second-generation Abstract Expressionist, a belated painter building upon the achievement of Pollock and the other pioneers. But that interpretation, I would argue, is mistaken. Everyone agrees that the Abstract Expressionists were great masters. But what has handicapped reflection on contemporary art is the failure to understand that abstract painting remains an ongoing tradition. What Pollock and the other Abstract Expressionists began was continued by Diebenkorn and his successors. To fully comprehend the greatness of Diebenkorn's very beautiful Ocean Parks, you must understand the ways in which his concerns taken up by Mangold and Scully. In ways that Diebenkorn himself perhaps could not have anticipated, he opened up a fecund tradition, a style of visual thinking whose ultimate implications remain, as yet, wide open. That is one reason why the Ocean Parks deserve our attention right now.

This essay is for John Elderfield.

ⁱ Hilary Spurling, *Matisse the Master: A Life of Henri Matisse. The Conquest of Colour, 1909-1954* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 198, 200.

ⁱⁱ John Elderfield has called attention to the compositional echoes of *Studio, Quai St. Michel* in the Ocean Park paintings. I have consulted also Pierre Schneider, *Matisse*, trans. Michael Taylor and Zbridget Strevens Romer (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), 424-30 and Jack Flam, *Matisse: The Man and His Art, 1869-1918* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 437-41. And Elderfield's *Pleasuring Painting: Matisse's Feminine Representations* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995).

ⁱⁱⁱ Arthur C. Danto, *Encounters & Reflections: Art in the Historical Present* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990), 194, 194-5.

^{iv} Quoted in *Modern Painting and Sculpture*, eds. Louise and Joseph Pulitzer (Cambridge: Fogg Art Museum, 1958), 30-1.

^v John Elderfield, "Figure and Field," *Richard Diebenkorn*, exhibition catalogue (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1992), 28.

^{vi} Quoted in Jack D. Flam, *Matisse on Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), 38.

^{vii} Flam, *Matisse on Art*, 82.

^{viii} Flam, *Matisse on Art*, 38.

^{ix} John Elderfield, *The Drawings of Richard Diebenkorn* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988),

^x Personal correspondence.

^{xi} Dan Hofstadter, "Almost free of the Mirror," *The New Yorker* (September 7, 1987): 68.