

GREY ART NYU GALLERY

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Exhibition highlights early works of West Coast painter Richard Diebenkorn

Diebenkorn in New Mexico
on view at the Grey Art Gallery January 25 through April 5, 2008

Diebenkorn in New Mexico is the first museum examination of a seminal moment in the career of artist Richard Diebenkorn when, between 1950 and 1952, he was enrolled in the graduate fine arts department at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Supported by the G.I. Bill and distanced from the art worlds of both East and West coasts, Diebenkorn produced astonishingly mature and beautiful works that have, until now, remained relatively unknown. On view at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University from January 25 through April 5, 2008, the show includes some 40 paintings and drawings from museums and private collections, as well as from the Diebenkorn estate, many of which are being exhibited together for the first time.

Recognized early on as an important artist, Richard Diebenkorn is best known for his epic "Ocean Park" series (1967 through 1978), large-scale paintings that hover between pure abstraction and depictions of the California landscape. Less familiar are the paintings he produced while living in New Mexico, where the high desert's dazzling light and harsh scenery permeated his artistic sensibility and influenced his mature style. Defying easy categorization, Diebenkorn's loose brushwork and all-over compositions are often labeled Abstract Expressionist, aligning him with New York School artists. Indeed, Diebenkorn taught painting in the late 1940s at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute), where Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko were visiting professors. As a World War II veteran, Diebenkorn could have attended any college in the United States on the GI Bill. He chose the University of New Mexico because he "liked the look of the place," and its geographic and ideological distance from the New York School offered freedom to explore a visual language that resonated with his disciplined approach and affinity for open spaces. As Diebenkorn himself remarked, "Temperamentally, I have always been a landscape painter."

Co-curated by Charles Lovell and Charles Strong, *Diebenkorn in New Mexico* has been organized by the Harwood Museum of Art at the University of New Mexico, Taos. “The exhibition recognizes the large influence that New Mexico *as a place* had on the artist’s exploration of and success in the idiom of abstraction,” states Lovell. “This in-depth show posits that Diebenkorn’s sojourn in Albuquerque provided an important fulcrum of what would become his mature aesthetic,” notes Lynn Gumpert, Director of the Grey Art Gallery. “As New York University’s fine arts museum, the Grey is delighted to present this scholarly and focused exhibition, which provides new insights into better-known works by this key West Coast artist.”

Born in Portland, Oregon, in 1922, Diebenkorn was raised in San Francisco, where his family moved when he was a toddler. He spent summers with his grandmother, a civil rights lawyer who, once retired, published short stories and focused on the cultural education of her grandson. In 1940 he enrolled at Stanford University, where he studied with Reginald Marsh and expressed appreciation for Arthur Dove and Edward Hopper. Through Stanford faculty connections, he was invited to the home of Sarah Stein (sister-in-law of Gertrude and Leo Stein) in Palo Alto where he saw works by modern European avant-garde artists such as Matisse, Picasso, and Cézanne. After enlisting in the Marine Corps Officer Training Program in summer 1943, Diebenkorn was assigned to a base 30 miles from Washington, D.C., where he became involved in mapmaking and cartography. His fascination with the irrigation patterns and geological formations that he saw from the air during his first plane flight would later exert a profound impact on his painting. Indeed, Diebenkorn’s references to aerial landscape views are apparent in a number of the “Albuquerque” paintings seen in *Diebenkorn in New Mexico*. After his release from the Marines, he enrolled at the California School of Fine Arts in 1946; he joined the faculty there the following year.

In contrast with Diebenkorn’s later canvases, which are characterized by sweeping expanses of pale blues and greens, his New Mexico paintings are improvisational compositions featuring intense oranges, reds, and yellows, interrupted by bold, meandering lines. The artist’s intention was, in his words, “to think of natural forms in relation to my own feelings,” with each work reflecting an independent experience. Critic Dore Ashton, who visited the University of New Mexico in 1950, notes: “One of my enduring memories was seeing, for the first time, a painting by Richard Diebenkorn—a golden vision of the Southwest, abstract, with small currents of shadow drawing by the winds in the sands, and filled with the special light that still emanates from his paintings.”

Diebenkorn is widely recognized as a crucial figure in the development and recognition of the West Coast as an important center of artistic production. His impact on California art is noted in Peter Plagens’s *Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945–1970* (1974/2000), and a number of his paintings were

included in the exhibition *Los Angeles 1955–1985: The Birth of an Artistic Capital* (Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2006). *The Drawings of Richard Diebenkorn* at the Museum of Modern Art (New York, 1988) received rave reviews, and in 1998, the Whitney Museum of American Art celebrated Diebenkorn's career with a retrospective exhibition. *Diebenkorn in New Mexico* presents a rare opportunity to view heretofore little-known paintings and drawings.

Diebenkorn in New Mexico is accompanied by a 154-page illustrated catalogue featuring a foreword by Charles M. Lovell, Director of the Harwood Museum of Art and co-curator of the exhibition, and essays by Mark Lavatelli, artist, art critic, and professor of humanities at Medaille College in Buffalo, New York; Gerald Nordland, a leading Diebenkorn scholar; and Charles Strong, artist and independent co-curator. The publication illustrates over 100 of Richard Diebenkorn's works from his time in Albuquerque, as well as documenting his art from its beginnings in 1943 to his arrival in New Mexico.

Diebenkorn in New Mexico is organized by the Harwood Museum of Art at the University of New Mexico, Taos, with major support from the Thaw Charitable Trust and the Richard Diebenkorn Estate. The Grey Art Gallery presentation is made possible by the Abby Weed Grey Trust. Public programs are supported by the Grey's Inter/National Council.

GENERAL INFORMATION

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E-mail: greygallery@nyu.edu

Web site: <http://www.nyu.edu/greyart>

Hours:

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11am–6 pm

OPEN LATE Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm

Saturday: 11 am–5 pm

Sunday, Monday and major holidays: Closed

Admission: Suggested donation: \$3; NYU staff, faculty, and students: free of charge

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