



The artist's Triangle Building studio, Oakland, Calif., c. 1962 © Richard Diebenkorn Foundation

Faces and Figures: Richard Diebenkorn's Formative Space

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Like so many others looking for a fresh start, at a crucial moment in Richard Diebenkorn's creative development, the artist went West. In what was really a homecoming after three years spent in Albuquerque, New Mexico and Urbana-Champaign, Illinois from 1950 and 1953, Diebenkorn had come back to the Bay Area. It was there that he ultimately returned to a figurative idiom. For him this transition was less a rejection of the dominant trend of the day than it was a search for something to come up against.¹ Going back to California allowed the artist to see with fresh eyes a familiar structure that centered itself on a perpetual state of becoming. The resulting approach embodied a kind of presentness that could be articulated in technical subtleties: the flicker of an eye, or the turn of a nose drawn from the immediacy of his intuitive brushwork. His figures from this period stand behind masks that are somehow both incidental and intentional, barely concealing the life bubbling beneath his pentimenti.

What distinguished this turn from Diebenkorn's earlier practice of figuration, was the time that he had spent away from home. With each new relocation, his process and his palette were marked, either by specificities like his capturing of the minute shadows in the Southwestern desert, or negations, such as his vibrant, Matissean interpretations of the midwestern planes. His move to the figure upon returning to the West Coast was not immediate. After first taking up a series of critically acclaimed abstractions in the two years after settling back in Berkeley, he soon had his sights set on something representational, affirmed by weekly life drawing sessions with



(fig.1) Richard Diebenkorn, *Woman by the Ocean*, 1956, oil on canvas
79 x 59 in. (200.7 x 149.9 cm) (CR. no 2080)

his friend David Park.² Figuration soon took over. It gave Diebenkorn a foundation against which he could push back, throwing his subjects into a sometimes-antagonistic relationship with an ether that both defined—and was defined by—the figure.

“Going back to California is not like going back to Vermont, or Chicago; Vermont and Chicago are relative constants, against which one measures one’s own change,” Joan Didion wrote in 1965. “All that is constant about my childhood is the rate at which it disappears.”³ Like Didion’s descriptions of San Bernardino Valley or Sacramento, Diebenkorn’s faces evoke a people at the precipice of a palimpsestic civilization. In the popular imagination the West had become synonymous with an offer of a fresh start—a potential for self-reinvention that was present in the nascent counter-culture of the Bay Area, conjuring an idealism that hardens too much when you try to pin it down as a set of life principles. The fact that the West Coast lacks a sense of preciousness about its history lent it a kind of liberated, indeterminate plasticity that New York and its eponymous School could never really know.

Diebenkorn’s oil on canvas portrait of *David Park on a Hot Day* from 1956 (CR 2083, pp. 8 & 9) is a case in point. Shown at work on one of the many life drawings produced during their weekly sessions, Park becomes the subject here: he has sketchbook and pencil in hand. Much like Henri Matisse’s mastery of the mythic Mediterranean light of Collioure and Giorgio de Chirico’s sun-baked piazzas of Turin, Diebenkorn perfected the mist of the Bay Area in his sometimes-sparse application of grey washes. In his 1956 painting of Park, a sun that is felt but not seen cuts through the fog. The atmospheric temporality transforms Park, bleaching the sitter’s torso to such a degree that



(fig. 2) Henri Matisse, *Male Model*, c. 1900, oil on canvas, 39 1/8 x 28 5/8" (99.3 x 72.7 cm)
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the effect is almost oppositional—even cold. This picture brings to mind his *Woman by the Ocean* (CR 2080, fig. 1) from the same year, the primary subject of Herschel B. Chipp’s crucial essay for *ARTnews*, “Diebenkorn Paints a Picture,” an article commissioned in the wake of his highly successful solo show at the Poindexter Gallery in New York the year prior. Chipp noted the way that chance effects—biproductions of intention in the mind’s eye—became the guidepost of Diebenkorn’s process.⁴ In his portrait of Park, the sitter’s body appears in tension with the back corner of the room—his head nearly indistinguishable from what looks like an off-kilter window behind him, one that establishes his relative relationship to the space. Absent a visible exterior landscape, any geographical location in this picture is alluded in Diebenkorn’s depiction of ephemeral atmospheric effects.

By contrast, *Two Nudes*, 1960 (CR 2762, pp. 20 & 21) moves outdoors in search of a different kind of spatial definition. Painted on an unusually large scale for this period, a male and a female nude appear scaffolded in place by a meandering blue background. This intense mass of color sculpts the figural pair by cutting into the flesh-tones with layers of blue, in some cases even defining their bodies with a contour line of the same hue. Formal parallels abound—in the alignment of the couple’s arms that suggest one uninterrupted limb, or the V-shape of the tree that appears in inverted form in the open stance of the figures’ legs with two feet firmly planted on the ground. Most difficult to determine is the precise nature of their social interaction; the tilts of their heads are inaccessible and perhaps even disengaged. Are they touching or overlapping? Evident in this painting is Matisse’s long-standing influence over Diebenkorn’s color palette and subject matter since the artist’s frequent trips to the Phillips

Collection in Washington DC in the 1940s while training in Quantico, Virginia. He attended a 1952 Matisse retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Art that featured *Male Model*, c. 1900 (fig. 2) and *Dance (I)*, 1909 (fig. 3), two potential sources for the subject and palette.⁵ Unlike Matisse, however, Diebenkorn did not try to harmonize his figure-ground relationships to achieve a joyful frisson, and instead used his direct manner of application to arrive at a psychological tone that was comparatively inconclusive.

It is this distorted dialogue between figure and milieu that also distinguishes Diebenkorn from Edward Hopper, an artist whom the former had admired since his student years. The two painters similarly use the isolated figure as a visual metaphor for urban ennui, but Diebenkorn operates at a different pitch. His paintings evoke a specific time and place marked by the tension between the concealing action of his strokes and the muted assertiveness of the figure's peachy flesh. When building up his layers in portraits such as the c. 1960–66 untitled painting of a female sitter in profile (CR 2231, p. 31), Diebenkorn combined unmixed pigments in the same pass of the brush, each bristle reproduces a quasi-divisionist separation with the economy of a single stroke. In *Girl with Glasses* from 1963 (CR 3358, p. 24), the subject's helmet-like mass of hair is lacquered in a grey glaze; her black lenses are blotted out by an abbreviated reflection. The size and shape of her nose shifts like an optical illusion and can be read as enclosed by Diebenkorn's strokes or otherwise as pushing back, expanding out of her body.

Occasionally, the figure penetrates the mask. In *Head (Portrait of a Friend)*, 1958 (CR 2524, p. 15), the sitter's eyes appear open and accessible beneath a shelf of violet; the mask seems to be coming loose, no longer integral to the face. The forehead is first a site of construction and second a place to interrupt that constructed planarity. Her rounded pearl-like earring and cardigan sweater—although fungible in their identification—come through here with an unusual clarity.

Even when it is not represented directly, the specter of the landscape is always present. At the time that Diebenkorn was creating these faces, he was also painting his hometown of Ingleside Terraces from memory, but in ways that reflected his temporal distance from that time, and the life experience that resided between. His figures correspond to a similar idea. The almost-geological quality of his faces reveals the way that these people have been formed by place. For example, Diebenkorn's *Untitled* painting from 1960 (CR 2757, p. 25) of a closely cropped male portrait builds up tension through the haloes of identical strokes framing his face in a field of energy. The eyebrows, nose, and mouth all form a black mass so dominating that it could be read as a craggy recess. A tiny spark of life asserts itself with a slight hint of white in the figure's left eye, a feature with edges so undefined that it is indistinguishable from the bridge of the nose. Not the primary subject, forces of nature are at play here: the sitter's left cheek rises up in a flat plane—the artist's surface manipulation turns the paint into a wave hitting the beach. Something conspicuously human always resides beneath, despite the distance created by Diebenkorn's heavy impasto.

California features allusively in these images as a constantly shifting idea—both a geography and a mentality—palpable in the faces and figures of the people who live there. Diebenkorn's return home allowed him to see the tacit rules that dictated the local rhythms or the speech patterns of regional accents. He gave a figure to the difficulty of establishing indeterminacy as a principle. In the end, definition itself turns out to be the *raison d'être*, a reminder that the closer one gets to achieving the essence of the thing, the farther away it can seem.



(fig. 3) Henri Matisse, *Dance (I)*, 1909, oil on canvas, 8' 6 1/2" x 12' 9 1/2" (259.7 x 390.1 cm)
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NOTES

1 Gerald Nordland, "The Early Abstract Years, 1947–1956," in *Richard Diebenkorn: The Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press and the Richard Diebenkorn Foundation, 2016), 85.

2 When Diebenkorn moved back to the Bay Area he began participating in weekly figure drawing sessions using a live model with David Park, Elmer Bischoff, and even Hassel Smith, who commuted from Marysville, California. This was seen as an outdated practice at the height of Abstract Expressionism, but Diebenkorn's involvement in this group impacted his use of ink drawing, gouaches, and monochrome washes for the rest of his career. See Thomas Williams, "Drawings of the Bay Area School," *Master Drawings*, vol. 51, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 481–520.

3 Joan Didion, "Notes from a Native Daughter," in *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* (New York: Picador Modern Classics, 1968, 2017), 257.

4 Herschel B. Chipp, "Diebenkorn Paints a Picture" *ARTnews* 56, no. 3 (1957): 44–47.

5 The show "Henri Matisse," curated by Alfred H. Barr Jr., began at MoMA, between November 13, 1951–January 13, 1952, and travelled to the Cleveland Museum of Art (February 5–March 16, 1952), the Art Institute of Chicago (April 1–May 4, 1952), and finally the San Francisco Museum of Art (May 22–July 6, 1952). Another possible source is the Alfred H. Barr Jr. book *Matisse: His Art and His Public*, published by MoMA in 1951, which Diebenkorn had in his personal collection. See "Richard Diebenkorn's Library: A Bibliography of Matisse Publications," in *Matisse/Diebenkorn*, edited by Janet Bishop and Katherine Rothkopf (Munich, London, and New York: Baltimore Museum of Art, Delmonico Books and Prestel, 2016), 167–169. Both the book *Matisse: His Art and His Public* and the exhibition featured Matisse's *The Dance*, 1909.