

RICHARD DIEBENKORN: “WORKS ON PAPER” AT L.A. LOUVER

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“Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.”

— William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Lecture III

Ken Collins’s portrait of Richard Diebenkorn, used to promote the recent L.A. Louver show of his works on paper, is peculiar in its emphasis on the distance between the camera and its subject. The artist, placed in the far corner of a room in his Ocean Park studio, is dwarfed by walls of brick, plaster, and wood. Illuminated by a sliver of natural light coming from a large opening in the cinderblock wall, Diebenkorn’s eyes are obscured by shadows. His legs are crossed in a further distancing gesture, although one arm rests easy on the back of a folding chair, almost touching the white wall on which the artist’s double is cast. There are no easels, brushes, or canvases in view. The only indication of the sitter’s vocation is the inscrutable gaze that serves as the vanishing point of the picture — the intersection at which the planes composing the room converge to form the illusion of space. Rather than showing a staged vision of the artist at work, the portrait offers an image of Diebenkorn’s vision itself, approximating his aesthetic sensibility and formal concerns through the careful composition and considered omissions that structure the photo. Like Diebenkorn himself, the photo attempts to give the outline of something ethereal: the meaning that accrues between people and things — which, after all, is their true essence for us.



Richard Diebenkorn photographed by Ken Collins in his Ocean Park Studio, 1980, Santa Monica, CA. Courtesy of the [Richard Diebenkorn Foundation Archives](#) and [L.A. Louver](#).

Introducing a group of black and blue drawings from the 50s made with ink, gouache, graphite, and charcoal, the exhibition's press release explains Diebenkorn's interest in pursuing these formal experiments with a studio note written at the time in which the artist states: "I could then look, and did, at the table beside me where I found a legitimate poetry attached to the facts of an ashtray and a coffee cup." The meandering lines of these works seem to trace around the form of things keenly observed, not capturing the outer limits of their shape per se (as is the goal in traditional draftsmanship) but feeling them out with a gaze. There is an affinity to cubism in the desire to capture the full roundness of objects in space without disguising the flatness of the picture plane, but rather than fracturing the composition into a glittering mass of intersecting perspectives, Diebenkorn's hand moves with the eye around the tableau, flowing over the surface of things, enveloping them. The blue that he uses calls back to Giotto's azure — the blanket of heaven that covers the earth — here, however, mixed with black, perhaps the worldly shadow of Joachim's hut. In *Untitled (CR 1422)*, we have an image of the artist incorporated into the scene he depicts: an eye peers out from the top right of the drawing; above, a group of curved shapes and charcoal lines suggest the movement of a hand groping and scratching; the rest of the drawing seems to pour out from this corner, filling the rest of the paper, observer and observed collapsed. In other drawings, we see how this attitude, this aesthetic disposition towards the world, gradually became a language of forms. The implied perspective of *Untitled (CR 1232)* and *Untitled (CR 1304)* already begins to curve back away from the viewer like in the aerial photographs that would inspire the characteristic structure of Diebenkorn's later works.



Richard Diebenkorn, *Untitled (CR 1422)*, 1955. Charcoal and ink on paper, framed: 16 3/8 x 13 5/8 in. Courtesy of [L.A. Louver](#).

Two large drawings from the 70s, executed on satin vellum-like paper, show a close relationship between Diebenkorn's haptic manipulation of materials, creasing and smudging the paper, and his pursuit of a graphic and painterly poetry. Structure emerges from the active engagement of the artist with the artwork, from the way that each responds to the other. The resulting image has a natural quality, even if the forms that compose it are largely abstract. The gouaches of clubs and spades — symbols that repeat throughout Diebenkorn's oeuvre — seem more concerned with the opportunities they afford for carving space and creating windows or portals within a picture — that is, a concern with defining the space inside, behind, and around the symbols — than with the cultural meaning or serial quality of the shapes themselves. The curves of the club and the spade return later in the etchings on view where they give shape to what looks like the nape of a neck and the rounding of shoulders. The etchings are not explicitly figurative, but they imply a body



Richard Diebenkorn, *#3 from Six Softground Etchings*, 1978. Soft ground etching, ed. AP, framed: 45 1/2 x 31 1/4 in. Courtesy of [L.A. Louver](#).

or group of bodies whose proportions are defined by the divisions that break up the picture plane. As figures, they have a muteness; they speak with the force of their presence alone. Self-contained, resolute in their silence, they are not unlike devotional idols whose gestures are now enigmatically frozen, communicating sacred truths to those who no longer know how to decipher their meaning. The image of Madonna and child recedes into nature: a memory to be forgotten.

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