

## RICHARD DIEBENKORN

*Ocean Park #79, 1975*

Oil and charcoal on canvas, 93 x 81 in, Estate #1495



COURTESY THE RICHARD DIEBENKORN FOUNDATION

## JOHN SACRET YOUNG

# A California Story

### Looking for Diebenkorn

*He would start and then stop, draw back and then start again. Dick was suspicious of what he called the headlong, where you start and go on no matter what happened.*

—Wayne Thiebaud about Diebenkorn

**E**arly on after being back in LA, I heard that the artist Richard Diebenkorn had also moved to Southern California. He was teaching at UCLA and had put together a studio near Ocean Park in Venice. My first time I had lived in a number of different places across the face of Los Angeles, off Adams Boulevard near USC, in a borrowed room in Hollywood, a tiny apartment in Los Feliz, and briefly north of Malibu. But I didn't know Venice well and Ocean Park not at all.

I was still young and, as far afield as Diebenkorn was from what I best knew, I was taken by the work of his I had seen. I thought I knew what he looked like: photos showed a well-set-up man with a brushy moustache, thick glasses, and shirts with button-down flap pockets that could have come west from L.L. Bean. Without an address, I took off on an expedition to find this artist. It was foolishness for sure, and I foraged along Abbot Kinney Boulevard, saw and knocked on the metal doors of new lofts nearby, jigsawed around the canals over the narrow bridges in Venice, and of course I never found Diebenkorn.

I had picked a Santa Ana day for my trek, part of an unending week of Red Wind and the heat and threat of fire. One had already eaten up 2,500 acres in Topanga Canyon. Days before, it had lit up a chunk of sky and spun ash in the air, the bleached white shade of the inside of a shell that tracked you down, indoors or out. Window light looked like chemistry experiments, beaker colors, and left in its wake, finally, a dusk of stunning purple.

The temperature was still ninety-nine degrees, even so close to the coast. I had bailed out of a tiny cubicle I had rented as an office that hadn't air conditioning. It was above one hundred degrees there, too hot to work, and the tiny space had tissue-thin walls and I could hear two women talking in the office next door. I could see them through a louvered window, also not working, sitting on the floor sharing complaints, talking about the heat, aging, and the impossibility of relationships. One was casually brazen, remembering how she once had had groundbreaking sex, once, and ruefully laughing about spots that were just too tight to fuck in, like the front seat of a Volkswagen. She had had to say, "Well, sorry, buckaroo." Despite herself and her tossed-off words, pain seemed to press through her words and make new coins of them.

I ended my foibled, failed, fruitless-seeming journey