

## 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

parked atop a hill in Ocean Park near the Santa Monica Airport in the still unrelenting heat and clutching the remnants of the girls' conversation. It was late afternoon now and there wasn't a single subtraction or softening of light. It was stark and made me blink and squint, as if I had sand in my eyes, and seemed to sharpen and yet shatter and splinter whatever I could see, like the paintings of Ocean Park by the man I had sought and hadn't been able to find.

As Diebenkorn wrote: "A painting . . . is an attitude. It says this is the way it is—and its beauty, fitness, magnetism, or emotion embraces the viewer and, if it does, seduces him—in some way persuades him that this is a way of viewing what it is to be viewed."

I looked down to Lincoln Boulevard and up to another hill and beyond it down to the Pacific Ocean. The rising and falling shapes jammed together. The configuration accorded the land and defied realism. The shapes seemed to both fracture and flatten, an impossibility. The visual truth wasn't literal and had a metaphoric echo to how alien Southern California had felt to me the first time I had arrived.

Sitting in my car, looking west and then south toward the bigger airport, LAX, I thought back to then, several years before I was married when I had little money and no car. It was a strange existence in such a city. Wherever I went, I walked. The locus of my life was very small. I had hitchhiked often in college on the East Coast. I tried it once on the Santa Monica Freeway. Once. It was clearly dangerous and not done and, by the way, illegal.

On the plane coming down to LA from San Francisco, I had met a girl named Joyce and when we landed she gave me her number. Still carless, I called her. Joyce picked me up in hers and we drove out the same Santa Monica Freeway to the Pacific Coast Highway to Malibu. My first time.

On the beach, Joyce shucked off her shirt and revealed a one-piece bathing suit that showily narrowed and snugged into a metal ring beneath her breasts. She was opulently built, and clearly nervous, as if she both wanted me to notice, even make a pass, and very much was worried that I might. At first Joyce was full of questions about me, but they didn't last long. As I listened she turned quickly back to talking about herself. We were still very much strangers yet as we sat on the beach a few feet above the high tide line, Joyce broke down in tears.

She told me about her boyfriend, his lousy treatment of her and, without looking up and noticing the two men who were walking practically over our feet, she told me that she was pregnant. I had no idea why she was telling me. Perhaps it was easier to share it with someone she didn't know rather than face the lousy boyfriend, or her parents, or her real friends.

I had no idea what to do or say or how to help and only could wonder what was this world I had come upon where such intimacy was so easily and quickly shared as well as what the two men, Joey Bishop and Buddy Hackett, who had passed us so closely, might have heard and the surreal-ity of who they happened to be.

So different than the customs and sights and silences of where I had come from.

This became a definition of Los Angeles to me. As someone said: in Los Angeles cause and effect aren't linked like elsewhere. They are separated, broken even. Cause gets on the freeway in one place and effect gets off at another exit miles away.

I never saw Joyce again. There were a few phone calls, each more distant and awkward until they ceased entirely and her fate fell out of my life.

I kept a journal in those first years and they are full of encounters that seemed like they would lead somewhere and then didn't. They were like strikes of a match—a call from a barely known neighbor asking my help in fear of a prowler and my facing the wrong end of the shotgun she carried when opening the door in a way short bathrobe; a twenty-fifth birthday party for an ash blond, more-than-pretty young woman held in candlelight because her gift to herself for the event was an eye lift, the stitching set like second eyelashes; and standing with an acquaintance side by side on his roof with hoses in our hands fighting to save his house from a fire—full of incident and intimacy but no fruition, continuity, or conclusion. Like Joyce, they fell away, ended without punctuation. We went our separate ways and on into separate lives, like ping-pong balls ricocheting down our own freeways. I lost track of these I mentioned—and there were others—and never saw them again.

Back then, still without a car, I took to driving around the city with a man I met, also new to LA, in his Pontiac Firebird. He had an early cassette player and a tape of

composer Bernard Herrmann's scores for films, mostly Alfred Hitchcock movies. We put it in as we ventured through the twists and turns of the canyons in the Hollywood Hills, as far west as Mulholland Drive and the San Diego Freeway, and toured east past the Cahuenga Pass and into Los Feliz. His car became a camera and with the music there seemed mystery and melancholy to what we saw, stories ready to sprout.

We would turn a corner or round a curve and come upon a house that belonged to the forties and the housing development Hollywoodland, "a Spanish house, like all the rest of them in California, with white walls, red tile roof, and a patio out to one side" that earned the title as the House of Death in James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity*.

The very next house might be completely different, designed by Richard Neutra, Robert Schindler, A. Quincy Jones, or one of more than a half dozen about Los Angeles by Frank Lloyd Wright. It might be beautiful, all glass or a classic Craftsman. It might be an oddity or a ghastly sight, as if it had wrangled its way in from a fifties B science fiction movie, cantilevered off a hillside, its entire underbelly—pipes and ducts and wiring—hanging out for all to see from the street below.

There was no sense to it. The architecture house to house seemed not to fit, like the landscape I would later see from Ocean Park, and split here and there like the lives I had glimpsed, and the diagnosis I had heard about cause and effect.

*In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back with a certain alienated majesty.*

—Emerson

When critics write about the artist I went in search of and didn't find, Richard Diebenkorn, and the nearly one hundred Ocean Park canvases that burst forth from his time in LA, they say he "successfully mapped out a neutral zone between conceptualism and painterliness, striking a balance between the romantic formalist sensuality of Matisse and the precise mathematical serialism of Mondrian." They say his "abstractions are composed of second thoughts, pentimenti, erasures and emendations" and that "many of his images involve the same elements: a scaffold

of lines and bands, overlapping planes and atmospheric veils of color through which layers of activity can be perceived. The effect is an architecture of form in which the beauty has as much to do with the intricacy of the joinery as with the overall design." They say, "The strength, and the curiosity, of his work also involves the contradiction inherent in the idea that indecision, conflict and tinkering could become the essence of such sensuous and seductive painting."

Whatever the incisiveness or eloquence of such words, it's not what I see and feel most in Diebenkorn's great paintings. Rather it is the apprehension of not just the geography I witnessed as I sat parked and drove about a city decades ago, and still. It is the capture of an essence of a place, a people, and a way of life.

In the twentieth century, it is Edward Hopper, a painter so different from Diebenkorn yet one he nonetheless admired, who characterizes and embodies so much of what I witnessed and felt on the East Coast. A silence and stillness in everyday subjects that arrest both infinity and apprehension, and that he makes immutable.

And it is Richard Diebenkorn whose work—however seemingly abstract—feels charged with an echo of similar silence, unease, and sharp shadows in a scenography that waits in slanted glare and broken angles for the unexpected that embodies movingly so much of what I was to find on the West Coast.

—from *Pieces of Glass: An Artoir*, Tallfellow Press, 2016

**John Sacret Young** is an award-winning writer, producer, and director, perhaps best known for his work on the acclaimed television shows *China Beach*, which he cocreated, and *The West Wing*. In addition to his various accomplishments in television and film, Young has also authored three books—*Gallitzen & Sons*, *The Weather Tomorrow*, and the *Los Angeles Times* best seller *Remains: Non-Viewable*—and written essays for books or exhibitions about John Marin, Charles Burchfield, Andrew Stevovich, and sculptor Lois Sloan.