

Review: Painter Diebenkorn found inspiration in New Mexico desert

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Can we discern the point or the period at which an outstanding artist found his own voice?

Every retrospective whispers this question. But it has special piquancy in "Diebenkorn in New Mexico" at the San Jose Museum of Art, a survey of the least-studied period in the career of Richard Diebenkorn (1922-1993).

In 1949, Diebenkorn, a World War II veteran and Oregon native, decided to use the benefits of the GI Bill to get a master's degree at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. He took his young family there in early 1950, and stayed for the next two and a half years.

Diebenkorn had already attended Stanford, UC Berkeley and the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute), where he had also taught.

At CSFA he had contact with powerful older artistic personalities, including Clyfford Still (1904-1980), Mark Rothko (1903-1970) and David Park (1912-1960), with whom Diebenkorn would later define the manner known as Bay Area Figuration.

In 1950, Diebenkorn still considered himself an abstract painter, but never denied that his art flowed from sources throughout his experience, not just from the experience of painting.

Some of the paintings in San Jose, such as "Untitled (Albuquerque)" (1952), have a sparseness and tawny palette that we might associate with the New Mexico landscape. Others Diebenkorn topped off with deep putty-colored slathers reminiscent, up close, of the gluey desert mud of the region. But we can imagine memories of contemporary painting - particularly Still's and Hassel Smith's - feeding such a picture as much as Diebenkorn's response to landscape did.

A muted sense of mischief ripples through Diebenkorn's Albuquerque work, a quality hard to detect in even the most buoyant of his later abstract paintings. For me, that is the mark of this phase of his art. It even informs the rare, praying-mantis-like welded steel sculpture on view, possibly Diebenkorn's only extant sculpture. But the mischief shows most clearly in the drawings, which frequently flirt with the look of unsprung or unfinished cartoons.

Gerald Nordland mentions in the exhibition catalog Diebenkorn's love of George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* comic strip, with its fanciful New Mexico moonscape setting. Herriman's work may have forged a link in Diebenkorn's imagination between the literal openness of the desert, the openness to possibility and nonsense in *Krazy Kat*'s homeland and the fruitful uncertainties of improvising on canvas or paper.

Contrary to expectations, the drawings, with minimal color, make the most profound passage of "Diebenkorn in New Mexico." Offering few opportunities for revision, they display his pictorial thinking at its freshest and most exposed. Diebenkorn's drawings, of this period particularly, remind me of Stanley Burnshaw's definition of poetry: "notations for an internal dance."

Critics persist in referring to Diebenkorn's early work as "abstract expressionism." It does indeed respond to the art of older figures of the New York School, such as Willem de Kooning (1904-1997) and Arshile Gorky (1904-1948). But Diebenkorn's New Mexico-period work pretty consistently lacks the sense of emotional eruption that might justify calling it expressionistic.

However, it does hew to the New York School principle that a painting should discernibly include its own development among the things to which it responds.

Hence the sense given by so many pictures in "Diebenkorn in New Mexico" of the topmost layers of paint as conclusive in more than a serial sense. The briskness of their brushstrokes also frequently suggests quick, unplotted movement.

Diebenkorn's paintings show him toying with ciphers and the sort of pictorial matrix that will keep their ambiguity afloat, and so keep the viewer's mind hoveringly tolerant of abstraction.

Happily, SJMA has paired the Diebenkorn show with "De-Natured: Works from the Anderson Collection," which includes a fine example of Diebenkorn's mature abstract painting style, "Ocean Park #60" (1973).

The thin, washy surface of this picture and its play with lines parallel to or studiously divergent from the picture's edges, exemplify the sort of abstract classicism Diebenkorn evolved to poise the energies at play in the work of the New Mexico years.

"Ocean Park #60" also shows color and line reconciled to a degree that almost never happens in the Albuquerque pieces, despite many pleasing and engaging efforts to make them reciprocally supportive.

The rest of "De-Natured," which draws on the incomparable holdings of Peninsula collectors Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson, assays the notion that contemporary artworks variously reflect concepts of nature and our place in it.

Take away that rickety conceptual framework and the show would suffer little. It includes drawings by Vija Celmins, William T. Wiley and Yvonne Jacquette, a remarkable early "Rear View Mirror Painting" (1988) by Los Angeles prankster sculptor Tim Hawkinson and a striking black and white lithograph by Sam Francis (1923-1994).

Diebenkorn in New Mexico: Paintings, drawings and a sculpture.

De-Natured: Works from the Anderson Collection: Paintings, sculpture and prints. Through Jan. 6. San Jose Museum of Art, 110 S. Market St., San Jose. (408) 271-6840, <http://www.sjmusart.org/>.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/10/18/DDBJSQTC8.DTL>

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