

The New York Times

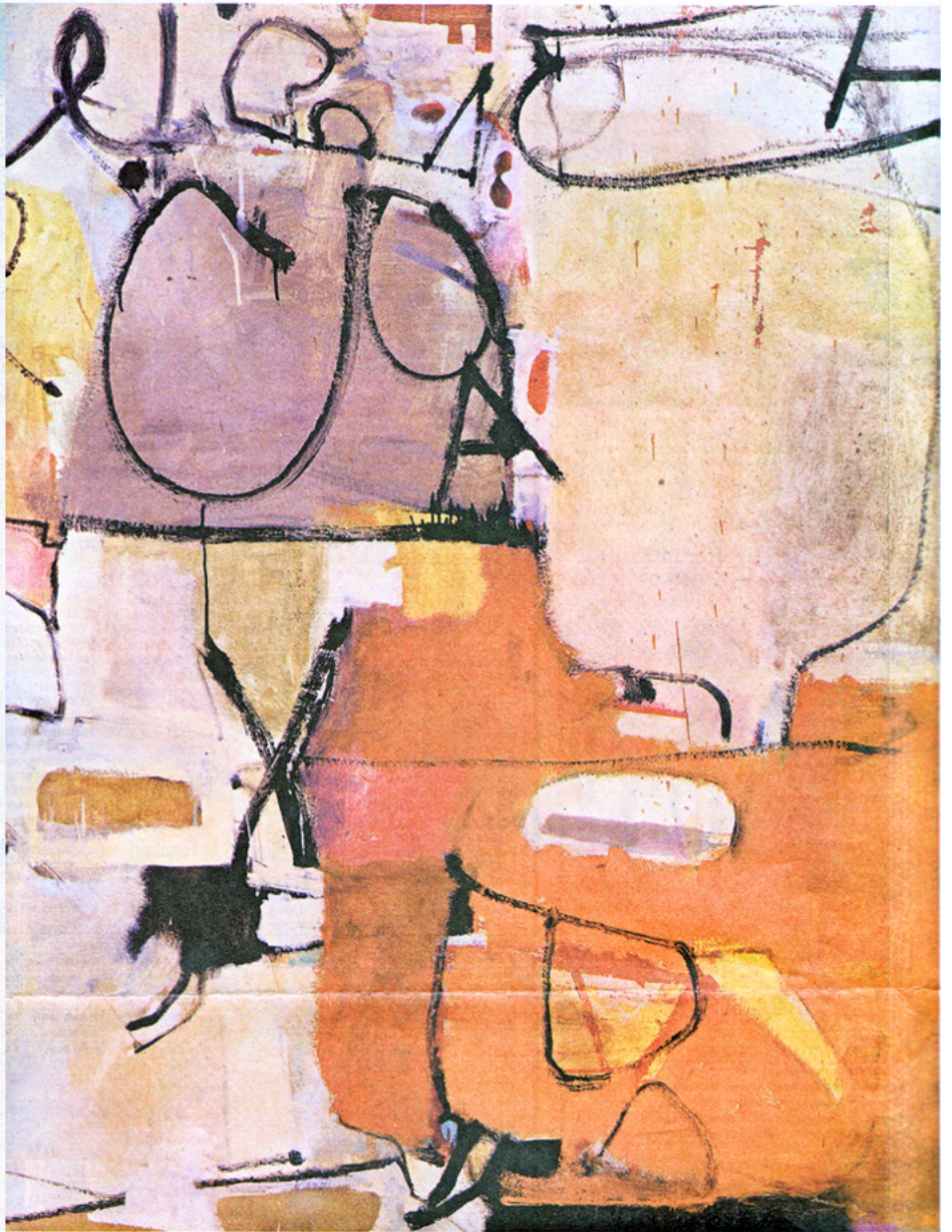
An Expressionist in Albuquerque

Like Georgia O'Keeffe, Stuart Davis and others, Richard Diebenkorn went to New Mexico and had a breakthrough. He arrived in Albuquerque in January 1950, with his wife, Phyllis, and their young son. He had been teaching at the California School of Fine Arts but had decided to go to graduate school at the University of New Mexico, courtesy of the G.I. Bill, so that he could paint full time. He was 27 years old.

ROBERTA
SMITHART
REVIEW

Diebenkorn's progress during his 30-month stay in New Mexico is the subject of a radiant hodgepodge of a show, full of striving, stumbling and sudden effortless glides at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University. Diebenkorn would later go on to make grander, more complex paintings, both figurative and abstract, than the ones here. But too many of these later works are tamped down by his studious reserve and exquisite touch; they balance on the cusp of vitality without really getting their feet wet. In many ways his painting was never freer, less predictable or more full of the future than in New Mexico.

By the time he got to Albuquerque, Diebenkorn was a fairly seasoned painter. As a young child growing up in San Francisco he had set his sights on becoming an artist and was steadily encouraged by his maternal grandmother, a lawyer who painted on the side. As an undergraduate at Stanford University he had made accomplished variations on Edward Hopper's chalky realism, bathing it in a sharp West Coast light. While at Marine training camp in Virginia in 1944 he had managed to immerse himself in the Phillips Collection in Washington and visited the Museum of Modern Art in New York.



In 1946 he returned to San Francisco and studied at the California School of Fine Arts (later the San Francisco Art Institute) with David Park, who became a close friend and whose blunt figurative paintings influenced Diebenkorn's return to representation in the late '50s. The next year a travel grant enabled him to return to the East Coast and spend eight months in Woodstock, N.Y. (Greenwich Village rents were prohibitive.) Between widely spaced visits to the city, he spent 12-hour days in the studio "teaching myself to paint," as he said later.

In an essay for the exhibition catalog, the art historian Gerald Nordland describes Diebenkorn as "one of the creative giants of the second half of the 20th century and among the most original of all modern artists." But Diebenkorn, who died in 1993 at age 70, may have come closer to the truth when he said: "I'm really a traditional painter, not avant-garde at all. I wanted to follow a tradition and

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Diebenkorn in New Mexico
"Untitled (Albuquerque)," 1951,
is on view at the Grey Art Gallery at
New York University.

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IMAGES FROM THE ESTATE OF RICHARD DIEBENKORN

“Untitled (Albuquerque Series),” painted by Richard Diebenkorn in 1951 during his stay in New Mexico.

extend it.”

In addition to his considerable painterly gifts, Diebenkorn had an eye for progressive art and a knack for synthesis. In New Mexico, away from the burgeoning art worlds of both San Francisco and Manhattan, he followed and extended Abstract Expressionism in works that emphasized the painting process in areas of layered color punctuated by darting lines, usually black.

These works have a humor and even a feistiness absent from most of his other work. What is especially startling is that they assimilate a style Willem de Kooning had broached barely two years earlier in his famous black-and-white abstractions.

Diebenkorn had seen the de Koonings in reproduction in 1948, when he was intent on marrying line and brushwork in his own art. He was also interested in cartoon art; the books he took to New Mexico included one about George Herriman, creator of *Krazy Kat*.

The Grey Gallery show, the first to focus on this short but rich phase, originated in a larger version at the Harwood Museum of Art at the University of New Mexico. With 19 paintings, 24 works on paper and one sculpture, it contains much that is unfamiliar, including canvases that have been on public view rarely if at all.

The marvelous “Untitled (Albuquerque)” from 1951, for example, has been exhibited only once since the Diebenkorn retrospective initiated by the Albright-

ning had broached barely two years earlier in his famous black-and-white abstractions.

ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

More images from the exhibition at the Grey Art Gallery:

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“Diebenkorn in New Mexico” is on view through April 5 at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, at Waverly Place, Greenwich Village; (212) 998-6780, nyu.edu/greyart.

Knox Art Gallery in Rochester in 1976. It features a lower right quadrant of bright, brushy egg-yolk yellow over white and red to which a bubble-like outline adds a bulbous head. Upper left, a series of cursive lines and loops imply an outburst of language, culminating with a red F at the top edge that is really a pronged patch of color that escaped an incursion of white. And beyond all this an empty speech balloon bobs at the painting’s edge, too small to contain the verbiage.

Herriman’s art is a factor here and in other paintings. It is explicit in several ink drawings, including one in which a thick vertical line has another vertical in tow. Vertical No. 2 is under attack from above by a large star and a crescent moon; delicate splatters of ink imply profanity, speed or both.

Diebenkorn always maintained that all his work was a reaction to reality, most often landscape. In New Mexico his colors brightened, his paint thinned, his line loosened and his compositions became actively improvisational.

The painting process was transparent, which was nothing new; it was in most Abstract Expressionist work. You could usually see all the way to the back — the raw canvas — of a Pollock drip painting, for example. But Diebenkorn added a more complicated awareness to the process, punctuating ragged blocks of layered color with lines and quasi signs, introducing irreverence and, at times, sexual innuendo.

For example, in an untitled painting that Diebenkorn made in 1950, shortly after arriving in Albuquerque, a smudged black



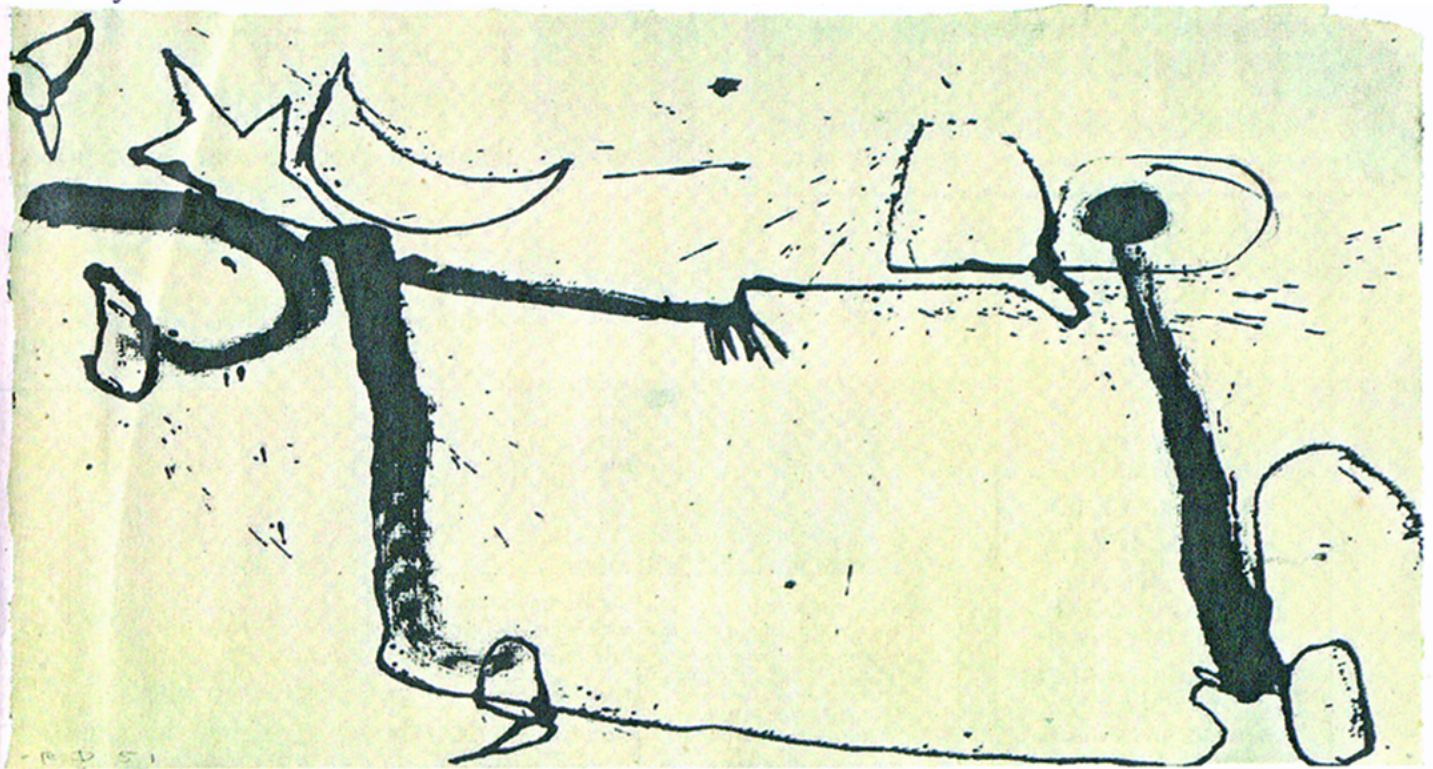
Richard Diebenkorn in front of his home in Albuquerque.

dot turns an area of yellow into a soft belly. Elsewhere, heavier surfaces might be undermined by unexpected holes that gave glimpses of earlier stages of the painting. In a small work from 1951, white kidney-bean gaps in a field of pink read as subterranean nests incubating ellipses of color — a small green one and a larger sky-blue one — while a darker pink shape at the top suggests a pair of women's underpants. In "Untitled 'M'" (1951), black ellipses are spread like dance steps across a mostly white field.

Diebenkorn used drawing to create a parallel commentary on and within the painting, a way to "talk back," signal second thoughts or direct our attention. He encircled painted shapes with black lines for emphasis, crossed out forms or sprinkled in random X's, triangles, sudden loops and letter fragments. All these elements invite you to look more closely at the way the paintings have been made, layer by mark, creating lush physical narratives rife with jokes and asides.

Mr. Nordland is right in his conclusion that the works in this show confirm, once more, that Abstract Expressionism was a national, not a New York painting style. But they also suggest that Diebenkorn tilted de Kooning's improvisatory style toward later developments, creating a variant of Abstract Expressionism that sidestepped the style's solemnity and its wholeness in favor of something more fractured and accessible.

These paintings foreshadow Color Field abstraction and Pop with their economy, their wit or their profusion of signs. They exhibit a self-consciousness of process and a willingness to mix high and low that would emerge more clearly at the end of the 1950s in the work of artists as diverse as Peter Saul, Cy Twombly and Jasper Johns. Diebenkorn, working alone in New Mexico, released some significant early warning signs.



Diebenkorn's "Untitled," 1951, from "Diebenkorn in New Mexico" at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University.