

May 2017

BALTIMORE

“Matisse/Diebenkorn”

BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART

It is no wonder that Richard Diebenkorn is known as a “painter’s painter.” His devotion to the medium is evidenced not only in his lush handling of paint but in his constant experimentation and his refusal to be constrained. By moving fluidly between abstraction and representation, as many prewar modernists had, Diebenkorn undermined the hard distinction between the two that circulated among midcentury polemicists. In doing so, he shaped an artistic trajectory that would come to be considered as among the most extraordinary of the post war period. Throughout Diebenkorn’s fifty-year journey from abstraction to representation and back again, Henri Matisse remained his muse. The Bay Area painter first discovered Matisse in the Palo Alto, California, collection of Sarah Stein, Gertrude Stein’s sister-in-law, while he was an undergraduate at Stanford University in the early 1940s. By the time he encountered the work of the then-greatest living French painter at a 1952 Los Angeles show, he was already hooked.

Diebenkorn remained enthralled for the rest of his life, even traveling to Russia to see Matisse’s work at the Hermitage and Pushkin Museum and poring over his extensive collection of Matisse catalogues. Throughout his peregrinations from California to New Mexico to Illinois and back, Diebenkorn took inspiration from the French master’s endless exploration of color and form. The two painters were different kinds of modernists, however. Take, for example, their interiors: Whereas Matisse created shimmering, Orientalist scenes whose shimmering patterns defied the wartime deprivation that clouded their production, the postwar painter preferred the exhausted poetry of bare rooms, that often contained nothing more than a folding chair or a pair of scissors to slice through space. Yet both painters had an instinct for the permeable boundary between inside and out: Rooms *were* windows, landscape *was* flesh, and light was the scalpel that cut through the distinctions.

Co-organized with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (where it is on view through May 29), “Matisse/Diebenkorn,” which opened at the Baltimore Museum of Art this past fall, takes up the matter of this enduring influence. The exhibition is one of the best pedagogical shows of two painters ever mounted. This is in part due to the dynamic collaboration between the two institutions. While the Baltimore Museum has a sizable collection of Matisse paintings, the SFMOMA installation restores a necessary sense of place to Diebenkorn’s practice, which was colored by the artist’s lifelong engagement with the California landscape. More important, the curators’ meticulous research and extraordinary eye for lyrical correspondences uniquely enabled them to create room after room of astonishing juxtapositions. With only the rare moment of overstatement—not every use of red in Diebenkorn’s oeuvre is a reference to Matisse’s goldfish!—the revelations are profound.

Whereas the memorable 2003 “Matisse Picasso” show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York felt something like a duel, “Matisse/Diebenkorn” feels more like a pas de deux. Even when Diebenkorn’s paintings incorporate overt references to Matisse’s work, they never feel derivative. Matisse may have led the dance, but he doesn’t ever steal the show. No painter who has noted the echoes of Matisse’s footsteps in Diebenkorn’s singular path can help but hope that she, too, might enter into such an exuberant dance.

Diebenkorn looked to Matisse not so much for permission but for inspiration—to transform an early expressionist work with a new Easter palette, as in *Berkeley #5*, 1953, or to introduce a whimsical pattern in

an otherwise serene expanse of color, as in his 1965 *Recollections of a Visit to Leningrad*. Yet Matisse’s influence goes much deeper than surface detail.

Perhaps the most compelling moment in the show is the placement of Matisse’s minimalist *French Window at Collioure*, 1914, amid several canvases from Diebenkorn’s magisterial “Ocean Park” series, 1968–80. Other Matisse canvases on display from this period, such as his sketchy *View of Notre Dame*, 1914, helped catalyze Diebenkorn’s hybrid exploration of drawing and painting in the aforementioned Santa Monica–based series. But *Collioure* was the window through which Diebenkorn sailed to return to abstraction. The canvas’s startling simplicity provided a model for how to move beyond the pulpy de Kooning–inspired expressionism of his “Berkeley” series, 1953–55, to a pared-down, cartographic elegance that verges on purity without, thankfully, ever getting there. Diebenkorn’s commitment to the labor of painting manifests in the latter series’ evolution. *Ocean Park #6*, 1968, is a resolved if uninspired melody of vertical shafts that curve into flesh. In *Ocean Park #27* and *#29* (both 1970), the artist has refined his palette and line to transcend both human and geographic form. By the time Diebenkorn arrives at *Ocean Park #54*, 1972, however, he has achieved sublimity—something few American painters dared attempt during the Vietnam War, or in the four decades since. If ever there was a pilgrimage-worth exhibition, particularly in the midst of an apocalypse, this show is it.

—Ara Osterweil

Richard Diebenkorn.
Ocean Park #54,
1972, oil and
charcoal on canvas,
100 × 81”.

