

Pivotal: Highlights from the Collection  
Orange County Museum of Art  
October 7 – December 31, 2017  
ARTIST INFORMATION

**Richard Diebenkorn**

Born 1922 (Portland, OR), died 1993 (aged 70, Berkeley, CA)

*Ocean Park #36, 1970*

Oil on canvas

Diebenkorn (1922–93) was born in Portland, Oregon, and received his artistic training at Stanford University, University of California, Berkeley, University of New Mexico, and California Institute of the Arts, where he later taught in the 1940s. Until the mid-1950s, Diebenkorn painted in the Abstract Expressionist tradition, his compositions marked by strong color and gestural brushwork. At the end of 1955, he turned to figurative painting along with fellow Bay Area painters David Park (1911–60), Elmer Bischoff (1916–91), and Joan Brown (1938–90) and they became recognized as progenitors of the Bay Area Figurative school. His best-known work, the Ocean Park series, was begun in 1967, after he assumed a professorship at the University of California, Los Angeles and worked out of a studio in Santa Monica for the next fifteen years.

The Ocean Park neighborhood of Santa Monica was locale and muse for many Los Angeles-based artists during the 1960s. Far from being an idyllic landscape, Ocean Park was half-residential, half-industrial, yet it inspired the luminous color and line studies of Richard Diebenkorn's Ocean Park paintings. Many associate the warm hues of *Ocean Park #36* with the California sunshine and the thinly layered blues the Pacific Ocean or the sky. These series of works are not meant to evoke the particular site of Santa Monica, but rather to be explorations of space and color. The compositional balance of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines in works by French Fauvist Henri Matisse have been cited as highly influential on his beginning the Ocean Park Series.

Richard Diebenkorn

b. 1922, Portland, Oregon d. 1993

Ocean Park #36, 1970

Diebenkorn came under the influence of New York Abstract Expressionists Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still at the California School of Fine Arts, where he taught in the late 1940s. By the mid-1950s he turned to more figurative painting, creating images of brooding figures and sun-soaked landscapes while trying to integrate Abstract Expressionist brushwork into this new representational phase of his art. His colleagues in this new style of figurative expressionism that echoed the forms and brushwork of Willhelm de Kooning were David Park and Elmer Bischoff.

In 1965 Diebenkorn traveled to the Soviet Union and was inspired by the paintings of Matisse and Mondrian in the Hermitage. He was fascinated by the way Matisse handled color and space in his "Window" paintings, how he created tension with line and how Mondrian, too, created tension with his linear rectangles and primary colors.<sup>1</sup> Back in Berkeley, Diebenkorn spent the remainder of the year exploring geometric abstraction on canvas. "One of the most interesting polarities in art," says Diebenkorn, "is between representation, at one end of the stick, and abstraction, at the other end, and I've found myself all over the stick."<sup>2</sup>

Moving south in 1966 to teach at UCLA, Diebenkorn took over Sam Francis' studio in the Ocean Park area of Santa Monica. A year later he embarked on the Ocean Park series, continuing his experiments with geometric abstraction. His palette grew lighter, responding to the southern light, and he began to apply diaphanous colors, often in multiple layers, with areas bleeding into one another. Each work was created slowly, crafted and recrafted, and often took more than a month to complete.

Ocean Park #36 was completed in 1970. Layers of paint, partially erased lines and scraped-out shapes add depth and a shimmering effect to the canvas. The bright colors bathed in light reflect the ambience of the seashore, and the abstractly conceived formal shapes create translucent blue shadows that contrast with a single brilliant shaft of yellow sunlight. Thin scaffoldings of horizontal and vertical lines contain strong primary colors. The lines provide, in Diebenkorn's words, "a feeling of strength in reserve: tension beneath calm."<sup>3</sup> The broad blue tones suggest the Pacific Ocean or the sky, and the warm tones can be likened to the California sun. Diebenkorn was challenged by the composition -- the need to bring the shifting and static arrangements of color, line and form into balance.

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Diebenkorn worked on the Ocean Park series, which eventually included over 150 large-scale paintings, for 20 years, and it is generally regarded as a zenith in his painting career.

1. The Moca Contemporary Newsletter, Sept. 1992, p. 5
2. Ibid.
3. Richard Diebenkorn, Arts Magazine, Feb. 1986.

Shelley Seltzer, 3/95