

Richard Diebenkorn's *Sleeping Woman*

American artist Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993) was born in Oregon and grew up in San Francisco. Studying studio art and art history at Stanford in the early 1940s, he found a mentor in his professor Daniel Mendelowitz, who encouraged his interest in such American artists as Arthur Dove, Charles Sheeler, and Edward Hopper. Though Hopper's influence would be recognizable in Diebenkorn's figurative work, the artist would owe a larger debt to Matisse and Cézanne. It was Mendelowitz who arranged the young artist's first exposure to actual paintings by these two, at the Palo Alto home of Gertrude Stein's sister-in-law.

While serving in the Marine Corps and stationed in Virginia during World War II, Diebenkorn visited the many important collections of modern art in the Washington, D.C., area and—in his own words—“just feasted” on their contents, absorbing Cézanne, Klee, Miró, Rothko, and others. Though the works he made during wartime were representational sketches, he soon transitioned to abstraction as a student at the California School of Fine Arts, which Janet Bishop, co-curator of the 2017 exhibition *Matisse/Diebenkorn*, describes as “a place where nonobjective painting was the only acceptable mode of expression.” Before long he had joined the school's faculty, where his colleagues included his friend and influence David Park, as well as Elmer Bischoff and Clyfford Still.

After further study in Albuquerque and a short stint teaching at the University of Illinois in Urbana—where his palette is said to have become richer and more intense—he returned with his young family to California, settling in Berkeley. It was there, in 1955, that he forsook abstraction for representation, influenced partly by Park's and Bischoff's explorations in that mode; he later explained that abstract expressionism had become a “stylistic straightjacket.” For the next dozen years or so, he focused on still lifes, figures, interiors, and views. In particular, it was the succession of large figurative and landscape paintings—including the KIA's *Sleeping Woman* (1961)—that generated attention and a national reputation.

In 1965, the artist began his late figurative works, characterized by relatively flat planes of color, geometric compositions, and the sparing use of decorative figuration. These elements would undergird a new style once the Diebenkorns had moved (in 1966) to Ocean Park, a neighborhood of Santa Monica. There Richard embarked on the great cycle of abstract works that one obituary described as “the most affectionately regarded series in modern American art.” Apart from a series of “Clubs and Spades” drawings (1980-81), which were partly inspired by his longtime interest in heraldic imagery, his work until his death was almost entirely in the abstract mode.

In the KIA's *Sleeping Woman*, the painter whom another obituary described as “a poet of sunny spaciousness” shows us something different. Instead of sunshine we have somnolence; instead of the brilliant geometries of his celebrated Ocean Park paintings, we have what Bishop calls the “dark envelope” of his studio. The work is typical of his figure paintings in featuring an isolated, faceless woman in quiet repose. It recalls the

work of Diebenkorn's hero Matisse in many ways, particularly the latter's painting *Studio, Quai Saint-Michel*, which Diebenkorn saw early in his career and which he said became "the big one" for him. Like that painting, this one depicts a sleeping woman in the artist's studio, beneath three paintings. Here, a mirror opens the space, teasingly suggesting an opposite world. (Diebenkorn's close friend and fellow painter Wayne Thiebaud observed that Diebenkorn "loved the beautiful . . . , but it always involved a juxtaposition of opposites.") In the mirror world—perhaps that of the sleeper's dream—the painter's customary California colors predominate. Though daylight colors also tug at the woman's back, the artist situates her in the crepuscular shadows, amid swaths of evening-sky and midnight blue, above an inky darkness suggesting the well of sleep itself. The voluptuousness resulting from these saturated colors, and from their lavish application in generous swaths, is common to Diebenkorn's works, and often commented on.

The fluid brushwork, lush color, and overlaid forms also attest to the painter's preoccupation with these elements. Indeed, one earlier KIA label asserted that Diebenkorn's work is "always about painting as a medium and a creative act rather than [about] subject matter." Thiebaud seems to endorse this view when he observes that Diebenkorn "always thought that painting was revision." *Sleeping Woman* shows evidence of revision in the pentimento at the bottom of the painting, where the sleeper's foot seems once to have had different contours. The presence of pentimenti in this and other Diebenkorn works further unites him with Matisse, whose paintings were full of what critic Adam Gopnik poetically calls "ghosts of a previous gesture." Bishop believes that the "unresolved details" in Matisse's work also encouraged Diebenkorn, whose own paintings, says Thiebaud, "always seem complete, but never finished."

Though Diebenkorn ultimately moved on from figurative painting, he might fittingly be called a "romantic abstractionist," as the author of an uncredited article in *Time* magazine—written in 1969, only a couple of years after the artist's return to abstraction—put it. Diebenkorn, the writer observed, occupied "a kind of stylistic halfway house between representation . . . and formal geometry." Upon the artist's death, many obituaries took note of the lyricism of his style, and one headline, in fact, explicitly identified him not as an abstract painter but as a lyrical one.

Sources

Diebenkorn.org, Richard Diebenkorn Foundation, 2019, diebenkorn.org/the-artist/biography/.

Gopnik, Adam. "Diebenkorn Redux." *The New Yorker* 24 May 1993: pp. 97-100.

Janet Bishop, "Making Matisse His Own: Richard Diebenkorn's Early Abstractions and Figurative Paintings," in *Matisse/Diebenkorn*, edited by Janet Bishop and Katherine Rothkopf (The Baltimore Museum of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and DelMonico Books, 2016), pp. 18-28.

"[Title = ?]" *Time* 1 August 1969.

Label (superseded), KIA artist file.

--Sandy Linabury, August 2019