

Richard Diebenkorn, American, 1922 - 1993

"Richard Diebenkorn was a great American artist. A modern painter of extraordinary intelligence and sensitivity, he quietly constructed a place for himself in the history of twentieth-century art with his singular vision and powerful commitment to the idea and practice of both figuration and abstraction...Diebenkorn emerges at the century's end as an artist who restored to late modernism the sense of the sublime." This statement was made in 1997 by David Ross, then Director of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Mr. Ross' description was only one of many made by others. Here are a few of them: "contrarian;" "high ideals;" "allowed his struggles to be seen in his paintings;" "always went his own way;" "never content to repeat himself;" "continuous self-criticism and awareness rarely matched by any of his contemporaries;" "a painter's painter;" "habitual self-questioning;" "private."

Richard Diebenkorn devoted all of his adult life to painting and his works can be arbitrarily divided into four "movements." He began creating traditional art, then became involved in Abstract Expressionism, then turned to representational art and finally returned to abstract work, creating what has been described as his "sublime" *Ocean Park* series.

Categorizing his work only helps the viewer get a perspective of the rich depths of Diebenkorn's talents, for while he was working and reworking a painting, he was also consciously or unconsciously working on others, in other ways. His sketchbooks demonstrate this with his drawings and saved photos from newspapers and magazines.

In an interview he describes his work, "I will probably be sorry I said all this, but much of the time is spent producing 'grist for the mill.' When I was young, the notion of problem-solving would have raised a sneer. Everybody was *emotionally* dedicated. But I *am* problem-solving. One isn't inspired all the time. The other part of the time is spent putting things together, making it possible for the lovely rapport that can occur out of the blue."

In 1950 while studying for the MFA at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, he produced a series of abstract paintings that were influenced by the areas' unique landscape. In 1953 back in his home state of California, he continued to expand this abstract view, creating the *Berkeley* series. Yet, after a few years, he was quoted as saying, "I came to mistrust my desire to explode the picture and supercharge it in some way. At one time the common device of using the super emotional to get 'in gear' with a painting used to serve me for access to painting, but I mistrust that now. I think what is more important is a feeling of strength in reserve - tension beneath the calm."

In 1955 he began figurative work; *The Sleeping Woman* was painted during that period in 1961. This painting, demonstrates "strength in reserve - tension beneath the calm" and it is achieved primarily through color and brush work.

The Sleeping Woman is a well-balanced painterly piece. The woman is centered and closest to the viewer. The entire large canvas is filled with color, shapes and movement. The shapes, for the most part, can be divided into two categories, with the geometric used to

create the environment and the more organic and natural for the woman. All edges are softly defined.

The color palette is limited to six: brown, blue, black, orange, yellow and red, yet they are worked again and again in an astonishingly variety of ways. Every color seems to be everywhere. Underneath the black are grays and blues with touches of red; in the browns are black and orange and yellows. For the woman, he has delicately combined all of the colors, emphasizing the richest blues with peeks of vibrant red to accent and outline parts of her body.

The brushwork makes this entire painting vibrate! It creates movement and tension and is especially forceful and dramatic in the environment, while a more subtle use of the brush gives quiet strength to the woman. One wonders how she can sleep in that moving room and with that question and the silent answer, one understands Diebenkorn's "tension beneath the calm." It is not precise reality that he creates but the *feeling* of a reality: a strong woman sleeping in spite of a vibrating room.

It is interesting to note that there are two aspects of this painting that frequently appear in his figurative works. One is his inclination to partially conceal the heads of his figures. In many of Diebenkorn's paintings the faces are hidden by caps, hats, shadows, positions. Such is the case in *The Sleeping Woman*. Her head is partially concealed behind her arm.

Another motif is a mirror. The artist frequently includes this device along with windows and patios. These elements allow other light to enter the painting and allow us to see another dimension of the room, another vista, another point of view.

It is also intriguing to imagine that the three rectangular paintings on the wall behind *The Sleeping Woman* are in homage to Matisse's work, *Studio, Quai St. Michel*. In this painting there are also three rectangular paintings behind the sleeping woman. Early in his career, Diebenkorn saw *Studio, Quai St. Michel* and it, as well as the artist, very much influenced his thinking and his art.

Although Matisse and many other artists were important in his artistic life, Diebenkorn has followed his own dictates and inclinations. In a personal paper entitled "Notes to myself on beginning a painting," he wrote ten points, including the following:

1. "Attempt what is not certain. Certainty may or may not come later. It may then be a valuable delusion.
2. The pretty, initial position which falls short of completeness is not to be valued – except as a stimulus for further moves.
3. Do search, but in order to find other than what is searched for.
6. Somehow don't be bored – but if you must, use it in action."

Richard Diebenkorn was an artist who created from knowledge, integrity and heart.

Lyda Stillwell, May 2010