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## Diebenkorn's "Ocean Park Series": Provisional Action, Provisional Vision by Matthew Ballou



The current traveling exhibition of Richard Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park Series* offers a unique opportunity for viewers to participate in the artist's grand achievement as negotiators – and re-negotiators – of visual dynamics and material effect.

"The painting is the story that is presently searching itself out."

– Jennifer Meanley<sup>1</sup>

"I am amazed that some people can be so lacking in anxiety as to imagine that they have grasped the truth of their art on the first try."

– Matisse<sup>2</sup>

It is not often one gets to see a significant portion of a major artist's oeuvre in one place at one time. We are used to knowing the canon of art history via the mediation of reproductions – such as they are – and often spend decades only imagining what the surfaces and colors actually look like. Taking cues from the few works we get to see, we extrapolate and do our best to apply what little direct knowledge we have to the pictures in glossy catalogs or musty old monographs, never really knowing how limited our grasp of the work might be.

So it is that artists and lovers of art value traveling to see great works of art in person. We make the Louvre, the Prado, and the Uffizi points of pilgrimage. We do our best to be with the works of Rembrandt and Caravaggio, to test out the feel of Rothko and El Anatsui, to walk along Goldsworthy's wall or Smithsonian's jetty. We solemnly venture into the interior space of Chartres or the resonant words of Elizabeth Bishop. These real-world experiences prove the truth of Walter Benjamin's notion of the "aura"<sup>3</sup> of artworks, and they raise our visual IQs as we experience art in as direct a way as possible.

Having the opportunity to see a great number of Richard Diebenkorn's iconic *Ocean Park Series* paintings together in exhibition has been something I have looked forward to for many years. My initial exposure to Diebenkorn's art was through images of the *Ocean Park* works during the first few days of my undergraduate art school experience. In many ways these reproductions – and my subsequent reading about the works and artist – calibrated my entire perspective on painting in particular and art in general.



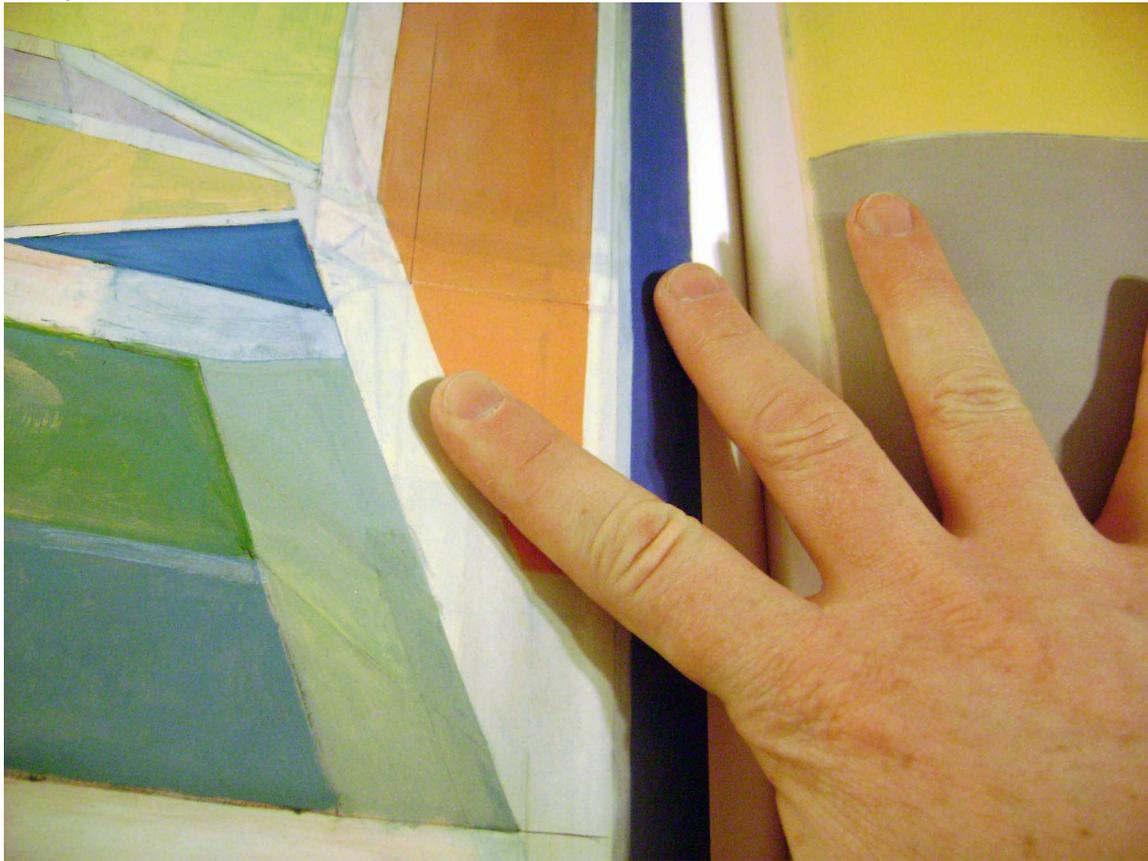
Over the years I have taken every opportunity to see Diebenkorn's paintings in person. Given my placement in the Midwest, most of my repeated visits have been in that region: in Cincinnati, Chicago, Des Moines, Kansas City, and Milwaukee. But these examples left something to be desired. In Des Moines, *Ocean Park #70*<sup>4</sup> was hung devastatingly close to an untitled Anselm Kiefer – the German master's massive work was a stentorian presence that muffled the light and line of Diebenkorn's piece. At the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, Diebenkorn's *Interior with a Book*<sup>5</sup> is cracked and dimly lit. Other viewings suffered similar fates.

Thus more often than I would like to admit I have been disappointed rather than excited by my encounters with Richard Diebenkorn's actual work. None of the paintings I had seen seemed as powerful as I had expected or hoped; they had been situated in the midst of other artists' works, without enough breathing space in art fairs, or otherwise deprived of sufficient context of their own. Was I responding to some quality apparent in the reproductions but absent in the actual works? Was I merely uninformed, my assumptions tailored to expectations that the paintings could never meet? Was my sense that it was the cluttered museum context that failed them rather than some problem with the works themselves just wishful thinking?

Thankfully, this was not the case. The fourteen years I spent reading all I could find and tracking down what was available to see near me did not prepare me for the majesty of a whole space given over to the proper presentation of Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park* paintings. The first iteration of *Richard Diebenkorn: The Ocean Park Series*, at The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, laid any lingering fear aside and cemented for me

the power of Diebenkorn's mature vision as embodied in the series. Fort Worth gave the works both dignified space and illuminating sequence, offering broad, expansive views and the opportunity to sense the deep connections and synergies that exist within this astounding body of work. In this setting where the paintings could breathe and sing in concert, I was able to more keenly perceive the underlying structure and deep-seated *provisionality* that operates in the *Ocean Park Series*.

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That word, provisionality, is perhaps the most particular and necessary one that I will use in my further discourse on the work in this traveling exhibition. There has been much discussion about “provisional painting” of late, stimulated by Raphael Rubinstein's May 2009 *Art in America* article identifying practitioners of this mode of painting – artists such as Raoul De Keyser, Albert Oehlen, and Mary Heilmann. Rubinstein describes provisional painting as “works that look casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-canceling. In different ways, they all deliberately turn away from ‘strong’ painting for something that seems to constantly risk inconsequence or collapse.”<sup>6</sup>



Sharon Butler (painter, writer, and professor at Eastern Connecticut University) expanded on “the centrality of the open proposition in contemporary abstraction”<sup>7</sup> in a 2011 article for *The Brooklyn Rail*. Butler talks about this approach to painting as “a studied, passive-aggressive incompleteness” and “subversion of closure” that exists within “multiple forms of imperfection: not merely what is unfinished but also the off-

kilter, the overtly offhand, the not-quite-right.” Artists working in this vein, Butler suggests, “cast aside the neat but rigid fundamentals learned in art school and embrace everything that seems to lend itself to visual intrigue—including failure.”<sup>8</sup>

Butler’s and Rubenstein’s exploration of provisional or “casualist” painting today could be interpreted as an indictment rather than a celebration, yet it seems to me that they are on to something. I submit that there was provisional painting before its current practitioners surfaced, and it found its varying degrees of unfinished tentativeness through a *negotiation* of “rightness”<sup>9</sup> rather than an acceptance of “the not quite right.” I believe that we see this in the work of artists such as J.M.W. Turner and Edvard Munch, as well as in the impulses of the Vorticists, the Fauves, and even the Impressionists. It goes without saying that Cubism participated in – even paved new avenues to – this arena. Making artworks through the calibration of a feeling of rightness beyond the expression of perceptual or conceptual truth – indeed, the denial of these things as entirely definable ends – is at the root of a provisional approach. This proclivity is distinctly evidenced in the work of Richard Diebenkorn.

To be sure, Diebenkorn’s methods and aims were far removed from those of the artists currently carrying the mantle of provisional painting. It seems to me that the artist inhabited a middle ground between the heroics of the abstract expressionists and what too often feels like the deadpan ennui of contemporary provisionalists. His mode and facture brought the fluttering tenuousness of choice and perception to center stage and offered a vision of seeing and making that continued to move pictorial logic away from an *if/then* proposition to a *both/and* one. In the following paragraphs I will explore what I identify as Diebenkorn’s penchant for provisional action and show how it stimulates a provisionality of vision in his audience.

Diebenkorn encoded provisionality in his work not via a “casual, dashed off” quality – though spontaneity and “commitment to improvisation”<sup>10</sup> were key to his process – but by embracing uncertainty and tentativeness within an overarching compositional format. His working method was comprised of questioning choices and negotiating varied factures within a particular compositional schema: a “definition and re-definition of the relationship of line and tonal field.”<sup>11</sup> His work became a ceaseless reappraisal of the rightness of the constellation of visual dynamics in effect at any particular time within the work at hand.

Unlike the provisionalists of today, Diebenkorn was deeply concerned with the aforementioned rightness as well as with a necessary openness of potential action. His notion of rightness seems to have been related to a modernist sense of compositional balance and a feeling of effective effort toward that end through material and its application. In all of this Diebenkorn pursues his rightness while recognizing that it is not a specific, definite end. Therefore the openness he sought could be described as a desire to maintain the potential for each choice – whether of the artist in making or the viewer in looking – to have true over-all effect and discernable affect. These two seemingly opposed ends are set together, providing an arena for possibilities to begin or end, to coalesce or dissipate. Though we recognize that, in a very real sense, the works are

forever locked in stasis since they can no longer physically change under the artist's hands, we see that they can shift and modulate under the eyes of viewers.

This is exactly what they do. Diebenkorn's paintings invite us to collaborate with – and second-guess – his choices in an active yet elusive viewing of the potential of the works to be what they are, or to *become what they might be*. The viewer participates in working out the rightness of the image and in so doing critiques its success. The *Ocean Park Series* is an investigation into the prospective and shifting nature of both painting and vision itself.



To get a clear view of Diebenkorn's connection with provisionality one must think about the sense of compositional balance exemplified in the *Ocean Park Series*. It is a balance that is hard-won yet still teetering on the edge of disarray. Though the works are in some ways locked, they flicker and undulate; these are compositions that don't always feel as if rightness was absolutely achieved. When I initially encountered the series in books I was not aware that Diebenkorn was seeking that sense of rightness so often considered as his chief aim. I felt that the works exhibited a rather unbalanced, clunky sort of tension among their various parts. Years later, I still hold this view, but *only as they read in reproduction*, not as they appear in person.

Consider *Ocean Park #38*.<sup>12</sup> On the printed page or pulled from the web, this work presents an almost unbearably fast, tilted read; our eyes shoot to the top left, swiftly running over the sharpness of the interwoven diagonals there. These dark forms contrast with the rest of the image, their "V" shape and separation from the rest of the

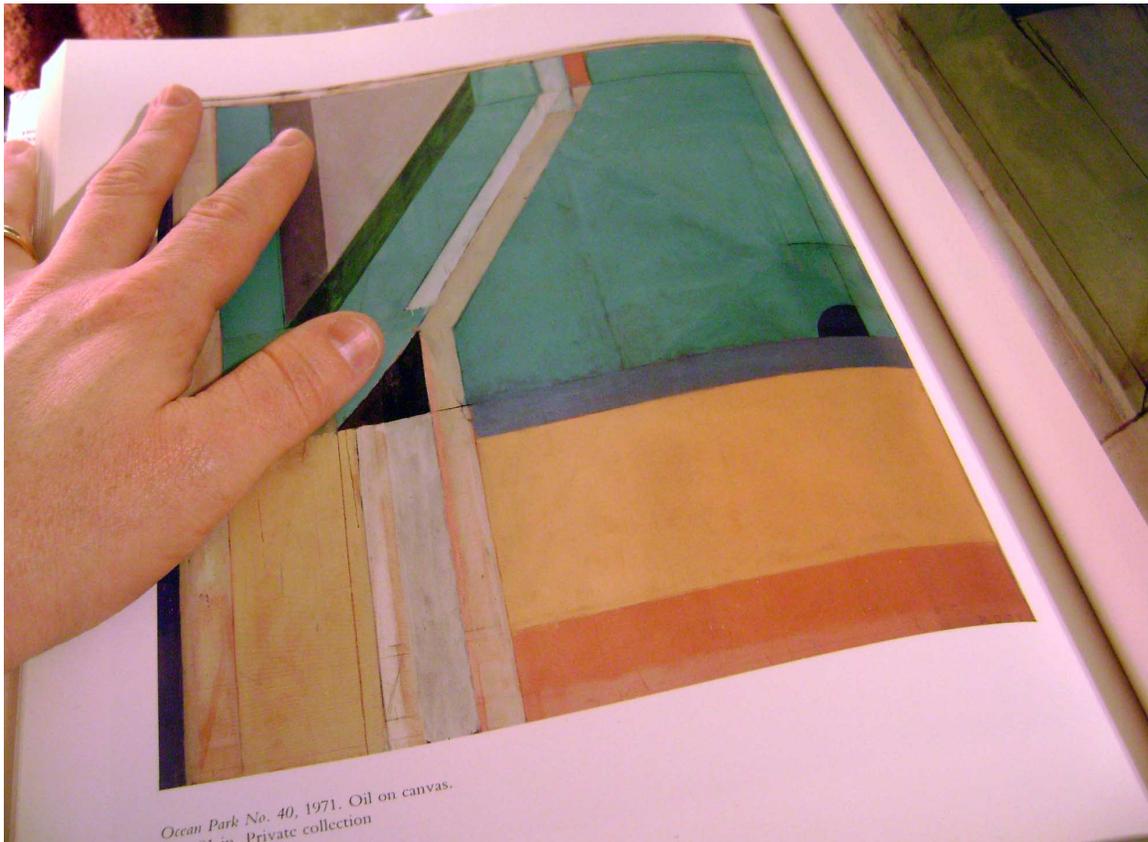
work standing out with iconographic strength. The painting is unbalanced and top-heavy.

In person the effect is dramatically reversed. Surface, color, line, and application become supercharged with multivalent weight and effect. The lower mass of light-infused color rises up slowly, monolithically, to countermand the angular insistence of the upper edges of the painting. The combined physical reality of the works – the symbiotic nature of their formal, material, and chromatic characteristics – is absolutely necessary to the true experience they stimulate. They are not balanced in a straight compositional sense at all; they are instead balanced via the interdependent visual effects that they initiate and propagate. We do not read these works directly by receiving all of their parts at once. Instead we wade through the indirect information they provide and must circle back for second, third, and fourth viewings to accumulate a semblance of the full experience.



Diebenkorn worked to orchestrate and manipulate the layered, syncopated reading of his paintings by making his various strategies, attempts and dead-ends the direct means by which we, the viewers, open them up. He enlivened the surface with arenas that take diverse levels of effort to move through, that require different visual solutions to understand. Yet these compositional forces and the quality of balance they achieve are illegible in reproductions of the works. They are, in a sense, unavailable to the eye in reproduction because it is the action of the eye playing over the actual

surface that constructs – or rather works to *reconstruct* – the quality of rightness Diebenkorn sought. Our eyes alternate in stalling or speeding through the scintillating fields of line and hue, pausing in certain locations only to find another form, element, or color effect coalescing into importance before us. John Elderfield saw this effect in how the equally essential figure and ground aspects of Diebenkorn’s paintings so often seem to “fluctuate and interchange in importance... the surface vibrates like a translucent skin as if the space it encloses is the full and living space within the body.”<sup>13</sup> The works flatten and bloom, are at once deep iridescent seas and impenetrably dense walls. They are simultaneously snapped to the bare grid and densely interwoven in layers. They are both “aperture and field.”<sup>14</sup>



Indeed, colors and shapes may flicker into resolution after sustained viewings; structures float up while others – previously more apparent – seem to drop away. This is a major aspect of reading the paintings and of perceiving the movement and weight they possess. The pieces play on the ability of our eyes to capture latent images and sustain them while interpreting subsequent visual sensations. There is a kind of planar phase transition in these works, something that rests on the dual nature of our eyes: ceaselessly motile yet able to retain aspects of what has been seen.

Thus the formalism at work in Diebenkorn’s *Ocean Park Series* seems directly connected to vision itself. It is in our activity of perceiving his work that the provisional nature of Diebenkorn’s painting has its power. The lines push us out or lock us in.

Analogous angles sync up, seeming to define particular shapes, only to dissipate upon a second glance. An area of color that one once read as flat may instantly project out dimensionally and stimulate a sense of vertiginous parallax. The glacial movements of color fields counteract the speed of linear diagonals; they seem both dense and weightless. Edges where two colors meet may simultaneously indicate low spatial relief and mere tonal variation along a level plane. Open areas take on strength as they hold large swaths of canvas against the complexity and tension of the smaller, more active, geometric, or hue-charged areas. The artist's famous pentimenti stall the route of one's eyes and trap them into recursive delays amid muted apparitions of texture and shape.

These pentimenti are more visible and more powerful, and their importance all the more apparent, when one takes in a large swath of the *Ocean Park* works at once. Their functions in the paintings, how their varying uses may shift from cursory notation to indication of procedural reassessment to stabilizing post-and-lintel, are as central as color or composition to these works. They mediate the sense of scale, compositional tensions, and veils of light in the paintings. They pop in and out, never entirely giving away their reasons for being, yet always pressuring the eye to redefine its route over the visual field. There is so much going on in these paintings that has been perfunctorily obliterated yet remains incontrovertibly present. Diebenkorn said that it was "a great relief to obliterate,"<sup>15</sup> yet these obliterations are less complete erasure and more obfuscation and tinkering. As Robert Buck observed 35 years ago, our experience of Diebenkorn's "facture is purposefully and prominently retained in the works" allowing us to follow along with "the artist whether the method was finally acceptable to him or not."<sup>16</sup> The tentativeness of this reappraisal and reconstruction is signaled in the nature of what is left behind on the surface for viewers to excavate.

There are many layers to dig through, as each chromatic sheet, each ruled line, and each dashed-in brush mark has its own nature and particular effect on the overall work. What yellow may do in an interlocking diagonal group or as a swift line is entirely different when it is given over to the service of light-infused planes. A color that neatly subsumes into an area of analogous hue may violently react when, only a few feet away, it intersects with some seemingly innocuous middle tone. Any location in a work seems at the very least binary in nature, taking on a kind of duality: speed *and* stillness, position *and* vector, passivity *and* forcefulness. With Diebenkorn, almost any element can embody seemingly opposing states. In some sense it depends on the facture – how he put the marks down – but it can also be based simply upon the interdependency and indeterminacy of the formal relationships he created. In *Ocean Park* formal properties play on the provisionality of the audience's subjective apprehension of the artist's pursuit of his own rightness. He said as much when he told Gerald Nordland in 1976, "one's sense of rightness involves absolutely the whole person *and hopefully others*."<sup>17</sup>

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It is not only that Diebenkorn has constructed a dynamic visual maze for us; it is also that he built *temporality* into the effort we must expend to perceive the works. This is something we can readily understand – we recognize that the "V" shape in the upper left of #38 is "fast" to our perception. But do we sense the dozen other speeds that he has embedded within the work? What may in a small-scale illustration be read

immediately and totally becomes a much harder prospect at full scale, and a much richer one.

The time it takes for us to read certain constellations of elements is a condition of the scale of these works, and it is not accidental. Most of the *Ocean Park Series* is human scale and their size – many of them are 100 by 81 inches – obviously forces a viewer to calibrate his or her bodily relationship to the work. Because of this the viewer must move to take in the tableau, tracking across a surface that will not allow for smooth, easy travel. Thus the amount of time necessary to physically move around the work – something done not only with the eyes, but also with the head and whole body – varies and is full of starts and stops. Any cohesive structure becomes a pivot point; a firm place from which to read/re-read the work, a place of calibration for the next interpretation.

The material information on the surface of the work and the interactions of colors and shapes will, by turns, dictate or suggest different speeds of sighting and different levels of attention, alternating types of focus. All of this maneuvering takes time, both physically and mentally. That temporal aspect in the experience of the works adds weight to the negotiation of the different areas and, as we find more to excavate, more to challenge, we sense that the amount of time we have spent in certain areas adds compositional weight to them; their balance is not based on strictly formal principles.



This temporal quality in the works extends deeply into their making, clouding our ability to grasp clearly the process by which they were made. That is, their surfaces are inscrutable in terms of the *order or sequence* of their creation. One cannot emphatically state when one layer was placed down in regard to other layers; each layer seems sequentially multivalent. As a matter of course we dissect a work of art as we view it, considering this area part of the under-painting and that element a detail added toward the end. This aids in our processing of the work and enlivens the temporality of the work. Yet when Diebenkorn created each element is a variable unknown to the viewer, so what one may think is on top may suddenly appear distinctly embedded, and vice versa. The order of the layering may be chaotic or simply non-linear, yet we perceive it as an amalgamated whole and only through extended viewing can we try out different potential orderings or viewing strategies. This factor adds to the provisionality of our reading, since any determination we make may pressurize other layers and elements, causing them to move away from our prior assumptions about them and altering the feeling of the whole work.

Therefore, in the *Ocean Park Series*, formal elements and their interrelationships are as subtractive as they are additive. By this I mean to suggest that they do more than simply accumulate in one manner or toward one particular state. There are multifaceted ends at play in these artworks, more than one solution being simultaneously considered upon their surfaces. It is the overlapping of alternate purposes uniting or interfering with one another that create divergent and potentially unplanned syncopations in the visual field. *Ocean Park* is indeed more complex than it may appear on the printed page.

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From all of this it seems to me that the mode of painting in the *Ocean Park Series* is not intellectual or emotional so much as it is *kinesthetic*. Diebenkorn succeeded in creating zones of reference and incident that allow a viewer to feel out and maneuver through the tensions in much the same ways he may have. He knew that we each inherently read these sorts of dynamic visual forces differently and at vastly different speeds. His provisional manner purposefully encoded, as described above, many varied spatial and temporal effects into the total compositional effect of his paintings. The works become catalysts for the kind of search for rightness that he himself pursued.

His commitment to “tension beneath calm”<sup>18</sup> and “an exciting kind of stillness”<sup>19</sup> in the gestalt experience of his art never removes the astonishment of discovery and sense of reconsideration it stimulates. Though they certainly carry a sense of calmness or stillness, the paintings deny viewers any sense of particular point of view and initiate the plurality of reading that I have suggested above. The *Ocean Park* works of Richard Diebenkorn “invite the viewer into a moment of intense contemplation without enabling a fixed viewpoint, no Cartesian sense of where artist or viewer is situated in relation to the composition.”<sup>20</sup>

Thus Diebenkorn’s rightness is not about collapsing possibility or locking in any particular read. Ultimately, that feeling of rightness may only be accessible via a condition of uncertainty rather than of objective facts. Perhaps that is why, at least in *Ocean Park*, the instinctive stroke of the artist is not a dogmatic assertion but a questioning reformation of what he has already done. There was vulnerability and risk in

this methodology; it was a risk of which he was well aware. Yet he stated that he wanted to “hold onto the incidentals” and work with the “kind of tension that would involve a large flex” to create a sense that “potentially, something was about to happen.”<sup>21</sup> He sought simultaneous “potency and impotency”<sup>22</sup> in the work, an approach that kept it constantly open and pressing toward both resolution *and* beginning. Burying previous strategies and disrupting safe, settled areas in favor of new angles and more tremulous solutions were at least as important to Diebenkorn as was any clear rightness. In some sense, it seems that the only right kind of rightness would be the sort that allowed the incidental and provisional to exist in the formal point and counterpoint of works that could be balanced only by viewing, negotiation, and experience.

It is a remarkable gift to be given the opportunity to see as the artist saw, if not in the specifics, then in the general manner and force of his vision. In the aesthetic economy of *Ocean Park*, anything may be reworked, each line and edge and color challenged or reasserted. As viewers we participate in the review. We get to be with Diebenkorn in the resolution of the tensions. We follow along in the fussy ease, the relaxed awkwardness, and the tentative tautness of the work. We try and retry our own perceptions, testing them, following the artist on “a path of continual new beginnings”<sup>23</sup>. In this the work becomes involved with our experience beyond the mere making and display of pictures. It exists as an invitation to negotiate and analyze.

What a reward for deep engagement: that each viewing of an *Ocean Park* painting may be a fresh aesthetic experience, informed but never eclipsed by those past. Perhaps this explains the popularity and resilience of Richard Diebenkorn’s painting; every time we see them we see them for the first time.

***Richard Diebenkorn: The Ocean Park Series*** will travel to the following locations over the coming year:

Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas  
September 25, 2011–January 22, 2012

Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, California  
February 26–May 27, 2012

Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.  
June 30–September 23, 2012

#### *Footnotes*

<sup>1</sup>Meanley, Jennifer. *One Day: New Works by Barry Gealt*. Indianapolis: Ruschman Gallery, 2008. Print catalog.

<sup>2</sup>Elderfield, John. *The Drawings of Richard Diebenkorn*. 1st ed. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1988. 22.

<sup>3</sup>Benjamin, Walter. “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction.” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Trans. Harry Zohn. 1st ed. New York: Schocken, 1968. 217-252.

- <sup>4</sup>Richard Diebenkorn. *Ocean Park #70*. 1974. The Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, IA. Web.
- <sup>5</sup>Richard Diebenkorn. *Interior with a Book*. 1959. The Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO. Web.
- <sup>6</sup>Rubinstein, Raphael. "Provisional Painting." *Art in America*. May 2009: N.p. Web. 18 Jan. 2012.
- <sup>7</sup>Butler, Sharon. "The New Casualists." *Two Coats of Paint*. N.p., 04 06 2011. Web. 18 Jan. 2012.
- <sup>8</sup>Butler, Sharon. "Abstract Painting: The New Casualists." *The Brooklyn Rail*. June 2011. n. page. Web. 18 Jan 2012.
- <sup>9</sup>Diebenkorn, Richard quoted by Gerald Nordland. "The Figurative Works of Richard Diebenkorn." *Richard Diebenkorn: Paintings and Drawings, 1943-1976*. 1st ed. Buffalo, New York: The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1976. 40.
- <sup>10</sup>Nordland, Gerald. "The Figurative Works of Richard Diebenkorn." *Richard Diebenkorn: Paintings and Drawings, 1943-1976*. 1st ed. Buffalo, New York: The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1976. 34.
- <sup>11</sup>Buck, Robert T. "The Ocean Park Paintings." *Richard Diebenkorn: Paintings and Drawings, 1943-1976*. 1st ed. Buffalo, New York: The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1976. 46.
- <sup>12</sup>Richard Diebenkorn. *Ocean Park #38*. 1971. The Phillips Collection of American Art, Washington, D.C.
- <sup>13</sup>Elderfield, John. *The Drawings of Richard Diebenkorn*. 1st ed. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1988. 32.
- <sup>14</sup>Bancroft, Sarah C. "A View of Ocean Park." *Richard Diebenkorn: The Ocean Park Series*. 1st ed. New York: DelMonico-Prestel, 2011. 22.
- <sup>15</sup>*Richard Diebenkorn*. Directed by Tom McGuire. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and TVTV, 1977. Videocassette (VHS), 22:40 min.
- <sup>16</sup>Buck, Robert T. "The Ocean Park Paintings." *Richard Diebenkorn: Paintings and Drawings, 1943-1976*. 1st ed. Buffalo, New York: The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1976. 46.
- <sup>17</sup>Diebenkorn, Richard quoted by Gerald Nordland. "The Figurative Works of Richard Diebenkorn." *Richard Diebenkorn: Paintings and Drawings, 1943-1976*. 1st ed. Buffalo, New York: The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1976. 41.
- <sup>18</sup>Mills, Paul. *Contemporary Bay Area Figurative Painting*. 1st ed. Oakland, California: Oakland Art Museum, 1957. 12.
- <sup>19</sup>Ashton, Dore. "Richard Diebenkorn's Paintings." *Arts Magazine* 46. December 1971-January 1972. 35.
- <sup>20</sup>Bancroft, Sarah C. "A View of Ocean Park." *Richard Diebenkorn: The Ocean Park Series*. 1st ed. New York: DelMonico-Prestel, 2011. 22.
- <sup>21</sup>Elderfield, John. *The Drawings of Richard Diebenkorn*. 1st ed. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1988. 54.
- <sup>22</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup>Bancroft, Sarah C. "A View of Ocean Park." *Richard Diebenkorn: The Ocean Park Series*. 1st ed. New York: DelMonico-Prestel, 2011. 35.