

Overview

RICHARD DIEBENKORN

Search for Something Else

Adapted from a memoir by Kathan Brown



Richard Diebenkorn in the Crown Point studio, Oakland, 1982.

“I’m making my drawing in spite of the metal,” Richard Diebenkorn remarked in 1992 as he was drawing on a copper plate at Crown Point Press. “There are unseen forces there, and it’s a competition with them. I think I’m going to make a straight line, and it says, ‘Oh no you don’t.’” His tone of voice was one of delight. He liked the minds-of-their-own that printmaking materials have. The difficulties would make the work unpredictable so that sometimes he would “see something.”

Diebenkorn made his first prints at Crown Point Press in 1962, the year I founded the press. Between 1962 and 1965 he created the portfolio *41 Etchings Drypoints*, and later, beginning in 1977, he spent a week or two in the Crown Point studio nearly every year until his death in 1993. He liked seeing his images in the unfamiliar territory of reversal, and also he liked making them in an unfamiliar way. The processes of etching and drypoint don’t allow a drawing to be fully seen until it is printed. As printers, we know this can be frustrating for artists, but also we have noticed a kind of exhilaration as, drawing on a copper plate, an artist gets on the

wavelength of the work. Some part of the print, at least, becomes a surprise. Dick liked the surprises, but always found his prints needed nudging, changing, correcting to make them finally work.

Dick would put things in, and he would take things out. “I like to have some impulse to go against what I’m up to, in a sense,” he once said in an interview. But changing and correcting isn’t easy when you’ve carved your drawing into a sheet of metal. If you want to remove a line, you have to do it physically using a scraping tool. Dick did this extensively, and traces of his removals and changes are visible in all his prints.

In printmaking it is common to keep a mirror nearby because plates print backwards from the way they are drawn. I learned, however, from a 1987 *New Yorker* profile titled “Almost Free of the Mirror” that Dick also used a mirror when he painted. He told Dan Hofstadter, the *New Yorker* writer, that he was trying to give up the mirror. But, he went on to explain, “by looking at a picture’s mirror image, I could see it as something foreign, unfamiliar, and so address myself to its previously hidden flaws.”

Dick’s use of the mirror, I think, was connected to his doubting, which was fundamental to his way of working. When I asked him about the word *flaws* in the article, he said it wasn’t the right word to describe what he was looking for. He accepted lots of flaws—in fact, I have seen him create them deliberately, pushing his fingers into a soft wax etching ground, for example, to create a shadow area out of fingerprints in the finished work.

Dan Hofstadter used a phrase, “the overlapping and interpenetration of the forms,” that reasonably describes what Dick was looking for when he studied a painting or a print in progress. I will add something more general. I think the content of Diebenkorn’s work concerns the flow of things in the universe. When he fixed a moment of that flow in a painting, drawing, or print, he would say, “That’s OK. Now it’s working.” And the art creates, in people engaged with it, a catch of the breath, a sense of pleasure and maybe also of vulnerability.

Sebastian Smee, writing in the *Boston Globe* in 2012 about an exhibition of Diebenkorn’s “Ocean Park” works organized in California at the Orange County Museum of Art, put it this way: “Diebenkorn’s built-up surfaces, with their erasures and ghost lines,



Large Bright Blue (far left), and *Large Light Blue*, (left), 1980. Each image is a color spit bite aquatint with aquatint and soft ground etching measuring 24-x-14½-inches on 40-x-26-inch sheet. Edition 35.

their scuff marks and pooled stains, draw you into a process, a history of their making. They transform the act of viewing into an elastic, involving experience, not just a sudden all-at-once hit.” But he also raised a question about beauty. He talked about “California hedonism” and pointed out that Diebenkorn is “deeply indebted to Matisse.” He called Diebenkorn’s paintings “some of the most beautiful works of art created in America, or anywhere else, since the Second World War,” and then added that “some undertakers of modern art contend that Diebenkorn was the end of a line—the last important studio painter still concerned with building on the inheritance of Cezanne, of the School of Paris, of Mondrian, of de Kooning. They may or may not be right.”

Picasso called Cezanne “the father of us all.” And now, we are (tentatively) being advised to forget not only Matisse, but Picasso—and Cezanne, even de Kooning, who came along much later. If Diebenkorn is at the end of that line, what other line is there? I have the April 2012 issue of *Art News* here on my desk and have been reading an article that describes art that meets Smee’s “sudden all-at-once hit” description.

The article is by Richard B. Woodward and is titled “When Bad Is Good.” Woodward writes that “bad taste often passes for avant-garde . . . and whereas kitsch in art was once to be assiduously disdained, art that traffics in sentimentality and bathos behind a dancing veil of ironic laughter has become highly prized.” One of those “highly prized” works of art is a model of a human skull by Damien Hirst. The skull, titled *For the Love of God*, is cast in platinum and studded with more than eight thousand diamonds. It is (according to *Time* magazine) “said to be worth” \$79 million.



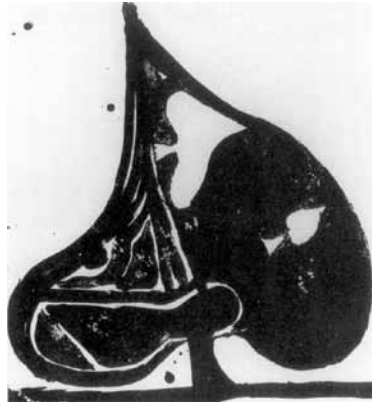
Kathan with Dick and the proofs of his first color etchings, 1980.

A retrospective exhibition of Hirst’s work opened April 4, 2012, at Tate Modern in London, and *Time* mentions that a museum gift shop, “the final room” in the exhibition, features a limited-edition plastic skull “garishly” painted and priced at \$58,000. Museum gift shops used to be called museum bookstores, but things have changed.

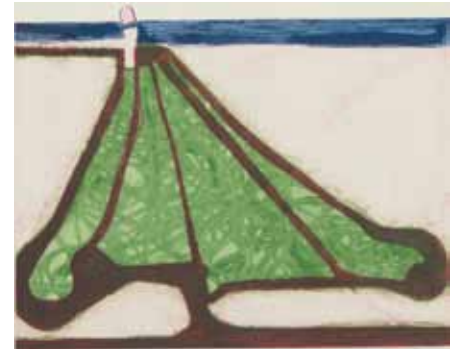
Japan has produced a kitsch artist almost as famous as Hirst. Takashi Murakami, born in Tokyo in 1962, makes paintings and animations of sweetly colored animals, flowers, and children with big eyes and wide smiles. In 2007 Murakami was given a retrospective exhibition at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, and the exhibition had an “embedded boutique” for Louis Vuitton, for



Blue Club, 1981. Color aquatint with soft ground etching, 18¾-x-17¾-inch image on 37½-x-30½-inch sheet. Edition 35.



Sugarlift Spade, 1982. Sugar lift aquatint, 16-x-14¾-inch image on 33-x-26½-inch sheet. Edition 35.



Green Tree Spade, 1982. Color sugar lift aquatint with flat bite etching, 9-x-12-inch image on 18½-x-23-inch sheet. Edition 35.

whom Murakami designs products. Also on sale in the boutique were multiples. Paul Schimmel, curator of the exhibition, told a Web blogger, “Takashi found exactly the point that would irritate both me and Louis Vuitton. He took the materials he had printed for various [Vuitton] products and had them stretched like paintings and made into a very large but numbered edition.”

Anyone visiting Japan can see roots of Murakami’s art in comic books, signs, Pachinko machines, the “Hello Kitty” statues in stores, and even the Buddhas in some monasteries. In the same way, you can see forerunners of Damien Hirst’s art by looking back to Frankenstein and other dark tales of the United Kingdom. Think about Salvador Dalí and the surrealists. And then, in your imagination, cross the ocean and in the United States look at the most popular videos on YouTube or the most successful movies measured by box office receipts. Then take a look at Andy Warhol.

Warhol said, “Just look at the surfaces of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There’s nothing behind it.” Diebenkorn said, “A successful artwork stands for an artist’s being; it contains the whole person.” I have a nagging worry that in this moment in history a commonly held connection to beauty and complexity is drifting away. But I also know very well that when the art market elevates a trend, artists begin looking for something else.

The next “something else” will most likely not be work that looks like Diebenkorn’s, but I don’t think it will look like Hirst’s or Murakami’s either. Possibly it will entail pursuing art as a skill-based pursuit, a way of becoming a whole person. Or, if searching for a whole person is too old-fashioned, too inner-directed, we could consider instead cultivating “a basic sense of good order,” as David Brooks puts it in a *New York Times* op-ed column on April 12, 2012. He uses Dashiell Hammett’s “noir hero” Sam Spade as an example, calling Spade “allergic to self-righteousness.” Brooks says

that “he is motivated by a disillusioned sense of honor. . . . Each job comes with obligations, and even if everything is decaying you should still take pride in your work.”

Richard Diebenkorn saw printmaking as “a way of drawing.” In 1980 Dick worked with color aquatint for the first time, painting the acid directly onto rosin-prepared plates. His skill in handling a brush gave him immediate results with this process. Two of his most admired prints, *Large Bright Blue* and *Large Light Blue*, are part of the first etching project in which he used it. The two prints share the same plates. The light blue version is a partial “ghost”—only the top part of the image received new ink; the light blue field resulted from ink residue in the plate after *Large Bright Blue* was printed.

In 1981, and also in 1982, Dick worked in the print studio mainly with images of clubs and spades, a motif that appears, in whole or in fragments, in drawings and paintings as well as in prints made off and on over his entire working life. The *Clubs and Spades* prints are mostly aquatints, some in color, some not. They demonstrate Dick’s use of printmaking as a way of firming up an idea by making many permutations of it. *Sugarlift Spade* and *Green Tree Spade*, shown here, are two of my favorites. Dick’s original name for *Sugarlift Spade* was *Spade Slouching*. In *Green Tree Spade* he added a separate little plate, a jaunty top to the tree, outside the print’s plate mark.

I don’t think anyone in history has made color aquatints more beautiful than those of Richard Diebenkorn, and in one short period in 1986 he made three of his most beautiful: *Indigo Horizontal*, *Red-Yellow-Blue*, and *Green*. He began work on *Green*, his largest and most sought-after print, in early October 1985, after a two-year absence from the etching studio. The largest plate he had worked on before *Green* was *Blue Surround*, twenty-two by nineteen inches. Our plates are made from roofing copper that comes in long sheets. We



Green, 1986. Color spit bite aquatint with soap ground aquatint and dry-point, 45-x-35¼-inch image on 53¾-x-41½-inch sheet. Edition 60.

cut them down to the largest plate size our press can accommodate and wait for direction from an artist as to how to cut them further. Printer Marcia Bartholme later recalled how *Green* began.

We had just finished cutting down some large sheets of copper when Dick walked into the studio. A full-size thirty-six-by-forty-five-inch plate was lying on the table. Dick immediately went over to it and walked around it, tilting his head to see it in both horizontal and vertical positions. An hour later, Takada and I were astonished to be pulling a line image in cadmium red off this plate. I use the word astonished because we assumed Dick would not work that large, that he preferred the intimacy of smaller prints. I was to learn very quickly that with Dick absolutely nothing should be assumed.

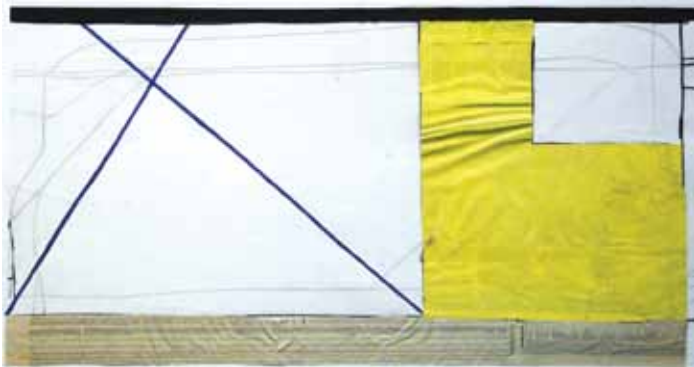
Dick developed his print images mainly by using collage. After the printers pulled a proof, he pasted or pinned cutout paper shapes to it until he got something he thought might work. Then the printers helped him figure out how to put the changes he wanted into the plates. Often this required scraping away something already there. Marcia continued the story:



Working proofs for *Green*, with handpainting and collage over prints of the black plate.

*For the next five days we had a hard time keeping up with him. Takada and I had begun to realize the complexity we were facing given Dick's predilection for going back into plates again and again to build up layers of texture and color, and sometimes to completely change whole sections. Then on the sixth day, work on *Green* came to a standstill. Dick said he was frustrated with the size of the plates. He decided to abandon the print. We took the proof off the front wall and put it up at the back of the studio.*

Dick started work on a smaller print, still larger than any he had done before. It was later named *Indigo Horizontal*. The printers became completely involved with it. They were beginning to forget



Red-Yellow-Blue, 1986 (top). Color soft ground etching with drypoint, 15¾-x-30-inch image on 26¾-x-40¼-inch sheet. Edition 60.

A collage Diebenkorn made on an early print of the black plate for *Red-Yellow-Blue*.

about the big green print on the back wall. “Then, one afternoon,” Marcia recounts, “I turned around to see Dick pasting some printed paper from *Indigo Horizontal* on the *Green* proof.”

Dick began a new plate for *Green*, using a technique he’d liked in the smaller print. There were only four days left of his planned two-week working time. Besides *Indigo Horizontal*, he had started a multiple-plate image that he abandoned after a lot of work on it. We had begun the project with Marcia as chief printer along with Takada as assistant and an apprentice. In addition, by this time, I had called in the two printers who had been editioning in our other studio. So five printers (all we had) were starting work at nine in the morning and sometimes not leaving until midnight. Dick would leave before dinner, but the printers would stay to etch plates he had finished drawing, then proof the result for him to see first thing the next morning. Marcia continued her story this way:

We made steady progress on Green in the last part of the second week. We were always working with Dick’s collage elements. Sometimes we would painstakingly measure and trace the exact location of a new line or color area, then mark the location on the plate for him to work over with acid or a drawing tool. At the other times he would look



The Oakland studio, 1986, showing proofs of *Green* (right), *Red-Yellow-Blue* (center), and the abandoned print (left).

at the proof and say something like, “I’ll just wing it here,” and begin drawing on the plate without any guidelines. Once we etched a triangle shape that came out three inches from where it was intended. Dick liked it, so it stayed.

We finished the project with OK to Print proofs of *Indigo Horizontal* and two smaller prints but without completing *Green*. Three months later, at the end of January 1986, Dick came back and worked with all five printers for another two weeks. He spent most of the time on *Green*, but also he created the color print titled *Red-Yellow-Blue*.

On the very last day of the project Dick added a seventh plate to *Green*, not full-sized like the others but a narrow strip that ran along the bottom of the image and changed its proportion. It widened a band of brown ink already there and was the final touch. The “something else” that he pursued was, in his words, “something other than what is searched for.”

The project that included *Green* was unusual in that Dick almost gave up on *Green*, and he did give up on another, smaller color print that he later referred to as “the one that got sick.” In all the years I worked with him, I can’t remember any other instance of his abandoning a print once he had begun serious work on developing it. He prodded and changed everything, and rarely let go of anything he had started. “Certainty may or may not come later,” he wrote in his notes to himself. “It may then be a valuable delusion.”

Dick’s last project with us was in September, 1992, and he was fragile at that time. His strength had been in decline since 1989, when he had had two heart valve operations. Nevertheless, he worked at Crown Point in 1992 with extraordinary productivity. That is the year he made *High Green*, second only to *Green* as his most celebrated work in printmaking.

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In 1991, a year before making *High Green*, Dick had completed *Touched Red*, a color print he had started in the temporary studio in 1990. When he had set *Touched Red* aside, I thought it had reflected his delicate condition. In 1991 he added strength to the print without losing its sense of vulnerability. That year he also made *Flotsam*, an odd black and white print full of motifs that he had used over the years. There are spades, circles, Xs, crosses, and in the center a soft floating form that—in my fantasy—is an embodied psyche hanging there.

In creating *Flotsam*, Dick had used an ink transfer method to work on three plates with different versions of the same image, and when he returned in 1992, he released the other two in small editions with the titles *The Barbarian* and *The Barbarian's Garden—Threatened*. I saw those prints as humorous and ignored the pessimism that was also there. I looked instead to the vitality of *High Green*, new that year. I thought he would recover. But he did not. He died on March 30, 1993. In three weeks, he would have turned seventy-one.

When we moved into our Oakland studio in 1972, we found an abandoned chair that had been repaired many times with diagonal wires bracing the legs and a length of cord wrapped around a split in the rounded backrest. The chair seemed symbolic to me of how art and life proceed. I didn't know that the studio had once been Dick's, but in 1977 when he walked in to make prints, he said right away, "That's my chair." Yes, I thought. Of course. It's his chair.



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