



The Dynamics of Surface / Objects in Space: Two new Exhibitions focus on Modernism

March 19, 2015 Susan Heywood No Comments

Richard Diebenkorn, whose synthesis of abstract and figurative painting made a major contribution to American Modernism at the Royal Academy



presentation.

Diebenkorn is associated with the generation of Abstract Expressionists who dominated the art world in the immediate post war period. The focus shifted from Europe to the USA and New York in particular, but as this show reminds us, exciting developments were afoot in Diebenkorn's own stamping grounds of California and New Mexico. The energy of Lyrical Abstraction pace de Kooning, and the sonorous Colour field work of Rothko fed into his early work as one of the Bay Area artists. Unevenly shaped areas of colour often feature organic, irregular blobs, linked and separated by informal black lines. Subsequently he turned away from abstract art, making paintings which reference everyday visual reality.

Modern art was famously described by the critic Clement Greenberg as characterised by flatness. The RA's welcome retrospective of Richard Diebenkorn (1922-1993) reveals how, inspired by the urban landscapes and desert vistas of modern America, the young colourist progressed through abstraction and figuration to the flat architectural certainty of his late style. The three main phases of his work are exhibited in three separate rooms, giving direction and fluency to the



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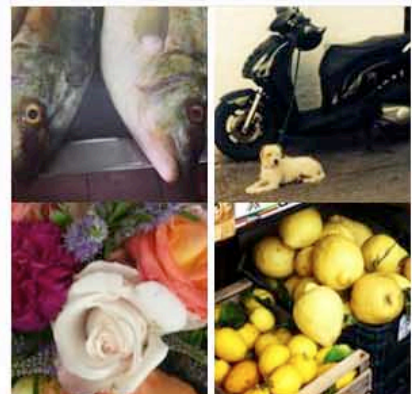
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Imagine sitting round a coffee table with friends discussing a wide range of subjects, learning from each other's experiences, discussing



He was an admirer of Edward Hopper, whose bland settings – railway cars, diners, bars, motel rooms – painted in unlikely, flat colours, were the backdrop for banal human dramas. The discovery of Matisse and the French artist's mastery of pattern, colour and above all flatness, was a moment of awakening for Diebenkorn. For the American, the bright light of California replaced the radiance of Matisse's Mediterranean, in paintings which celebrate the glimpsed intimacy of the familiar. Diebenkorn's fame rests principally on the numerous Ocean Park paintings (see image to the left) made from

the late 1960s until his death in 1993. Any tendency towards the romantic is held in check by an architectonic sense of volume and depth.

The dense palette of 1960s narrative, seen at its most intense in paintings such as *Cityscape#1* (see left image in featured image at top of post) and the enigmatic *Girl on a Terrace* (see image to right) and *Woman by the Ocean*, is replaced by glowing expanses of muted, almost bleached colour. Freely painted areas of wash and drip are contained within an angular, geometric frame which could equally be a point of entry or a blank wall. Thin brushwork and lack of finish – typically modern features – are balanced by fastidious observance of line. Diebenkorn claimed that he was unaware of the clear Californian light as a condition influencing his work but that he discovered its special properties during the actual process of painting. Cool and intellectual, these atmospheric paintings validate a lifetime's pursuit of two dimensions of reality.



### The supremacy of Giacometti and Smith, two giants of post war sculpture, revealed in a mere five works at Ordovas Gallery



Ordovas presents five exemplary works from the 1950s by the Swiss Giacometti and the American David Smith in a cool, white space where, on a sunny afternoon in late winter, their discrete, soft shadows fall in a kind of echo, a palimpsest of the originals. Giacometti's diminutive *Walking Man* group (see right image in featured image at top of post) and his enigmatic *Femme de Venise IX* (see image to left) hold a silent yet eloquent dialogue with three works by Smith – the totemic *Forging VI* (see image below right), an untitled bronze from 1955 and his finely tuned *Anchorhead* (see image below left). In two short films which play continuously, each artist is in conversation, talking about his work. In the case of

Giacometti it seems, the process, one of uncertainty and discovery, is more important than the result. Disarming and candid, he talks while he is working, modelling his material on an armature, or as he says, "playing with matter."

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*Melanie Chew, Director of Fundraising, East Anglia's Children's Hospices*



Sculpture is by definition three dimensional, and Giacometti, whose knobbly, etiolated human forms are familiar to us as emblems of twentieth century isolation and alienation, talks about his difficulty with volume. According to him, he cannot easily envisage the front of a piece when he is engaged with the profile or the back and vice versa.

Smith, who worked at one time as a welder, does not mould or model, he creates assemblages. Many of his monumental sculptures can be seen in an outdoor setting in the filmed interview of him at Bolton Landing, where he lived and worked in comparative isolation for several years. He speaks about "drawing in space" and his affinity with "the painters" and on occasion uses colour, painting parts of the metal in the tradition of Calder and Miro, artists who were familiar to him and whose irreverent, witty Surrealism he shared. Giacometti's starting point is the human condition translated into figurative angst; Smith employs a more abstract language to map the complex forms of our material world.



This small exhibition stands in welcome contrast to the busy blockbusters which constitute the museum experience as we have come to expect it. I was reminded of the central importance of the so-called *autonomy* of the art object; it exists for its own sake, and requires time and contemplation as it invites you to share in its unique and powerful presence.

Giacometti - Smith continues at Ordovas, 25 Savile Row, London W1S 2ER until April 11 2015. For full details, click [here](#).

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