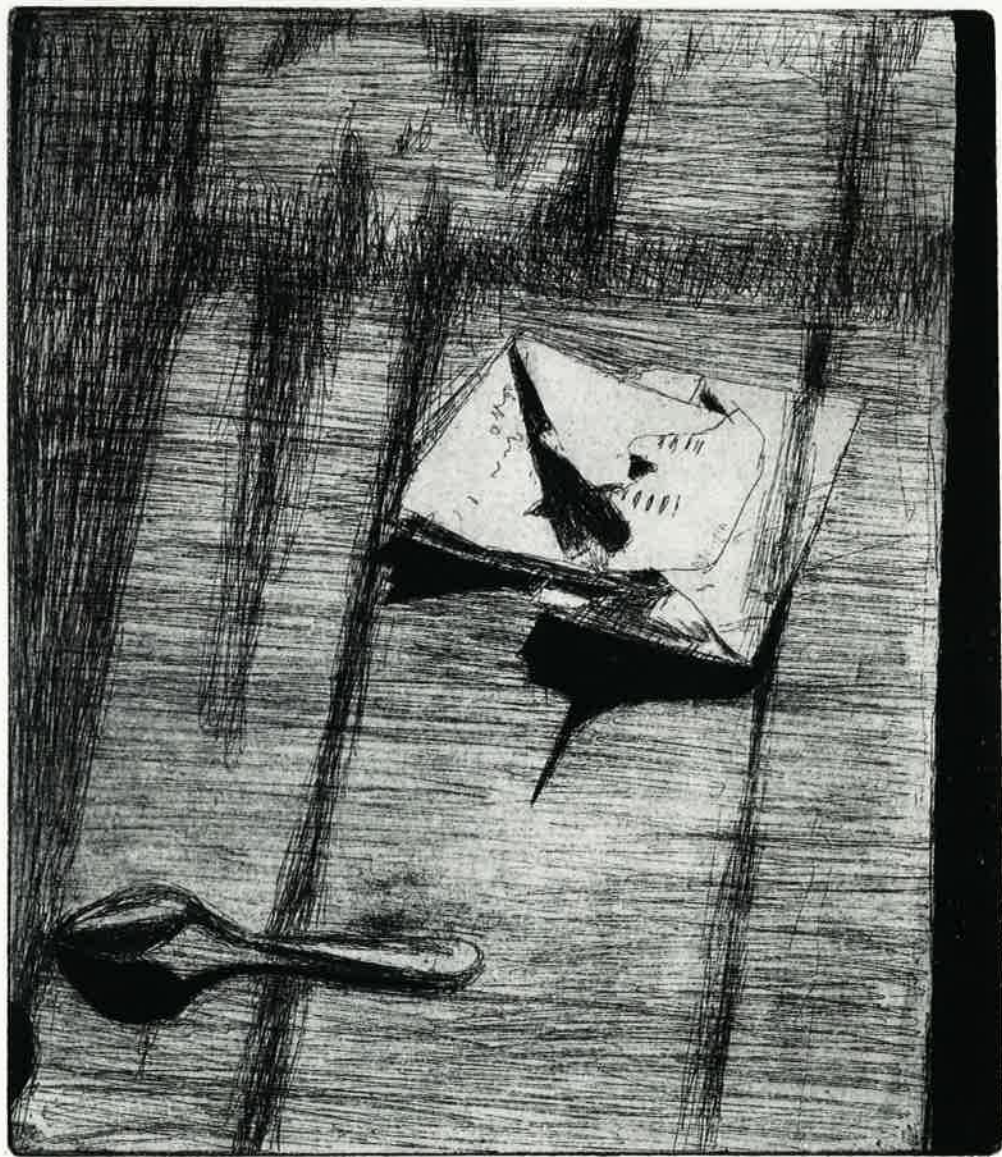


The Anderson Gallery of Contemporary Graphic Art

RICHARD DIEBENKORN:

41 ETCHINGS DRYPOINTS



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FINE ARTS MUSEUMS OF SAN FRANCISCO

Anderson Gallery of Contemporary Graphic Art

California Palace of the Legion of Honor

25 September 1999 – 23 January 2000

This exhibition has been the curatorial project of Krista Brugnara, the Achenbach Graphic Arts Council Intern for 1999–2000. Her selections are drawn exclusively from the Anderson Graphic Arts Collection and the Crown Point Press Archive, two collections that have brought new vitality to the presentation of contemporary American graphic art at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

Richard Diebenkorn's *41 Etchings Drypoints* has special significance for both Mr. and Mrs. Harry Anderson and Crown Point Press. For the Andersons, who purchased the work shortly after it was published in 1965, it was a first foray into collecting contemporary art. For Crown Point Press, it was not only one of the first publications for the fledgling, three-year old enterprise, but the beginning of a long and productive relationship with Diebenkorn that would end only with his death in 1993.

This exhibition is significant also for the Legion of Honor on the occasion of its seventy-fifth year in 1999. Fifty-one years ago in 1948, the young Diebenkorn was given his first one-artist exhibition at this museum. Today, the Fine Arts Museums are pleased to offer tribute to Richard Diebenkorn with this presentation of his early printed work.

Karin Breuer

Curator

Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts



cover: #11 (letter and spoon on a table), 1965

above: #1 (the artist's wife, Phyllis), 1964

RICHARD DIEBENKORN: 41 ETCHINGS DRYPOINTS

by Krista Brugnara

Achenbach Graphic Arts Council Intern, 1999–2000

During his 1961–1962 guest teaching stint at UCLA, Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993) began drawing with a drypoint needle on etching plates, which were printed by his graduate assistant. Upon his return to Berkeley in late 1962, he contacted Kathan Brown, who had opened Crown Point Press less than a year before, telling her he liked using drypoint as “a way of drawing” but needed a place to print the plates.¹ The result of that conversation is this group of forty-one prints chosen by the artist from about one hundred, made between 1963 and 1965, which represent Diebenkorn's first real endeavor at printmaking.

Although he liked drawing on the plates, Diebenkorn was at first less interested in the printing process that would later become an important part of his oeuvre. In 1963 he told Brown that he wanted to “to be doing something, not making something”—he wanted to emphasize the creative process over the mechanical aspects of manufacturing art.² Brown printed the plates for Diebenkorn and expanded his knowledge of printmaking throughout his career. This group of prints, in fact, chronicles the development of his interest in the process of printmaking as he experimented with varying line and tone in both aquatints and soft-ground etchings. The work exposes the deliberation and process inherent to printmaking, while still conveying the spontaneity of Diebenkorn's drawings. In fact, only three of these etchings were derived from drawings because he was so intent on drawing directly onto the plate from life.

Diebenkorn, who painted abstractly in the early 1950s, returned to representational art while living in Berkeley from 1955 to 1967. His work during this period seems to have naturally evolved from the abstract swirls and diagonal passages into the representational images that gave impetus to the Bay Area figurative school. Diebenkorn's figurative works are powerfully constructed and full of clarity. He abandoned abstraction and Abstract Expressionism in favor of the figure. While his abstract work was redolent of the real, his representational art never lacked an abstract consideration of line, form, and plane.

In the early 1960s Diebenkorn kept a stack of etching plates in his Berkeley studio that he would turn to when he had a case of painter's block. Always curious about expanding possibilities, he adapted these studies to larger, more formal paintings. After a one-artist paintings exhibition at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in 1963, Diebenkorn completed few paintings the following year. This lull in painting seems to have stimulated his interest in drawing on the plates and he made many of these prints during 1964 and 1965. He placed the images in flattened, shallow spaces and created drama by contrasting the white paper with the black line. Diebenkorn's strength lay in the elegance of the abstraction of his line, exemplifying his gift for creating compositions around beautiful, sensual lines.

Diebenkorn brought etching plates home and made drypoints from life—a view out his window, household objects such as a letter and a spoon, and, above all, his wife Phyllis, who is immortalized in sixteen of these etchings, lounging about their home, lost in thought. His sentiment for the everyday was shared by members of the Bay Area figurative school. Diebenkorn joined other figurative artists who convened weekly for evening group sessions of drawing from the live model directly onto plates. Six of the forty-one etchings in this group are of the nude figure, revealing just how comfortable Diebenkorn was with the challenge of drawing from a live model. The clothed figures meanwhile illustrate the sudden inspiration he found in the people who surrounded him, capturing their distinct personalities and characters in very few lines. The charm of Diebenkorn's work is truly his draftsmanship, a line that delineates shapes within the composition, whether on paper or canvas, while contributing substance in its own right.

Diebenkorn wanted the forty-one images to be seen in a certain order, providing the pleasures of both contrast and continuity, and carefully considering their progression and formal rhythm.³ They are reflective and melancholic, brought together by the artist as a sort of visual diary.

Endnotes:

1. Kathan Brown, *Ink, Paper, Metal, Wood: Painters and Sculptors at Crown Point Press* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1976), 20–21.
2. Karin Breuer et al., *Thirty-Five Years at Crown Point Press: Making Prints, Doing Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 169.
3. *Richard Diebenkorn: Etchings and Drypoints 1949-1980*, intro. by Mark Stevens (Houston: Houston Fine Art Press, 1981), 7–14.

Process

Etching is a printmaking technique in which acid is used to incise the plate, which is usually copper or zinc. The plate is first coated with an acid-resistant material called a ground. For line drawing, grounds are usually made of wax. To etch, the artist draws through a hard wax that coats the plate, creating lines that are thin, wiry, and blunt at the ends. In soft-ground etching, the lines look like pencil or crayon lines and are made by drawing on paper laid over a soft wax coating on the plate. When the paper is lifted off, wax is removed where the pencil was pressed, though some wax stays in the lines in the pattern of the paper grain.

Aquatint is an etching technique used for making tones. The aquatint ground, which is also resistant to acid, is not a solid coating on the plate but is composed of fine particles of rosin. The metal plate is dusted with the rosin, then the acid bites around the particles, creating tooth that holds ink.

Drypoint lines, on the other hand, are simply scratched onto the plate with a sharp point. The scratching doesn't remove the metal but makes a ridge called a burr, similar to the ridge of earth thrown up when the plow goes through a field. When the plate is inked, this burr creates lines that have a fuzzy, velvety quality.



#28 (Kathleen Brown), 1964



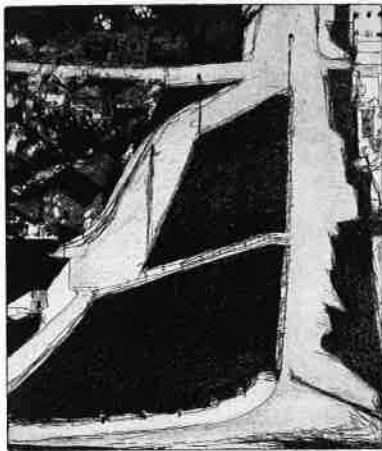
#31 (view of artist's deck), 1965



#26 (table still life with artist's glasses), 1964



#16 (seated model), 1964



#33 (hillside streets), 1965



#8 (double portrait of Phyllis with motif), 1965

Exhibition Checklist

41 ETCHINGS DRYPOINTS

Published by Crown Point Press, Berkeley, California, 1965;
printed by Kathan Brown; unbound portfolio, number 4 of an
edition of 25 comprised of 13 bound and 12 unbound portfolios.
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Anderson Graphic Arts
Collection, Gift of the Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson
Charitable Foundation
1996.74.76.1-41

- #1 (the artist's wife, Phyllis), 1964, drypoint
- #2 (the artist's living room in Berkeley), 1964, etching
- #3 (seated woman), 1965, soft-ground etching
- #4 (Phyllis), 1965, soft-ground etching
- #5 (Phyllis wearing a hat), 1965, etching and aquatint
- #6 (two portraits of Phyllis), 1964, drypoint
- #7 (Phyllis and her friend, Flora), 1965, soft-ground etching
- #8 (double portrait of Phyllis with motif), 1965, soft-ground etching
and aquatint
- #9 (reclining model), 1964, etching
- #10 (leafy plant in vase with fork and mirror on a table), 1965, drypoint
- #11 (letter and spoon on a table), 1965, etching and aquatint
- #12 (Phyllis on outside deck), 1965, drypoint
- #13 (the artist's daughter, Gretchen), 1965, drypoint
- #14 (Phyllis under umbrella on the patio), 1965, etching
- #15 (standing nude with arms on hips), 1965, etching
- #16 (seated model), 1964, drypoint
- #17 (back view, female nude), 1964, etching, aquatint and drypoint
- #18 (Phyllis in striped chair), 1965, drypoint
- #19 (still life with pencil, glass, and box with cigarettes), 1963, drypoint
- #20 (painting in artist's studio lying on its side behind a table),
1965, etching
- #21 (portrait of Phyllis), 1965, soft-ground etching
- #22 (portrait of Phyllis), 1965, etching
- #23 (portrait of Phyllis), 1965, etching
- #24 (Phyllis seated in rattan chair), 1965, soft-ground etching
- #25 (Phyllis leaning head on arm of couch), 1965, etching
- #26 (table still life with artist's glasses), 1964, drypoint and aquatint
- #27 (still life with silverware, scissors, and three crosses), 1964, drypoint
- #28 (Kathan Brown), 1964, drypoint
- #29 (seated woman resting elbows on knees), 1965, drypoint
- #30 (Phyllis seated on couch), 1965, soft-ground etching
- #31 (view of artist's deck), 1965, etching and aquatint
- #32 (street scene—trees, houses, lawns), 1965, drypoint
- #33 (hillside streets), 1965, etching, drypoint, and aquatint
- #34 (seated female nude), 1964, etching
- #35 (reclining female nude), 1964, drypoint
- #36 (table setting on flowered tablecloth), 1964, etching

41 ETCHINGS DRYPOINTS

Published by Crown Point Press, Berkeley, California, 1965;
printed by Kathan Brown, bound portfolio, one of 10 artist's proofs.
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Crown Point Press Archive,
Museum Purchase, Earthquake Fund
1991.28.332-372

Working proof 2 for #18 in the portfolio 41 *Etchings Drypoints*,
1965, drypoint
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Crown Point Press Archive,
Museum Purchase, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Michael Wilsey
1991.28.349.1

Working proof 3 for #18 in the portfolio 41 *Etchings Drypoints*,
1965, drypoint
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Crown Point Press Archive,
Museum Purchase, Gift of Nan Tucker McEvoy
1991.28.349.2

State proof 4 for #18 in the portfolio 41 *Etchings Drypoints*,
1965, drypoint
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Crown Point Press Archive,
Museum Purchase, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William Steen
1991.28.349.3

State proof 5 for #18 in the portfolio 41 *Etchings Drypoints*,
1965, drypoint
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Crown Point Press Archive,
Museum Purchase, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alfred S. Wilsey
1991.28.349.4

State proof 13 for #33 in the portfolio 41 *Etchings Drypoints*,
1965, etching
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Crown Point Press Archive,
Museum Purchase, Gift of Joseph and Deborah Goldyne
1991.28.364.1

State proof 14 for #33 in the portfolio 41 *Etchings Drypoints*,
1965, etching, drypoint, and aquatint
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Crown Point Press Archive,
Museum Purchase, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles R. Schwab
1991.28.364.2

Drawing for #38 in the portfolio 41 *Etchings Drypoints*, 1965,
graphite and watercolor
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Crown Point Press Archive,
Museum Purchase, Gift of the Graphic Arts Council
1991.28.369.1