Richard Diebenkorn: Clubs and Spades

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Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993) was fascinated with the figures of clubs and spades from the time of his childhood, when he painted them as emblems and heraldic devices on homemade shields. Occasionally he included them in his early abstract paintings and drawings of the 1950s and 1960s. Diebenkorn also featured clubs and spades in two small, untitled etchings (nos. 1, 2) that were made at Crown Point Press in 1977 and 1980.

"I had always used these signs in my work almost from my beginnings, but always peripherally, incidentally, and perhaps whimsically," he said to explain their reappearance as more important forms in his work beginning in late 1980.1 An untitled drawing (no. 20), one of four made in December 1980, may be his announcement of a new artistic preoccupation with the forms.2 In the drawing, clubs and spades in various colors and sizes are scattered in a complex arrangement that also includes numbers, circles, triangles, and crosses. Over the course of the next two years (1981 and 1982) in a break from the rectilinear geometry of his large Ocean Park canvases, Diebenkorn dealt directly with clubs and spades, as theme and variation, in a sizable group of drawings and prints.3
In two printmaking sessions at Crown Point’s Oakland studio, April 13–21, 1981, and May 5–20, 1982, Diebenkorn produced fifteen prints with clubs and spades as singular motifs. The forms are iconic in these prints, enlarged to a monumental scale within the printing plate, often crowding the image space. Clubs and spades mutate into trees (Green Tree Spade, no. 16), towers (Eiffelspade, no. 14), or merge to form hybrids (Combination, no. 9). Blue Club, Tri-Color II, and White Club (nos. 6, 7, and 8) depict spades that are bloated and bulbous, each containing a flowerlike club form. In the prints Black Club, Tri-Color, and Clubs Blue Ground (no. 4, 5, and 11) the shape of a club is manipulated into a clover leaf, flower, or tree with rounded petals or leaves and an elongated stem/trunk that emerges from the ground. These prints find a strong correspondence in emphasis and format with Diebenkorn’s drawings from this time, but some drawings such as two untitled works from 1980 and 1981 (nos. 21 and 23) display forms that are so distorted as to be unrecognizable, non-objective fragments.

Clubs and spades were not an exclusive theme for the artist during 1981–1982. In fact, he also created several Ocean Park–style drawings and the print Blue Surround at this time. Diebenkorn’s intense concentration on the theme was exhausted by 1983 and he claimed that he had returned to a “relational mode” that was dependent on no theme or motif. The prints and drawings that follow, however, indicate that he continued to explore the forms of clubs and spades within the abstract, geometric framework of Ocean Park works. In the 1983 woodcut Other (no. 17), for example, there is no doubt that the profile of Spreading Spade (no. 10) is the origin of the peaked curve at the lower right of the composition. Soft, sensuous curves of spade forms appear in three areas of the print Touched Red, 1991 (no. 18); and in many other prints, drawings, and paintings specific shapes of clubs and spades enter the vocabulary of elements that define Ocean Park compositions.
It is not surprising then that Diebenkorn described the clubs and spades as having “a much greater emotional charge than I realized,” a statement that suggests they had a strong personal significance. Diebenkorn never discussed the meaning of the symbols within his work, however, and allowed them to remain enigmatic. Their inclusion in the late print Flotsam (no. 19), published in 1991, provides at least a clue that they had some special meaning. Clubs and spades are featured within the jumbled composition as discarded odds and ends, along with other “discarded” images of scissors, arrows, numbers, and circles that also figured importantly in Diebenkorn’s pictorial repertoire. The print, with its eccentric appearance, strongly resembles the December 1980 drawing that introduced clubs and spades to his oeuvre. At the end of his life, it served to identify them as personal symbols and elements even as they were being jettisoned for something new, or gathered together as a summation of past work.

4. Black Club, 1981

14. Eiffelspade, 1982


3 It was only on paper, not canvas, that Diebenkorn investigated clubs and spades as subjects. He produced approximately fifty drawings and twenty prints.


5 Diebenkorn quoted in Elderfield, in The Art of Richard Diebenkorn, 112.
CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

All works in the exhibition are by Richard Diebenkorn (American, 1922–1993). Prints are in the collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; drawings are generous loans from California collections, as noted. Measurements for prints and drawings are in inches, height before width. All prints were published by Crown Point Press in Oakland and San Francisco.

PRINTS

1. Untitled (Club and Spade) or Untitled (abstract), 1977
   Drypoint and aquatint
   8 x 11 in. (image); 22 3/8 x 15 in. (sheet)
   Edition: 5
   Printed by John Slivon
   Crown Point Press Archive, gift of Kathan Brown
   1991.28.385

2. Untitled trial proof (walking figures with spade), unpublished, 1980
   Spit-bite aquatint
   6 15/16 x 5 in. (image)
   1991.28.605

   Soft-ground etching
   11 x 13 in. (image); 22 x 30 in. (sheet)
   Edition: 35
   Printed by Nancy Anello
   Anderson Graphic Arts Collection, gift of the Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson Charitable Foundation
   1996.74.88

4. Black Club, 1981
   Etching, drypoint, and aquatint printed in black and brown-black
   13 1/2 x 9 1/2 in. (image); 30 x 22 in. (sheet)
   Edition: 35
   Printed by Nancy Anello
   1991.28.634

5. Tri-Color, 1981
   Color aquatint, etching, and drypoint with color applied à la poupée
   13 1/2 x 9 1/2 in. (image); 30 x 22 in. (sheet)
   Edition: 35
   Printed by Nancy Anello
   Anderson Graphic Arts Collection, gift of the Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson Charitable Foundation
   1996.74.91

   Color aquatint, spit-bite aquatint, and soft-ground etching
   18 3/4 x 17 3/4 in. (image); 37 1/4 x 30 in. (sheet)
   Edition: 35
   Printed by Nancy Anello
   Anderson Graphic Arts Collection, gift of the Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson Charitable Foundation
   1996.74.86

   Color aquatint, spit-bite aquatint, and soft-ground etching
   18 3/4 x 17 3/4 in. (image); 37 1/4 x 30 in. (sheet)
   Edition: 35
   Printed by Nancy Anello
   Anderson Graphic Arts Collection, gift of the Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson Charitable Foundation
   1996.74.69

8. White Club, 1981
   Ink transfer etching
   18 3/4 x 17 3/4 in. (image); 37 1/4 x 30 in. (sheet)
   Edition: 22
   Printed by Nancy Anello
   1991.28.670

9. Combination, 1981
   Color aquatint and spit-bite aquatint
   15 1/2 x 13 1/2 in. (image); 31 x 24 in. (sheet)
   Edition: 40
   Printed by Nancy Anello
   Anderson Graphic Arts Collection, gift of the Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson Charitable Foundation
   1996.74.89

10. Spreading Spade, 1981
    Color aquatint, spit-bite aquatint, and drypoint
    18 x 19 in. (image); 36 3/4 x 31 in. (sheet)
    Edition: 35
    Printed by Nancy Anello
    Anderson Graphic Arts Collection, gift of the Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson Charitable Foundation
    1996.74.87

11. Clubs Blue Ground, 1982
    Color etching, spit-bite aquatint, and drypoint
    20 x 19 in. (image); 33 x 26 1/2 in. (sheet)
    Edition: 35
    Printed by Lilah Toland
    1991.28.77

12. Tri-Color Spade, 1982
    Color drypoint, aquatint, and spit-bite aquatint
    9 x 10 in. (image); 26 1/4 x 19 3/4 in. (sheet)
    Edition: 50
    Printed by Lilah Toland
    1991.28.68

13. Sugarlift Spade, 1982
    Sugarlift aquatint
    16 x 14 3/4 in. (image); 26 7/8 x 26 1/2 in. (sheet)
    Edition: 35
    Printed by Lilah Toland
    1991.28.73
14. Eiffelspadre, 1982
Aquatint
8 3/4 x 6 7/8 in. (image); 23 1/2 x 18 1/2 in. (sheet)
Edition: 50
Printed by Lilah Toland
1991.28.69

15. Spade Drypoint, 1982
Drypoint
10 1/4 x 9 in. (image); 23 1/4 x 18 1/2 in. (sheet)
Edition: 50
Printed by Lilah Toland
1991.28.59

16. Green Tree Spade, 1982
Color aquatint and spit-bite aquatint
12 x 9 in. (image); 23 1/4 x 18 3/8 in. (sheet)
Edition: 35
Printed by Lilah Toland
1991.28.58

A working drawing and a selection of working proofs for Green Tree Spade are included in the exhibition.

17. Ochre, 1983
Color woodcut
35 3/4 x 24 7/8 in. (image); 38 1/8 x 27 1/4 in. (sheet)
Edition: 200
Printed by Tadashi Toda at the Shi-un-do Print Shop, Kyoto
1991.28.675

Color aquatint, spit-bite aquatint, aquatint, soft-ground etching, and drypoint with scraping and burnishing
24 1/4 x 16 1/16 in. (image); 35 13/16 x 26 5/8 in. (sheet)
Edition: 85
Printed by Renée Bott
1993.51.204

Aquatint and drypoint with scraping and burnishing
23 15/16 x 18 in. (image); 34 x 26 5/8 in. (sheet)
Edition: 85
Printed by Renée Bott
1993.51.205

DRAWINGS

20. Untitled, 1980
Opaque watercolor, pastel, ink, and cut-and-pasted paper
25 1/8 x 19 in. (sheet)
Collection of Christopher Diebenkorn

21. Untitled, undated, ca. 1980
Opaque watercolor
19 x 25 in. (sheet)
Private collection

22. Untitled, 1980
Acrylic and charcoal
22 1/4 x 17 3/8 in. (sheet)
Private collection

23. Untitled, 1981
Opaque watercolor
13 x 12 1/2 in. (sheet)
Private collection

24. Untitled, No. 9, 1981
Opaque watercolor and charcoal
30 x 22 1/8 in. (sheet)
Collection of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson

25. Untitled, No. 46, 1981
Opaque watercolor and crayon
27 1/2 x 25 in. (sheet)
Courtesy of Gretchen and John Berggruen

Opaque watercolor; 2 1/4 in. (length)
Collection of the Richard Grant Family