Berkeley #4, 1953
During January 1981 many Bay Area museums and galleries are exhibiting works by former San Francisco Art Institute students in commemoration of the Institute's 110th anniversary and its rich contribution to the cultural life of the area.

MATRIX is presenting a selection of paintings from Richard Diebenkorn's Berkeley series, which were executed in a twenty-month period between 1953 and 1955. These paintings give the viewer an excellent opportunity to examine the work of a major artist in the process of his stylistic development. With this series Diebenkorn achieved his first widespread, formal recognition as an important figure in the Abstract Expressionist movement.

Diebenkorn was born in 1922 in Portland, Oregon, grew up in the San Francisco area, and received his undergraduate education at Stanford University. He became a Marine in 1943 and was enrolled briefly by the Corps in the University of California at Berkeley with an assignment to study physics and art. This training made him a proficient map-maker, and although he never felt comfortable with the task, his cartographic skill remains apparent in the construction of much of his work.

When he was released from the Marines in 1945, Diebenkorn returned to the West to the California School of Fine Arts (as the San Francisco Art Institute was then called). His association with the school, first as a student and then as a teacher from 1947-49, was extremely fruitful for his growth as an artist. He came into contact with important Bay Area artists on the CSFA faculty, Elmer Bishoff (now a professor at UCB), David Park, and Hassel Smith, as well as visiting instructors Clifford Still and Mark Rothko, leaders of the New York based Abstract Expressionist School.

When Diebenkorn returned to Berkeley in 1953, after completing his graduate degree at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and teaching for a year at the University of Illinois, he began the Berkeley series, which was to number over forty paintings.

The Berkeley series shows Diebenkorn's absorption of New York Abstract Expressionism which he adapted to his own Western environment and personal idiom. It is important to recognize, however, that Diebenkorn belongs to the first generation of Abstract Expressionists along with such Bay Area artists as Hassel Smith and Frank Lobdell. His work in Berkeley represents a fully formed achievement contemporary with that in New York which announced the arrival of the American avant-garde on the world scene.

The first Berkeley pictures, such as Berkeley 84 (1953) are, like the previous works done while still in Albuquerque, cut by horizontal lines or bands of color suggesting a silver of sky above a hilly landscape. Their colors are also reminiscent of the pinks and browns of the earlier New Mexico paintings. Broad bands of color stacked vertically upon one another also characterize Berkeley Landscape (1954), but here, rather than sky at the top, a dark area suggests mountains, while the bay is indicated by a wide strip of blue/green at the bottom. The middle and upper sections of the canvases are intersected by strong diagonals. The later Berkeley series paintings in MATRIX, all from 1955, show more expressionistic brushwork and are structurally more complex than the earlier pictures.

Berkeley, 1955 and Berkeley #23 have an increased variety of color and calligraphic vitality. The grid-like sections of heavily stroked paint are separated by fragments of line drawing, giving the effect of an aerial landscape ending in a narrow strip of sky. Berkeley #48, one of the last paintings in the series, returns to the desert landscape colors arranged in a more ordered formality.

All of the Berkeley pictures are executed with bold brushwork. By scraping and scratching at the colors in these pictures, Diebenkorn achieved a stronger linear element than previously seen in his work. Large blocks of color seem to tumble together, but the compositions are held firm by diagonal, horizontal, or vertical stripes of darker color which originate at the sides of the canvases and move directly into the center of the composition or frame at the edges. The results are luscious pictures in which spontaneity is tempered by the logic of the structural elements.

Diebenkorn's approach to the Abstract Expressionist style differs markedly from that of his New York contemporaries. His line is restrained compared, for example, to the compulsive, energetic line of Franz Kline; Diebenkorn's canvases are composed of flat, brushed, horizontal color patches, whereas in the works of Jackson Pollock colors were dripped and poured. Diebenkorn's color sense is distinctly Californian: warm earth colors dominate as opposed to the blacks, grays and whites that generally characterize the New York school.

The Berkeley series pictures were immediately exhibited on both West and East coasts; three were sent to the Third Sao Paulo Biennale in 1955. Following this series Diebenkorn painted a group of still lifes, another of figurative works, and numerous cityscapes. In 1969, after moving to Southern California, he began the Ocean Park series on which he continues to work at the present. In these grand abstractions we can see again the achievements he made in the Berkeley series—the freedom and originality of the Berkeley pictures opened up for him the possibilities for painting which are now apparent in all his work.

Richard Diebenkorn is represented in San Francisco by the John Berggruen Gallery and in New York by M. Knoedler and Co., Inc.
Works in MATRIX:

Berkeley #4, 1953, oil on canvas, 55 3/8" x 48". Collection University Art Museum, Berkeley.

Berkeley Landscape, 1954, oil on canvas, 50" x 56 1/2". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Harry W. Anderson.

Berkeley, 1955, 1955, oil on canvas, 59 1/4" x 64 1/4". Anonymous loan.

Berkeley #23, 1955, oil on canvas, 62" x 54 3/4". Lent by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: Gift of Women's Board.


CA '77; M. Knoedler & Co., Inc., NY '77 '79 & '80 (cats. pub.); University of California, Santa Barbara Art Museum '79.

Selected group exhibitions: The Art Institute of Chicago, IL, Seventy-second American Exhibition '76 (cat. pub.); Gruenebaum Gallery Ltd. and Gimpel & Weitzenhoffer, Ltd., NY, Three Generations of American Painting: Motherwell, Diebenkorn, Edlich '76 (cat. pub.); 38th Venice Biennial, United States Pavilion (one-person exhibition), Italy '78 (cat. pub.); John Berggruen Gallery, SF, Western Art '78; The Brooklyn Museum, NY, American Drawing in Black and White '81 (cat. pub.).

Selected bibliography about Diebenkorn:

Richard Diebenkorn's list of exhibitions is extensive. There have also been hundreds of articles and reviews written about him. Complete biographical and bibliographical information is contained in the catalogue for his 1976 retrospective exhibition organized by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York (see one-person exhibitions). A selection of exhibitions and articles which have occurred since 1976 are listed below.

Selected one-person exhibitions:
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY, Richard Diebenkorn: Paintings and Drawings, 1943-1976 '77 (travelling exhibition, cat. pub.); The Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles '76, also Stanford University Museum of Art, Palo Alto, MATRIX is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency.