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Gone West

Richard Diebenkorn's work comes home with de Young and College of Marin shows, and two new locally published books
BY GRETCHEN GILES



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The North Coast painter Peter Onstad has a story he likes to tell. It was Nov. 22, 1963, and he and a friend were walking down a Berkeley street. A boy ran past them and shouted, "The president's been shot!"

Most Americans tearily gathered around television sets and radios. But not Onstad and his friend.

"We had bigger fish to fry," Onstad remembers. "We had an appointment with Richard Diebenkorn!"

That meeting Diebenkorn would be an appointment more urgent to Onstad than learning the details of President Kennedy's assassination is but a small surprise to those who care about fine art.

Diebenkorn is set for a mini-renaissance of sorts in the North Bay and beyond, as two new exhibits open and two locally published books see release in the immediate future. To those same people who care about fine art, this is no surprise at all, a deserving recognition of the man who, before his final years in Healdsburg, left a legacy that's still being rediscovered.

Arguably the most important painter to come from California, Diebenkorn was raised in San Francisco and fated to attend Stanford, where his father fervently hoped he would put away what he termed his son's "fine avocation" and instead study something real, like medicine or law. But having seen a van Gogh at the de Young Museum with his grandmother in 1936, Diebenkorn was one of those rare folks who knew early on what he wanted to do with his life, and that was to paint. After Stanford, he enrolled in the California School of Fine Art, now known as the San Francisco Art Institute. His first one-man show was held at San Francisco's Legion of Honor in 1948 when he was just 26.

'Diebenkorn: Works on Paper' opens at the College of Marin Art Gallery on Thursday, Sept. 19. 835 College Ave., Kentfield. 415.485.9480. 'From the Model' and 'Abstractions on Paper' can be purchased directly from Kelly's Cove Press, www.kellycovepress.com. 'Diebenkorn: The Berkeley Years' runs through Sept. 29 at the de Young Museum, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, San Francisco. \$10-\$22, separate from museum admission. 415.750.3600.

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Richard Diebenkorn Foundation

'INTERIOR WITH DOORWAY' Oil on canvas 1962, on display at the de Young.

Influenced by Willem de Kooning, as well as Matisse and Cezanne, Diebenkorn came of age just after WWII, when abstract expressionism held sway among young artists, mostly men well into their 20s who were just back from the corps, ready to attend college on the GI bill, and who brought with them the rage and loss of an unwanted early maturity amid gruesome war. Figures were exploded, backgrounds receded, rules were broken, everything changed.

Diebenkorn was quickly swept up into the San Francisco ab-ex movement in league with Clyfford Still, David Park, Frank Lobdell, Hassel Smith, Horst Trave and others. His daughter Gretchen remembers that as a time when, if you saw a figure in a painting, you never mentioned it. Representation was forbidden; emotion was all.

As always, the art community was divided, with New York painters claiming abstract expressionism as their own, and West Coast painters having to add the geographical descriptor "San Francisco" to the name. But in his 1997 *American Visions* PBS project, the great art critic Robert Hughes put the record straight.

"To me, the best abstract painter of the time wasn't in New York at all," Hughes intoned. "His name was Richard Diebenkorn, and he lived in California. He painted some of the most intelligent responses to Matisse that any American had done."

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I really enjoyed the article, especially for the attention to the situation of California artists. There's a typo in the caption for one of the photos-- that's not Sonoma County's wonderful author and garlic-grower Chester Aaron (who is also worthy of a profile in your paper) but more likely the person you are quoting in the article, Chester Arnold.

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Posted by **Carol Sklenicka** on 07/10/2013 at 10:28 AM



Good heavens, Carol, you're right. Fixed now, and yes, both Chesters are great enough that our fingers get them mixed up from time to time on deadline. Best - G.

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Posted by **Gabe Meline** on 07/10/2013 at 1:18 PM

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