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Richard Diebenkorn and Agnes Martin:

Negative Space - Synthesis of Method and Regional Influence

The vitality of negative space features prominently in the work of Richard Diebenkorn and Agnes Martin—and the art of *generating* negative space seems paradoxical, impossible. Yet the sensitivity required to develop direct passages of breathing room is pronounced in their late Modernist works, whose multi-lithic, active, expressive structures celebrate the void and command presence. The striking suggestion of scale and space is still vibrantly relevant, reminding the 21st century museum-goer that there are points of visual punctuation, invitations to enter space that mutate landscape and morph biology through abstraction. By analyzing Diebenkorn's *Untitled* (1951) and Martin's *Untitled* (1954), we gain insight into a sense of space-place that draws on regional influence, exerting a balance of precision and looseness rooted in Modernist sensibilities. By focusing on their use of negative space and its relationship to the geography of New Mexico, formal and interpretive analyses reveal the essential nature of these early, stylistically developmental pieces. Similarities allow a valuable understanding of the relationship between artist, influence and method. We can see how pivot point development allowed each to paint works in the same decade, in connected locations, which explored spatial placement as part of a total experience and approach—opening doors for future progress.

Descending into the dimmed main gallery at the University of New Mexico Art Museum, viewers are confronted by a wall of large-scale works, looming heavily on the right. The viewer is consumed by a dominating oil on canvas: Diebenkorn's *Untitled* (1951), whose bold, essential shapes demand attention. The vertical 55" x 35" piece is fiercely illuminated, accentuating its high-contrast, sizzling desert palette and the massive, wavy-edged geometrics whose blurred silhouettes create movement across the two-dimensional surface. The painting is imposing, monolithic, with a sense of breadth implied by the force of

its heavily saturated voids. Expressive, yet muted, passages exist as loosely defined, off-kilter moments and shaded, almost three-dimensional environmental divisions.¹

Formally speaking, the most striking element is a large, dominating plane of yellow-orange. Other elements seem pushed aside by its blunt, upward thrust. The yellow plane is both intrusive and inclusive, simultaneously dividing and unifying visual elements at its farthest edge.² The endless bump of planes and crisscrossing lines evoke a charted surface, giving the viewer a downward perspective on the high desert, observing buildings and highways—tracing the unity of rural and urban textures. It's not unlike the view of Albuquerque one gets from a landing plane, as the descent carries the viewer over connected, soft-edged rectangles, cut through by roads and shopping centers which surrender to passages of yellow-brown. This suggestion of aerial perspective and flat, topographic mapping is powerful and related to Diebenkorn's then-developing visual investigations.³ The space itself is complex, shifting from aerial to ambiguous multi-point perspectives within the same visual plane.

The planar elements vibrate with an almost invisible sense of textured layering—the void spaces are never truly *devoid*. Over-painted marks are unified into a seemingly undifferentiated space, but observation reveals a sense of movement and etherealness that keeps the shapes from simply collapsing into solid tone. Though the environment, which abstractly suggests cartography, roads, fields, structures and space, is itself flattened, there is no sense of actual *flatness*. Each element is, in fact, alive with the

¹ Though often categorized as Abstract Expressionist, many of Diebenkorn's New Mexico paintings exhibit a kind of allusive figuration that is considerably more representational than the "paint-slinger" action painters (Buck et al. 13).

² Art historian Gerald Norland describes the intruding plane thusly: "one can read a vertical canvas in a golden yellow, which saturates seven-eighths of the surface, with a few invasions from each of the four framing edges" (Norland 38). Norland emphasizes Diebenkorn's use of lightness, flow, spontaneity, calligraphic lines and their relation to the landscape proper.

³ Diebenkorn had a personal interest in observing terrain from airplane windows during his time spent in the military (Gersh-Nesic) and he took his first civilian plane flight in 1950, "from Albuquerque to California," which had documented impact on his treatment of color, line and space (Buck et al. 13). The flights he took over the desert were "propeller-powered, at medium altitude [and] they provided exhilarating views of the landscape. Earlier on, the painter had been receptive to the ways in which driving through a particular terrain would influence his reception of it" (Norland 43). Diebenkorn said of his experimentation, "the aerial view showed me a rich variety of ways of treating a flat plane—like flattened mud or paint" (Norland 43).

negative and brimming with layered nothingness!⁴ The pseudo-solid pulses with hidden texture, becoming *created* negative space, the paradox that makes *Untitled* (1951) vital.⁵

Thin lines offset the floating shapes. They cut through edges, define ellipses, outline squares and generate a vertical division of space by lightly intersecting and dissecting the picture plane. Transparency allows enough substance for crispness, in contrast to the fuzz of the forms, while letting lines fade gently beneath overlaid tone. The verticality allows the yellow plane to give compositional weight to the piece, anchoring it as an observed place. The smaller elements then have the chance to float lightly into position, never heavy-handed, settling in but never rooted. The palette is warm, reflective of New Mexico geography, with surprising punctuations of blue and green which interrupt the scheme like splashes of man-made dye, the intrusion of billboards and neon signs along the yellow of Route 66. Moments of white behave like reflected sunlight and a burst of beige-pink hits between highlights, itself the soft, aging surface of an adobe wall. Critic Beth S. Gersh-Nesic described similar beige-pink flares as “feminine” and “unlikely,” neither of which come to mind here.⁶ The beige-pink is undoubtedly adobe, permeating the physical personality of Albuquerque. It behaves as a suggestion of sun on regional architecture, one Gersh-Nesic may not have been familiar with—but which Diebenkorn intimately understood and manipulated in his New Mexico paintings.⁷ The proliferation of calligraphic marks, loose rectangles and wedges scream of property lines, developed farmland and bright sidewalks, with shapes simultaneously

⁴ Diebenkorn often spoke of “sparseness,” saying “Don’t be afraid of empty space” (Buck et al. 13).

⁵ Diebenkorn doesn’t rely on canvas tone or color ground to generate breathing room—instead the yellow, environmental plane is thoughtfully constructed and other shapes, like the passage of black in the upper right, exist as strong, identifiable solids and fluid, veil-like shadows. Norland describes these patches as “ambiguous color grounds” and identifies the dark passage as being “tied into the paint fabric with linear markings that suggest sewing or collage” (Norland 38).

⁶ It should be noted that Gersh-Nesic was referring to the occurrence of beige-pink splashes found across several of Diebenkorn’s Albuquerque paintings. The beige-pink found in *Untitled* (1951) is identical to the tone Gersh-Nesic referred to as “feminine” in other pieces painted the same year or two. (Gersh-Nesic).

⁷ Many of Diebenkorn’s New Mexico paintings (like *Albuquerque No. 4* and *Untitled* (1951)) make use of this red-pink adobe hue, suggesting not only architecture but also the peculiar iron-rich dust that permeates the entire region: “The pink coloration typical of *Albuquerque* recalls the “fleshy pinks” in de Kooning’s contemporaneous *Woman* series but actually reflects the red dust of New Mexico and the effect of Southwestern light on adobe houses” (Buck et al. 15). Diebenkorn’s “paintings from Albuquerque incorporated direct landscape impressions, along with the bleached cast of things that resulted from dust from the red earth mixing with sand” (Buck et al. 16) and he indicated “the flat line of the western mesa of Albuquerque... influenced my work” (Norland 38).

existing as flattened map-view components and semi-dimensional structures, casting shadows that become linear elements in themselves. The colorful void-patches are at once light, open, dry and suggestive of the desert.

Similarly, Agnes Martin's *Untitled* (1954), from a collection of her early, pre-grid works, dominates and attracts the viewer at the expense of surrounding pieces.⁸ Martin's large scale, oil on board expressionist investigation stands in contrast to her later fine-line grid works, but speaks harmoniously to Diebenkorn's yellow-orange abstraction.⁹ Active lines and broad, negative spatial components plant it squarely in late-Modernism, allowing the viewer to enter the picture plane from a perspective similar to Diebenkorn's. The less saturated, still monumental horizontal composition makes use of *constructed* void space that vibrates with thinly concealed layers of information. Though unified by a large, gray-beige, curving structural component, the dominant shape (a swath that cuts through the surface, overlaying and sliding beneath elements) falls to the background, allowing warmer shapes to float to the surface. From a distance, the spray of neutral tone undulates like vague highlights and shadows on shifting sand. On closer inspection, brush strokes combine to form negative breathing room, while also existing in a state of subtle activity, not unlike Diebenkorn's yellow-orange thrust. The sweep of sandy beige serves to orient the composition, connecting loose elements and balancing the picture plane while imperceptibly affecting other active shapes. Instead of washing elements clear to the edge, Martin's sand gives them room to play. The horizontal canvas allows a rambling surface, an expansion beyond the field of vision, as the viewer draws in to observe detail—horizontality itself being traditionally read as landscape. This contrasts heavily with Diebenkorn's dominating vertical plane.

A skewed wedge is the next focal element, generated with fine strokes that maintain drawn flavor even in large scale, connected by juicy washes. The wedge does not dominate, however, coexisting

⁸ Martin's *Untitled* (1954) was on display as part of the same exhibition at the University of New Mexico Art Museum that showcased *Untitled* (1951), though the collection of her early works was in the basement Raymond Jonson gallery. Both paintings in this comparative analysis are part of permanent collections here in New Mexico.

⁹ *Untitled* (1954) is approximately the same size as *Untitled* (1951), though a bit more balanced (likely 55" wide by 45"). The piece is not labeled and precise sizing was not easily available. A request for the exact size has not been answered as of this writing.

pleasantly with sand and a swath of red that peeks from the center canvas, suggesting volume as thin lines cross over it. The red itself, with brown divisions, also reads as skewed horizontal perspective—are we sensing light, or warmth? Or are we literally viewing a sunset over distant, backlit hills? Two bright circular shapes stand starkly against the red wash, moon-like, or even comically eyeball-ish. They exist in that strange perspective moment, suggesting a laughing face when combined with the wedge below, gently biomorphic but almost certainly a comedic aside.¹⁰ The ambiguity of these marks prevents absolute reading and the viewer's associations continually shift, denying the sense of an anchored, observable place found in Diebenkorn's allusions, even as the composition suggests geographical relationships.

Vague foreground is implied by a row of vertical stones, like prehistoric architecture,¹¹ found in the lower left. They cast their own line-based shadow toward the center, where a convergence of thin marks suggest telephone lines or tangled hair, not unlike Diebenkorn's wandering wires. The additional use of dashed lines implies dirt roads on a survey map, recalling Diebenkorn's work while also rooting Martin's in a strong sense of geographic space, without the precision of perspective *place*. The subtle, earthy palette is less blinding than Diebenkorn's, but equally regionally influenced.¹² Martin's use of negative space emphasizes the moments of interwoven, interlocking surface play that generate pause and tension, expanse and density. Her void spaces are flatter than Diebenkorn's, however, as Martin allows some of the breathing room to exist quietly, without excessive over-painting. Surface movement is

¹⁰ Diebenkorn's piece has a similar face-like suggestion, the central line forming an angular nose, with a single eye and two dashes for a mouth. In each case, the discovery of face-like terrain is like uncovering a hidden subplot within an allusive landscape—we read the face into the piece, wonder if it is accidentally placed or curiously added, then draw back to view the whole as a total environment.

¹¹ The “standing stones” in *Untitled* (1954) offhandedly recall ancient regional architecture, like cave-dwellings and pictographic stones, as well as the rounded contours of pueblo walls. It is reasonable to assume that during Martin's long residence in Taos, New Mexico, that she would have visited the Taos Pueblo. Access to early rock structures, pueblo architecture and pictograms is an easy task. Martin lived in Taos in the 40s, part of the 50s, then again from the 1990s until her death. From 1968 – 1993 she lived in New Mexico, though not in Taos (Bryan). Arne Glimcher also recalled her propensity for observing rock formations (see footnote 11).

¹² Art historian Arne Glimcher recognized the regional influence on Martin's work, describing her canvases as sky-like and claiming “the visual extravagance of space in the landscape and the quality of the light inspired her, and her life in New Mexico is inextricable from her work. She drove the same routes day after day, hundreds of times, and each time she responded to infinitely small changes in the patterns of the rocks and vegetation” (12).

implied via the active, thin lines and their constant diagonal course, leading the eye from one passage to the next, where it can wander among “rocks” and shadows.

Both paintings are connected by proximity in time, conceptual considerations and, interestingly, geographic location. Diebenkorn and Martin were living in New Mexico at the time they painted each of the *Untitleds*—and both attended the University of New Mexico¹³, where the works are currently on display in the *UNMAM Fiftieth Anniversary Exhibition*. Likewise, work completed in New Mexico is considered pivotal to each artist’s subsequent development, marking these pieces as influential moments. The *Untitleds* exhibit a form of suggestive abstraction—marks are allusively figurative, triggering reactive viewer interpretation. Mutated, embedded shapes provide the kind of Rorschach gameplay common in semi-abstraction: the viewer has license to string recognizable elements together, building an associative response. This kind of semi-abstraction, then, can lead to endlessly divergent interpretations.

Knowing that Martin renounced (and destroyed) her pre-grid work plays heavily on the importance of figuration in *Untitled* (1954). By the early 1960s, she abandoned all trace of biomorphism, content and allusion in favor of the mantric repetition and reverberation of pure geometric form (Glimcher 11). Her grids “equate more with sound than familiar visual experience,” existing without narrative and arresting all associative gameplay (Glimcher 11). Perhaps Martin moved away from the more suggestive nature of *Untitled* (1954) to end guessing games that potentially detracted from the delivery of a clear meditation on “the artist’s inner state” (Glimcher 11). Diebenkorn also moved away from the loosely referential forms in *Untitled* (1951), though he embraced increased figuration over the reductive non-representation of Martin. While maintaining the void and vibration of over-painting, later series (like *Ocean Park* or his cityscapes) are undeniably landscape with dynamic, understandable, horizon lines and perspective. Where *Untitled* (1951) suggests dry earth, maps and architecture with

¹³ Agnes Martin attended UNM in the late 1940s through the field university, living in Taos, New Mexico, where *Untitled* (1954) and other early works were completed (The University of New Mexico Art Museum) (Bryan). Richard Diebenkorn attended UNM (he was part of the graduate MFA program at the Albuquerque campus) from 1950 – 1952 on funds from the GI bill and *Untitled* (1951) was actually part of his MFA thesis exhibition (Norland 40). New Mexico distanced Diebenkorn from the direct effects of the east and west coast art worlds (Gersh-Nesic) (Gray NYU Gallery).

ambiguous (even confusing) perspective shifts, his mature work delivers spontaneous, atmospheric geography that undeniably exists as *location*. Perhaps for Diebenkorn, the use of allusively figurative marks also left too much up for interpretation. Movement toward representation narrows the field of response.

Martin's change from biomorphic compositions to her famous grids occurred as a result of experimentation in her early Taos pieces (The Harwood Museum of Art).¹⁴ Diebenkorn's move to New Mexico, likewise, had documented impact on his technique—everything from geographic representation to color choice (Grey Art NYU Gallery).¹⁵ This sense of space and light is highly evident in the works analyzed here, recalling the vastness of the desert and the congestion of invading urban sensibilities.¹⁶ The impact of regional influence ties them visually, experimentally and chronologically, allowing the viewer to unearth compositional relationships that are undoubtedly (and admittedly) tied to geography. The use of void space in *Untitled* (1951) and *Untitled* (1954) is a product of their investigation of the vast, geography and palette of the American southwest, revealing a unique sensitivity that allowed Diebenkorn and Martin to synthesize their physical location with burgeoning conceptual concerns.

¹⁴ Since many of the pieces in the *Agnes Martin: Early Works* exhibition are of literal New Mexico landscapes and translations of landscape into heavier abstraction, it is undeniable that the physical negative space of the high desert heavily impacted her choice of color, spatial arrangement and approach. As such, Martin's late-Modernist style relates directly to other Taos Moderns—like Edward Corbett, Clay Spohn, Thomas Benrimo, Bea Mandelman and Cady Wells (The Harwood Museum of Art). Her work would drastically change after moving to New York.

¹⁵ Gersh-Nesic's review of *Diebenkorn in New Mexico*, an exhibit which highlighted 1950s works like *Untitled* (1951), acknowledges that his move to Albuquerque "presented a new sense of color, space and light that belonged to neither the west or the east." It should be noted that while *Untitled* (1951) was painted in Albuquerque, he did not name it part of the official Albuquerque series. Diebenkorn attended UNM from 1950 – 1952 (Gersh-Nesic).

¹⁶ While less familiar than Diebenkorn's Santa Monica *Ocean Park* paintings, or even his *Berkeley Paintings*, the formal investigations Diebenkorn made while living in Albuquerque had tremendous impact on later development, bringing his west coast sensibilities through the unique filter of light and space, urban and rural which he later, arguably, carries into his observations of the Pacific Ocean (Diebenkorn.org). Diebenkorn himself "posits that his time in Albuquerque provided an important fulcrum of what would become his mature aesthetic." (Grey NYU Gallery). For Martin, her New Mexico work was so developmental, so experimental, that she attempted to round up and destroy her earlier pieces, including *Untitled* (1954)—anything that was overtly traditional, Abstract Expressionist or biomorphic. The selections found in her ...*Early Works* exhibition were the product of extensive research and dogged preservation—collectors who kept the pieces from being removed from circulation (Bryan). One can speculate that she wanted only her final, mature voice to ring through—further confirming the developmental importance of her New Mexico paintings.

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Richard Diebenkorn, *Untitled* (1951). Oil on Canvas. 55'' x 35''.



Agnes Martin. *Untitled* (1954). Oil on Board. Approximately 45" x 55".