



Dennis Dykema: This is my Reply

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Richard Diebenkorn, *Seawall*, 1957, oil on canvas, 20 x 26 inches
 Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, gift of Phyllis G. Diebenkorn, 1995.96



Dennis Dykema, *The Dancing Trees*, 2015, oil on paper, 22 x 30 inches
 courtesy of the artist

Most painters of the Iowa landscape rely on naturalistic colors to depict tranquil scenes. Dennis Dykema has made many of these paintings. But in the early 1980s, he was painting landscapes that were completely different; they were bold, energetic, and brightly colored. These landscapes began with the basic forms of the land in Iowa—the geometry of the fields, groups of trees, the irregularity of rivers and lakes. But those paintings ended not when the last leaf was added to a tree, but when Dennis was satisfied with his composition.

Dennis had begun painting landscapes in 1976, several years after beginning a long tenure as art professor at Buena Vista University in Storm Lake. Though he approached the landscape from a background in abstract painting, he worked to balance forms from nature with forms of pure imagination. However, as with all artists, sources of inspiration are continually required to give artists new challenges...or sometimes remind them of old ones they had left behind. Dennis tells the story of his most recent source of inspiration:

“In the summer of 2013, we were in California for a family wedding. Friends and former students urged us, while there, to see the Richard Diebenkorn *Berkeley* Years show at the de Young Museum in San Francisco. I was familiar with Diebenkorn’s later *Ocean Park* series and had seen only one or two of the earlier works from Berkeley prior to seeing this show. For me, the show was an overpowering, exciting, and stimulating experience. I found the work to be a wonderful embrace of a number of influences. Artists such as Matisse, de Kooning, Pollock, Gorky, and even Edward Hopper were evident to my eye. I was further reminded

of my own work during the 1980s. I was so taken by the energy in the works in that show I knew my own work would be affected by the experience.

“A year later, in the summer of 2014, I began my response to that experience. The works you see are the result of a three-year effort in response to that show. It has been a challenge to resolve reminders of Diebenkorn’s work with memories of my own of 20 to 30 years ago, and find ownership in a new expressive body of work. This is my reply.”

Richard Diebenkorn was arguably the most important painter of landscapes from the generation of artists who emerged during the 1950s and 1960s. Born in 1922, he lived most of his life on the West Coast and was, therefore, often overlooked. After completing graduate school in New Mexico, he returned to California in 1953, bringing with him a mostly abstract style of painting. For the next 13 years, he would use the manmade and natural landscapes of Berkeley to create paintings that looked back to the vibrant colors and dramatic lines and forms of many of the great artists from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At the same time, the overall composition of his paintings was entirely new, and the blending of abstraction with representational imagery was unlike anything else being produced. Just as important, these paintings had great feeling, depicting moods perhaps even more clearly than they depicted places or people.

Just as Diebenkorn found inspiration from earlier artists, Dennis’s unexpected exposure to the *Berkeley* series rekindled his passion for the Iowa landscape. Some of



Richard Diebenkorn, *View from the Porch*, 1959, oil on canvas, 70 x 66 inches
Collection of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson, 1970.018



Dennis Dykema, *Big Yellow*, 2017, oil on canvas, 35 x 29 inches
courtesy of the artist

his earliest “replies” to Diebenkorn, like *Contour Crop* (2014) and *The Dancing Trees* (2015), show how neatly Dennis reconfigured Diebenkorn’s California works to the Iowa landscape. Both paintings are controlled by large, roughly rectangular areas of color placed horizontally on the canvases. As in many of Diebenkorn’s paintings, such as *Seawall* (1957), both of Dennis’s paintings have more dynamic placements of smaller shapes and curves in the center of the picture.

Beyond the amount of abstraction that Dennis creates in his landscape, what truly separates his work from most other artists in the state is how much his unexpected color choices can evoke emotions. This becomes apparent almost immediately after viewing only a few of his works; Dennis is not painting to give viewers a sense of place—he is painting to give viewers a feeling of place. He shifts Iowa’s unique topography onto his canvas by sometimes painting fields as if they are viewed overhead, as in *Contour Crop*, while at other times painting other natural features as seen from the surface or even below the surface. The trees in *The Dancing Trees* are presented from a lower viewpoint than the overview of the fields around the trees. The trees, the water, and other natural forms are important for their colors and shapes, and how they relate to the surrounding colors and shapes on the canvas.

Paintings by Dennis during the last year or two have become even more abstract. He continues to find inspiration in the *Berkeley* series. Consider Diebenkorn’s *View from the Porch* (1959) as an example. Large fields of color, broken into both geometric and random shapes by slender and thick lines,

provide us the barest glimpse of landscape. Though the horizon line is steady, the variety of shapes and colors gives Diebenkorn’s painting a sense of energy, even motion.

Comparing Dennis’s *Sentinels* (2016), *If You Stand the Earth on Edge* (2016), and *Big Yellow* (2017) to *View from the Porch*, we can see again how Dennis reworks Diebenkorn’s California coast for Iowa. Dennis maintains just enough naturalistic colors and a glimpse of the sky to give us a clue that the painting is, at its core, a landscape. On top of that foundation, Dennis builds color upon color and form upon form. Large areas of color give each painting a sense of solidity, but he has painted each one to give us a feeling of movement. The lower half of *Sentinels* is a whirling arrangement of small bits of color, creating a turbulence that is rarely found in traditionally placid Iowa landscape paintings. *If You Stand the Earth on Edge* contains large areas of color that spiral gently around a central dark shape. Beyond the large, yellow area of *Big Yellow*, the space seems to recede quickly through the central green area, back toward the horizon.

Dennis Dykema received an unanticipated spark of inspiration from a California artist who died in 1980. The spark restored his excitement in artistically excavating the Iowa landscape, as in *What Lies Beneath* (2016). Diebenkorn’s inspiration returned him to an exuberant style of painting that he had left behind. The paintings are daring, even dramatic, and they encourage all of us to reconsider the impact that the natural beauty of our state has on us. Dozens of paintings into his current series, Dennis is still examining the impact our environment has on him.



Dennis Dykema, *Sentinels*, 2016, oil on canvas, 33 x 45 inches
courtesy of the artist



Dennis Dykema, *What Lies Beneath*, 2016, oil on canvas, 45 x 57 inches
courtesy of the artist



Dennis Dykema, *If You Stand the Earth on Edge*, 2016, oil on canvas, 45 x 45 inches
courtesy of the artist

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Dennis Dykema, *Contour Crop*, 2014, oil on canvas, 45 x 45 inches
courtesy of the artist