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Residency I  
Comparative Essay  
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**Was Henri Matisse to Richard Diebenkorn as Robert Frank is to Wayne Theibaud?**

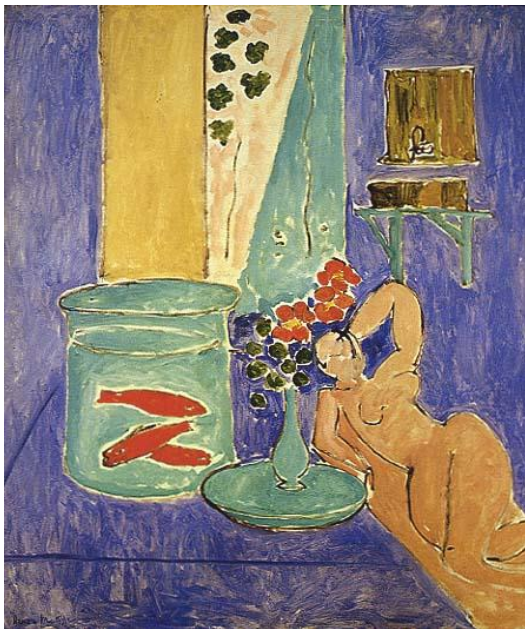


Figure 1. Henri Matisse, *Goldfish and Sculpture (Le Poissons)*, 1911



Figure 2. Richard Diebenkorn, *Ocean Park No. 114*, 1979, Oil on canvas, 81 x 81

*Empathy allows both the artist and spectator  
to enter and vicariously live in an imagined, painted world.*

—Wayne Thiebaud<sup>1</sup>

Richard Diebenkorn emerged out of the Bay Area Figurative movement during the 1950s and 1960s. Bay Area Figuration was in many ways a response to what was

happening with the New York School of painting in the work of artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and the like. Not unlike New York, Paris and London there was an on-going collaboration among artists in the Bay Area. They showed their work in exhibitions together and they also helped one another find teaching jobs, galleries, and museum exhibitions. This collaboration provided a rich foundation from which Bay Area Figuration grew and gained momentum. It was out of this synergy the acclaimed magazine *Artforum* began in San Francisco in the early 1960s only later did it move to New York. The initial goal of the publication was to bring acclaim to artists on the West Coast. The additional element that existed in the Bay Area was that the museums showed works from significant European collections.

In addition to the influential exhibitions of modern and contemporary painting mounted by the San Francisco Museum often in advance of the artists' showing in New York museums, there were important local collections of Impressionism (the Palace of the Legion of Honor and the de Young Museum), Cubism, School of Paris (the Stein collection), and the Blue Four (Galka Scheyer).<sup>2</sup>

Diebenkorn had the opportunity to look at the works of Matisse up close in the museum and was profoundly influenced by his work. The influence is evident not only in the figurative works but in the non objective works of the Ocean Park series and the landscapes as well. He drew from Matisse's distinctive palette, bold graphic references, and reductive abstraction; in addition he borrowed from Matisse's distinctive brush work. There are several works to draw a direct comparison.

One such comparison is *Goldfish and Sculpture (Le Poissons)*, 1911 and *Ocean Park No. 114*, 1979. Although Matisse's painting makes reference to the human form and objects in a three dimensional space, Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park No. 114* uses line and reduced color pallet and brush work, to in many ways communicate a similar feeling as *Le Poissons*.



Figure 3. Robert Frank, *The Americans*.

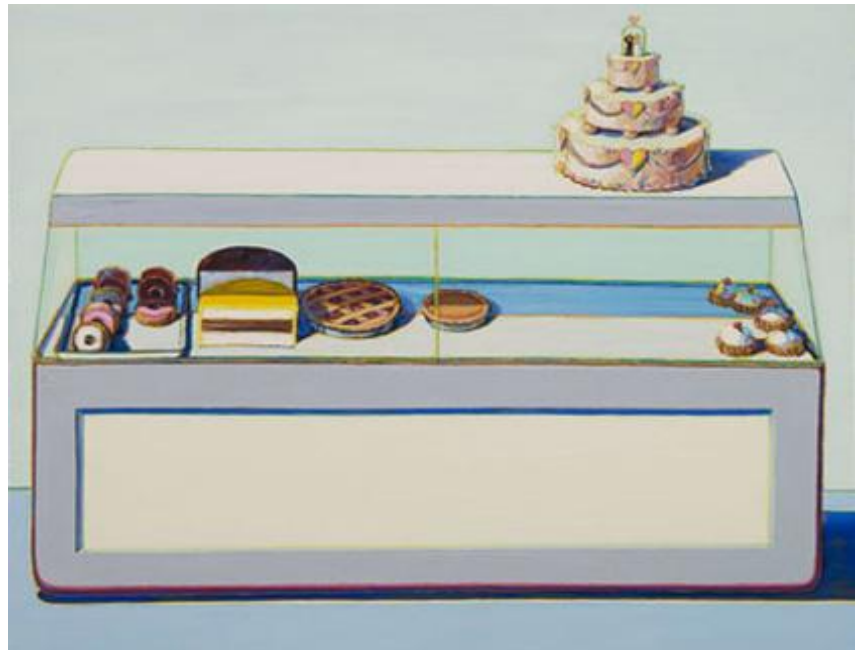


Figure 4. Wayne Thiebaud, *Bakery Case*, 1996

Photographer Robert Frank, a Guggenheim recipient, had a research project which was to create a body of work while traveling across America in 1955 and 1956. His task was fundamentally a documentary one, capturing an image of America from the perspective of an outsider.

Frank was a “documentary-style” photographer, as Walker Evans once termed it, looking onto the world, rather than an art photographer in the

Romantic mold who looks out only to see a reflection of himself. Frank was a photographer of social form who opened his audience's eyes to "what was everywhere visible" in American society but "seldom noticed."<sup>3</sup>

Frank faced significant criticism, and for many reasons. He was "condemned for his self-absorption in the face of the American social landscape."<sup>4</sup> It is through his work that a distinctive portrait of America and American consumerism was painted and one that strongly influenced US artists in the late 1950s and early 1960s. When one looks at the work of Frank, the many references in Thiebaud's paintings that directly relate to the visual essay created by Franks work can be seen - America in the cabinet and behind the scene. The direct conservatism of Thiebaud's paintings speaks of a limited view or selective view of that "American Feeling"; with flags, cup cakes, candies and the like.

My own artistic work has been influenced by Diebenkorn, Thiebaud and Frank. I have looked to them for answers to questions about the 1950s and 1960s. In many ways the work of Diebenkorn and Thiebaud is easier for me to digest, in that they seem to me to be more optimistic. The candy confections and beautiful yet sublime abstractions of Diebenkorn are more about what I believe was the mindset of the American founding fathers. The separation from England represented a new "freedom", freedom of religion, speech, the ability to follow one's own path, etc. - i.e. birth the term, "The American Dream". Robert Franks through his photography shows us the underside - the bitterness and unfairness that exists in discrimination of race, social class, ethnic origin and gender.

Growing up my mother told me, Melissa you can't judge a book by its cover. I have been attracted to the work of Matisse, Diebenkorn and Thebaud. I studied with Thiebaud

for five years; he has influenced my work in many ways. For me, it is easier to live with the work of the three; Diebenkorn, Thiebaud and Matisse, and it is much more difficult to absorb Frank's work as in the exhibition, *"The Americans"*. Last spring the exhibition was showing at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and I spent a lot of time digesting the exhibition, repulsed by the social unfairness and class distinction portrayed by Frank.



Figure 5. New York Times VW Ad 1959



Figure 6. American Fin Auto, 1950s

When one looks at the historical time sequence of the Deibenkorn, Thiebaud and Frank, all working artist in the 1950s and 1960s, it is evident they were at the same time, addressing different yet similar social issues. The New York Times in 1959 had a full page ad for Volkswagen. The ad read "Think Small". This ad and concept was running concurrently with the construction of gaudy, oversized American cars.



Figure 7. Melissa Chandon, VW Bug in Yellow, 6" x 6", 2009



Figure 8. Yellow 2007 H2 Hummer

So, in the end what is this all about? We all have personal choice and for me personally I have resonated with the “Think Small” concept. For many reasons this feels like it’s the right thing to do both in my youth and now as we face many political issues from tightening support for higher public education to healthcare and a changing planet due to global warming. My final question is: do we need opposing visual presentations from artists such as Frank and Thiebaud in order to educate and assist us in understanding our own personal taste and choices?

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<sup>1</sup> Thiebaud, Paul. “Wayne Thiebaud Riverscapes”, (2002). *Exhibition catalogue*, page 35.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, Caroline A. “Conclusion Chapter Six” *Bay Area Figurative Art 1950 - 1965*. University of California Press, Ltd. Oxford, England. 1990, page 157

<sup>3</sup> Stimson, Blake. “The Pivot of the World, Photography and Its Nation”. Mit Press. 2006. Page 105

<sup>4</sup> Stimson, Blake. “The Pivot of the World, Photography and Its Nation”. Mit Press. 2006. Page 105