

AESTHETIC AND MATERIAL ASPECTS OF TWO BERKELEY PAINTINGS BY RICHARD DIEBENKORN IN THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION

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In the early 1950s, the American painter Richard Diebenkorn created his abstract *Berkeley* series, two of which, *Berkeley #1* (1953) and *Berkeley #12* (1954), belong to the Phillips Collection. Since their creation, the paintings have led dissimilar lives, both in the homes of previous owners and after coming to the Phillips Collection. The aim of this investigation is to compare and contrast the present appearance and state of preservation of the paintings, while taking into account how they were made, how they have each been employed and displayed, and the effects of previous conservation treatment.

Both works are painted in oil on canvas, and were conceived and painted by Diebenkorn in his studio in Berkeley, California. The canvas was stretched on a simple wooden stretcher and prepared by the artist with a glue sizing and a white, oil-based ground. Both paintings bear similar artist's inscriptions in paint on the canvas reverse, which give the title and the artist's name, and indicate the proper orientation.

The paint layers vary in character and thickness. Paint is applied freely and thinly, and has a generally fluid and medium-rich consistency, with occasional areas of lean background paint and heavier, impasted brushstrokes. Visible *pentimenti* and other evidence of reworking on the Phillips Collection paintings are typical of the artist's analytical yet spontaneous approach.

Diebenkorn worked mostly with the typical materials of oil-based tube paints mixed with linseed oil and turpentine. In 1957, after he had switched to painting figuratively, it was documented that he also used white, oil-based house paint in cans [1]. While it is reported that he mostly used such paint for the ground, he may have also mixed the fluid yet opaque paint with his artist's colors. This would be consistent with the muted, chalky colors and general eggshell matt surface of both the *Berkeley* paintings, as well as two later figurative works by the artist in the Phillips Collection (c.1957 and 1960).

Shortly after it was painted, *Berkeley #1* was sold by the Paul Kantor Gallery, California, to Mr and Mrs Gifford Phillips in Santa Fe, New Mexico. It was borrowed for exhibition five times between 1955 and 1968, and was given to the Phillips Collection in 1977. Though records indicate that the painting remained in fair condition, an extensive network of raised ageing cracks had developed, due in part to inherent vice, but likely exacerbated by travel and fluctuating environmental conditions. The painting was conserved by a private studio in 1978. The exact condition of the painting at the time remains unclear, although color transparencies illustrate well the extent of the cracking. The treatment included lining with an interleaf to a solid aluminum honeycomb panel using a polyvinyl acetate resin, removal of dirt, and varnishing with a dilute solution of Acryloid B-67. In 1989, further treatment was carried out to set down isolated areas of lifting paint. In 2005, the painting traveled on loan to the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris, France.

The earliest records for *Berkeley #12* are of its sale from the Allan Stone Gallery, New York, to Mr and Mrs Gerald Miller in

the 1970s. In the early 1970s, Mr Stone is thought to have bought a few *Berkeley* paintings from another New York gallery, one of which may have been *#12*. Mrs Miller gave the painting to the Phillips Collection in 1990. Since 1970, there have been no records of loan for exhibition. The painting remains taut and in plane on its original stretcher. It exhibits raised cracking similar to that seen in *Berkeley #1*, but to a lesser extent. The paint layers are presently stable, although insecurity has been noted at the intersections of some cracks. Previous conservation treatment includes local consolidation of cracks and dirt removal. The painting is currently on display at the Phillips Collection.

Conservation decisions taken for the paintings reflect contrasting approaches to typical problems for abstract paintings from the mid-twentieth century. A painting such as *Berkeley #1*, with an extensive exhibition history and raised cracks, was a prime candidate for preventive lining at the time treatment was undertaken. Unfortunately, the painting now has an overall flattened appearance, further accentuated by the uniformity of surface imparted by the applied coating. Compared with *Berkeley #12*, the transitions from smooth to textured paint in areas of impasto are less gradual. Flat areas are more flat, and the softness and fluidity of the paint texture is sharpened. In addition, flattened cracks are more defined, due to the lining adhesive seeping through the canvas at these points and saturating the paint. Over the entire surface area of the painting, these seemingly insignificant details are compounded into a subtle, yet noticeable change from the overall original aesthetic. *Berkeley #12* is not lined and retains the subtleties of its original surface. However, the network of raised cracks is prominent and it is also necessary to see past this disfigurement, to appreciate the artist's original aesthetic.

Consideration of the comparative aesthetics of the two paintings is valuable. While accepted conservation decisions have been taken in the treatment of both paintings, their appearance is quite different as a result. Which aesthetic is most acceptable, weighed with other issues of preservation, has long been a matter for discussion. For these paintings, as with many contemporary paintings, the surface quality has a direct bearing on the overall appearance, and surface quality is affected by subtle changes within the total three-dimensional structure of the painting as well as at the surface. The current aesthetic of *Berkeley #1* is a direct result of preventive conservation treatment, while that of *Berkeley #12* is due to unavoidable changes in the materials. It is an illustration of a classic conservation conundrum, for which there has proven to be no easy answer.

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REFERENCE

- 1 Chipp, H., 'Diebenkorn Paints a Picture', *ARTnews* 56(3) (1957) 44–47 and 54.