

What set Bay Area painters apart in '60s  
by Kenneth Baker  
San Francisco Chronicle

The visceral character of Bay Area painting, circa 1960, gets strong and proper emphasis in "Abstract and Figurative: Highlights of Bay Area Painting" at the John Berggruen Gallery. Artists such as David Park, Richard Diebenkorn, Elmer Bischoff and Paul Wonner made no secret of the competitive pressures they felt, even at this distance, from the practices and personalities of the so-called New York School. Park (1911-1960) and Diebenkorn (1922-1993) in particular studiously rejected the idea that the true tests of artistic authenticity lay in improvised abstraction. The present selection of work lets us see Diebenkorn edging his way out of abstraction in pieces such as "Berkeley #48" (1955) and "Interior With Flowers" (1961). And we can see how abstract ostensibly descriptive pictures could remain in the hands of Bischoff (1916-1991) and others. Bischoff's "Rooftops and Bay" (1961) supports figurative and abstract readings almost equally. Various characteristics connect the works on view: an attachment to the human figure, however spectral or symbolic; a shared sense of local, or as it now appears, regional and generational vantage point; consistent attention to a picture's surface energy. But the aspect most striking is the air of painters trying to manifest a bodily feeling, not merely an optical impression, of something observed or vividly remembered or envisioned. Even a picture as stylized as Wonner's nearly empty still life "Objects on Floor" (1966) exaggerates the play of shadow and the swallowing of objects by volume to awaken any kinesthetic recall the viewer may have of spatial experience distorted by emotion. Nathan Oliveira, Diebenkorn, Bischoff and especially Park tended to use the pressure of brushwork on canvas, of colors amplifying one another, of gestures eddying together, to evoke the impact of lived experience, though Park seldom painted a live model. The ambition to turn the artwork into a kind of retentive membrane, rather than a theater of improvisation or a descriptive report, set the Bay Area painters, diverse as they were, apart from most of their East Coast counterparts. Wayne Thiebaud looks almost like a formalist in the setting of this show, but in his own way he carried forward the Bay Area painters' project of demonstratively reconciling the internal demands of a picture with the felt need to share personal observations of life.