

National Gallery of Art News Release



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Contact: Ruth Kaplan
Tina Coplan
(202) 842-6359

1991 COLLECTORS COMMITTEE GIFTS ANNOUNCED

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Two colorful, figurative paintings by leading contemporary artists--Seated Figure with a Hat (1967) by Richard Diebenkorn and Erotic Blando Fruto (1989) by Malcolm Morley--have been acquired for the National Gallery of Art by its Collectors Committee, Gallery director J. Carter Brown announced today. Seated Figure with a Hat is also a partial gift from Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Rubin.

The Morley painting is on view in the East Building concourse level. Diebenkorn's canvas, currently on tour in a European retrospective of his work, will be hung in the Gallery next June.

"These are both outstanding examples of major currents in the careers of two highly distinguished artists. They make a resounding contribution to our twentieth-century collection," said Brown. "Diebenkorn's important figurative painting gives serious depth and quality to our presentation of his abstract works. The Morley tour de force is his first painting in our collection."

Both artists have been recognized with prestigious awards in their native countries. A preeminent American artist since the 1950s, Diebenkorn was honored this year with the presidential National Medal of Arts. In 1984 the Trustees of the Tate Gallery in London awarded the first Turner Prize to Morley, who was born in England and moved to New York in 1958.

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Seated Figure with a Hat depicts Diebenkorn's wife, Phyllis, whose monumental figure fills the entire canvas. A lush application of paint counters the spare, geometric composition. Long strokes of yellow brushed over deep blue drench the figure in sunlight. Poised between representation and abstraction, Seated Figure with a Hat combines two modes that Diebenkorn has explored alternately and with distinction throughout his forty-five-year career.

Beginning in 1948, the artist produced a rich and varied group of abstract paintings that culminated in the mid-1950s in the powerful Berkeley series of abstract landscapes, named for the Bay Area location where they were painted. In 1956, he embarked on a lengthy exploration of figurative painting. Over the next decade he produced a remarkable group of landscapes, interiors, still lifes, and paintings of the human figure. Seated Figure with a Hat is among the finest of Diebenkorn's last representational compositions. Made in 1967 just before he returned to abstraction with the renowned Ocean Park series, the painting projects the same tranquil mood that characterizes his later abstract work.

Morley's Erotic Blando Fruto, measuring eleven by nine feet, confronts the viewer with a profusion of oversized tropical fruits, vivid colors, and energetic painterly effects. Beyond this explosive still life, a landscape depicts two men thatching the roof of a cabana.

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Erotic Blando Fruto is, in fact, a montage based on two separate watercolors painted by Morley in Costa Rica. To enlarge these works, he used a time-honored technique called "squaring-up" in which he laid a grid over the original work, applied a grid of the same proportions over a larger blank canvas, then reproduced the drawing square-by-square in paint. Unlike his predecessors, however, Morley approached each square individually so that what appears to be a unified image is actually a compilation of separately rendered abstract paintings. The exuberance of his execution brings together this improbable assemblage of elements and effects into a powerful, and convincing visual whole.

A highly personal interpretation of traditional technique is typical of Morley's art. Born in London in 1931 he studied at the Royal College of Art before moving to New York in 1958, where he is a major figure in American contemporary art.

In the mid-1960s he first applied the technique of "squaring-up" to the reproduction of postcards of cruise ships and photographs taken from travel brochures, blending, in effect, the detailed illusionism of photorealism with the ironic, deadpan imagery of pop art. Morley changed directions in the mid-1970s and became an accomplished watercolorist. The works made on his frequent travels have been "squared-up" as the basis for his recent oil paintings.

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In addition to donating major twentieth-century paintings and sculpture, the Collectors Committee has also established a curatorial discretionary fund for acquiring prints, drawings, and photographs. Gifts this year include photographs by Harry Callahan, and prints by Lucian Freud, Tony Cragg, and Joan Mitchell.

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