



MARTHA DIAMOND

Sensation Rising

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The large oil paintings that Martha Diamond showed in New York two seasons ago took some extra scrutinizing before their visibility, and even their sensational impacts, could register. Disoriented viewers tended to shrug them off precipitously. Taken as exercises in a postreductive, painterly abstract style, Diamond's blithely charged surfaces seemed too glib, too erratic, diverse, or, worse, hastily slapped down; as emotive imagist glyphs, too nonchalant, rarefied, and obscure. "Nothing much at first," "not much going on," went the adumbrations in two local critics' lead sentences before those writers settled into telling what, after staying with the work for a time, they had seen and appreciated.

The nonplussed reactions to Diamond's show suggest a cautionary tale about the checkout quotient from works that require more than a first glance in the stressed-out sensorium of the art public. A highly sensual, nuanced art, it seems, won't cause much disturbance in the millennial spillway of theoretically quick reads. A few months before Diamond's show, the experience of watching people enter and leave a small installation of Robert Ryman's paintings in San Francisco had resulted in my estimating a 30-second requirement for the viewer willing to see either that there was anything there but bare walls, or that the Ryman's, once their recognizably literalist formats were brought into focus (they were in fact white and aluminum-gray constructions bolted to the walls), had much to offer by being inspected further. Most of those who gave the installation a half minute's close study were hooked, and likely to remain for anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour or more while each of Ryman's nominally perfect blanks intimated light and sense.

By comparison, Diamond's pictures are far from blank, though some of them deal, much like any Ryman,



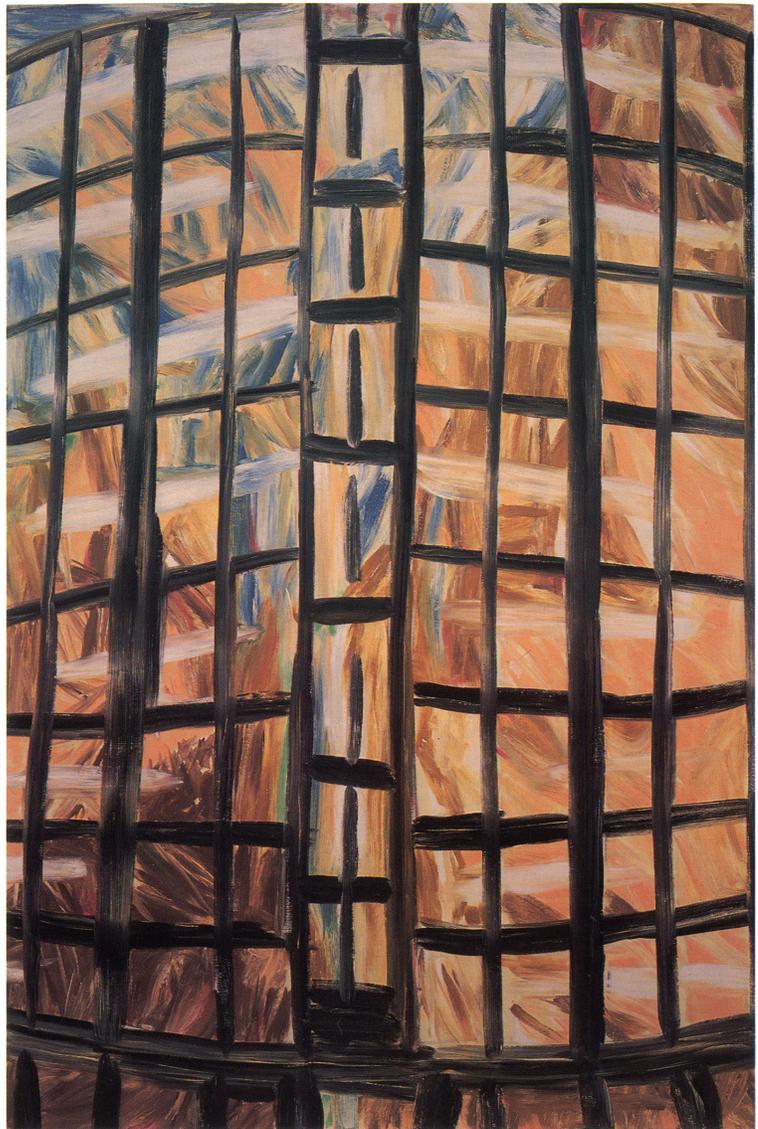
Opposite: Martha Diamond, *Red Light*, 1988, oil on canvas, 90 x 72".
Right: Martha Diamond, *The Matter*, 1988, oil on canvas, 108 x 72".

with great gobs of evanescence. Rather, each is painted fully, near to impaction, which is where some of the work's difficulties lie. At a glance, you can't see the painting for the paint; and the massive image the paint amounts to spreads nonsensically, as if some essential, mediating focal point were missing. Only over time do you see that the strangely resolved, surface-wide image is the point, and that its time of arrival is double: fast for color and light, slow for graphic statement. The paradox is that these slow-to-be-perceived surfaces evoke the kind of unscheduled rushes of perception that most keenly fall to sight in ordinary experience.

For most of the past ten years, Diamond has painted cityscape abstractions based on the canted New York vistas one's eyes meet inadvertently out the window several stories up, or in passing from the street. Such discrete actualities tend to impinge on one's consciousness as sensations only tenuously connected to the solidities of things. All of a sudden, one is struck by a ratcheting amalgam of stone-and-glass gridwork with the reflection or shadow of a second architectural bit, plus perhaps the cropped profile of an incongruous third across a chemically coated slip of tumbled island sky—and all of this bunching upward from no foothold in a spatial continuum that flattens out much as the distances across the Grand Canyon when observed from the rim. Animated by weaves, darts, and scrubblings, alternately glistening and dry, of Diamond's pigment, such mirages claim the giddiness and pathos of the aimlessly grandiose.

Diamond's New York views developed out of a number of generic city images the artist made after switching from acrylic to oil paints in the latter half of the '70s. Her earlier acrylic paintings were, she says, "about brushstrokes,"¹ with some landscape references. Her first oils were a variety of what Rene Ricard then called "single-image painting"—one rudimentary form per painting, floated in the center of the pictorial field—a mode to which she occasionally reverts, though with a broader attack (especially in a series of enigmatic, thorny abstract still lifes beginning in 1986 called "Sets"). By 1980, when she zeroed in from memory on specific Manhattan subjects, her pictures began to project a footloose elegance commensurate with a sensibility at home with its motifs.

Diamond is a New York visionary. Her pictorial embodiments of the stuns and implusions of urbanity are best understood in the company of those painters of Manhattan across whose surfaces the arguments between representation and abstract form are deflected by the urge to nail down the forces that contend at just about any intersection. One thinks of the vector-ridden outcroppings of John Marin's "downtown" pictures, Georgia O'Keeffe's night-blooming monoliths, and the hectic avenues looming up in pictures by Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning. The energetic realist wing of the New



York School belongs here, too: Jane Freilicher's ever-deepening skylines, John Button's reveries upon cornices and clouds, Yvonne Jacquette's contemplative particularist overviews, and the recent "black" paintings of Lower Manhattan at night by Alex Katz.

A Manhattan native, Diamond returned in 1965, after graduating from Carleton College in Minnesota and a year in Paris, to discover New York School painting: "I felt sympathetic to Kline, de Kooning, and Rothko," she has said, "but I was most influenced and fascinated by Pollock and Warhol." For the young painter starting out in the mid '60s, the "persistence" of Andy Warhol's images and Jackson Pollock's "graceful, complex space," as she saw them, presented the necessary challenges. De Kooning at the time seemed "more graphic." Nevertheless, it is to de Kooning's highway abstractions of 1957-63 that the physicality of Diamond's recent pictures most relates. In the highway pictures, de Kooning brought forward an image of the sweep at the peripheries of vision—literally, the landscape rushing away at the side of the road as seen from the passenger seat of a car. Frontality—the paint in front of the picture—put the viewer on intimate terms with the accelerated image as it spread out in scale and light.

More accurately, it could be said that Diamond has retrieved the blunt physicality of de Kooning's and Kline's paint at one remove—by seeing it through the use Alex Katz made of it during his own phase of directly handling imagery that included, besides landscapes and portraiture, a series of head-on window-frame views done circa 1959-62 in his West Side loft. (Somewhat earlier, Katz had announced his sense of the procedural issues involved by the remark "The paint goes across the canvas making discriminations.") Apprehending the agitated marks of action painting through Katz's nimble, more circumspect realism means removal for the painter in another sense: the image agglomerated of a dual attentiveness to the external world and to the contiguous behavior of paint is objectified and transposable. Hence Katz's progress away from direct painting and into his current "artificial" phase of working from drawings, through oil sketches, to the transpositions of images (via drawing and pouncing) onto huge canvases where, as he has said, "you see the image first and not the paint, but if you want to look closely you can see how it's painted." Hence, too, Diamond's way of similarly transposing images worked out on small Masonite panels to big, mostly vertical paintings in which the basic scheme is altered only by more refined touches and a greater care as to scale.

It's as if Diamond has put the paint back in front of the picture where de Kooning had it, and from where Katz eventually (and other '60s reductivists, generally) smoothed it away. But, like Katz's, Diamond's art is distinguished from that of the exemplars of action painting by a



Opposite: Martha Diamond, *Reflections*, 1989, oil on canvas, 89½ x 60". Above: Martha Diamond, *World Trade*, 1988, oil on canvas, 72 x 60".

heightened intentionality apropos image and appearance, including a pragmatic approach to the mediating messages of style. "On the surface," she told me,

my work resembles expressionist paintings, but I'm more concerned with a vision than expressionism and I try to paint that vision realistically—I try to paint my perceptions rather than paint through emotion. A familiar subject in a radically generalized or edited treatment is a formalist device I use, so that recognizability or familiarity leads the viewer to look for expected detail. For the most part the details are not there so you look harder at the paint and the painting. You begin to distinguish between paint, performance, image, idea, expectation, and you.

The normally rigid components of the urban grid—of what James Schuyler calls "the continuous right-angled skin of the city"²—yield to the eliding fluency of Diamond's brushstrokes. Contrariwise, for oil paint to look so fresh and articulated—for it to articulate solids and gases as seamlessly as they appear in the bat of an eye—it must be handled dryly: thus unblended white and blue streaks, through which poke the extremities of tall buildings in *Tips*, 1987, make, Diamond says, "a sign for sky, mist, and water on a gray day." The atmosphere left by the brush doesn't undulate but zips laterally or hunkers down. Atmosphere and light cushioned by mass and tone are a view's most salient traits. Tingles of offshore light and weather modify the diaphanous facades in *World Trade* and *Winds*, both 1988. But the particulars of those skeletal prospects are left for memory (including memory's illogical color statements) to extrapolate. What appear most nonsensical—the gummy penumbras and moonstruck calcium rows of girders, or a sunny apartment tower's feathered-off, dithering incline, as in *Reflections*,

1989—ring most true. In the overall image a precise look of combined architecture, light, and air may be reflected, but the reflection is without objects; it veers instead to fasten on sensations analogous to those high-pitched, random instants of vision when our associations of contour and particular objects merely percolate in the effect.

Diamond extends the optical life of her sensations with bold integuments that verge on cartooning. Like a comic strip artist, she has come up with a repertory of marks with interchangeable connotations: a reduplicated single stroke hooked into an open V can stand for a rooftop ledge in one painting and a stack of balconies in another. This as much as anything—as much as her taste for jarring (or, as she says, "conspicuous") colors—has led some critics to mistake her as a latecomer to the ranks of neo-Expressionism. Diamond's vision may be subjective—sensation, finally, can be nothing else—but her painting's expressivity derives from a feeling for live fact. Joan Mitchell has spoken of "a feeling that comes . . . from the outside, from landscape."³ And it may be that Diamond is doing for the cityscape what Mitchell does for the great(er) outdoors. Where Mitchell layers her canvases with the irregular swatches of nature perceived as chaotic sense impressions, Diamond builds edifices that bring citified chaos into focus as character, condensing the rush and stabilizing it as an emblem.

Diamond's brand of real-life abstraction reminds us that, conversely, the most piquant New York realism has always made the object of its contemplations the city dweller's quick response to the immediate environs. What becomes visible with a cursory turn or lift of the head is what makes the city click into place, revealing its larger nature and dynamism. One gives oneself up to such excess with a plausibility that briefly overrides the baseline bludgeonings by which whole zones of sense are quashed. The city seen with a naturalist's bent transcends its witless negotiations. Light on buildings against the high Atlantic sky makes New York life tenable.

Diamond's pictures make a close analogy of brushed-on oil paint to immanent light. Indeed, some of her latest paintings take light alone for their subject matter. A spree of closely adjusted color values, *Red Light*, 1988, is four red tones folded against each other to envelop a blushing white wedge. "*Red Light* is light that's white in red," Diamond says. "Light and rhythm are such basic parts of order. Almost everything can be defined by them—joy as well as monumentality. They can be thrilling even before they become attributes. That's where my spirituality lies." □

Bill Berkson is a poet and critic who lives in Northern California. He writes regularly for *Artforum*.

1. All quotations from the artist are from conversation and correspondence with the author, summer 1989.
2. James Schuyler, "View from 210 Riverside Drive: Nell Blaine's Variations on New York Scenery and Interiors," *Artnews* 67 no. 5, May 1968, pp. 36-37.
3. Joan Mitchell, quoted in Carter Ratcliff, "Joan Mitchell's Environments," *Art in America* 62 no. 4, July 1974, p. 37.