

Art in America

Martha Diamond at Brooke Alexander

Reviewing a Martha Diamond exhibition several years ago, Gerrit Henry [*A.i.A.*, Dec. '82] noted that Diamond, unlike many of her Neo-Expressionist peers, creates canvases filled with "a great good humor," even if her subject matter is at times apocalyptic. This perception is clearly sustained by Diamond's new work, which celebrates the vitality of the contemporary American city in a series of paintings largely devoted to high-rise buildings under construction.

The Neo-Expressionists—and the German Expressionists before them—have elaborated the anxious drama of modern urban life. For all that she shares the Neo-Expressionist painting style, Diamond is more concerned in her art to celebrate the excitement inherent in the New York cityscape. One might think of Diamond's recent city paintings as a kind of late 20th-century landscape painting, in which the dynamism of the great 19th-century American landscapists is transferred from mountains, craggy pinnacles, glaciers or waterfalls to the gigantic urban structures in the making that fill New York's sky. Diamond has as positive a vision of this scenery as Bierstadt ever had of Yellowstone.

In these most recent works Diamond is interested in expressing the happy power embodied in new construction. Painted in long, broad and continuous brushstrokes, the skeletons of her buildings move up and across the canvas. Yet despite their grandeur—Diamond creates a fictional space that is more expansive than would really be possible—one sees these buildings intimately. Diamond's structures do not occupy vertiginous spaces; rather, they seem to have been painted from some safe vantage point. The brightness and

clarity of her palette—light blues, yellows, comforting oranges and tans—also puts the viewer at ease.

Diamond is a pro at creating slightly off-center images which are memorable because of the unstated relation of the image to the center and edges of the canvas. This exhibition included many successes—above all, *Pale Blue Construction*, made only of shades of blue, and *Facades*, where a simple diagonal, formed by the juxtaposition of two buildings, is a particularly strong and surprising element of design. The failures were few, occurring only when the off-center image, as in *High View*, related unsuccessfully to the painting's overall geometry.

Diamond's reliance on off-center imagery owes something to Alex Katz. She seems to share some metaphysical concerns with him as well. Like Katz, Diamond never demands a heavy moral or metaphysical reaction from the viewer, although she has often chosen scenes which would permit this. In her apocalyptic paintings of the early '80s, for example, Diamond painted New York going up in flames. Yet even here, the luscious yet placid painterly attack acts to check the development of somber emotions.

Diamond is now clearly a painter of mature capacities. Yet in spite of the authority of her works, one misses a certain breadth of emotion. Without wishing that she join the gloomy Neo-Expressionist

camp, one might hope that Diamond would express a darker, more critical mood in certain of her paintings—as her 19th-century forebears sometimes did. Given her skills, the results would be well worth the risk.

—Edmund Leites