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JONATHAN GRIFFIN | ART REVIEW



Paintings by Martha Diamond at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles. "Yellow Sky" right, and "Study for Yellow Sky" above (both 1986). Below, from left: "Highway" (1984) and "Pass (Detail)" (1981).



JEFF MLANE, VIA DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, ABOVE LEFT, MARTHA DIAMOND TRUST, VIA DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

Structures in a Familiar Skyline, Seen in a New Light

A painter's depictions of New York, on view in Los Angeles, have a casual look that belies their complexity.

LOS ANGELES — Martha Diamond, who died in December, at age 79, was remarkably consistent in her subject matter — namely New York architecture — but extraordinarily wide-ranging with what a painting of a building could signify.

In some of the works displayed in her first show at the David Kordansky Gallery, "Martha Diamond: Skin of the City," it seems as if her only concern was for color; in others, abstract form takes over. Some locations are identifiable; other pictures are not even recognizable as buildings. In a painting such as "New York With Purple No. 3" (2000), the tall buildings appear to evaporate into the busy sky, architectural solidity succumbing to shimmering atmosphere and dappled, springtime light.

Diamond's paintings may have been of New York, her muse since she settled into a

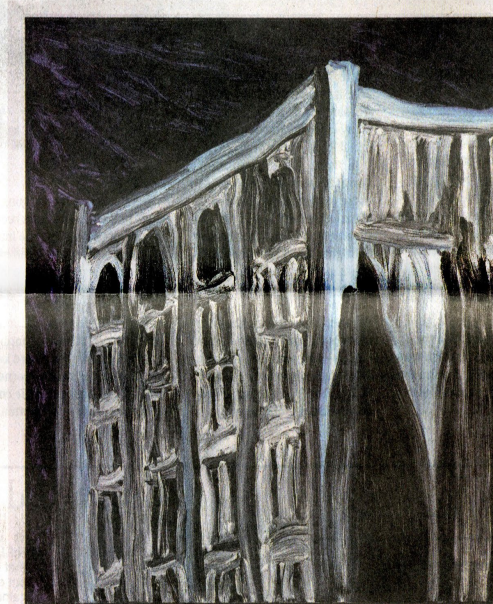


Martha Diamond: Skin of the City
Through April 27 at David Kordansky
Gallery in Los Angeles; 323-935-3030,
davidkordanskygallery.com.

loft on the Bowery in 1969, but they are about so much more besides.

It is perhaps unsurprising that someone living in that compressed, vertiginous metropolis would develop an attunement to the particularities of scale. Her small studies — preparatory exercises for the large-scale works that follow — are tightly organized, keyhole views onto the grandeur of the city; most are on Masonite boards around 16 or 20 inches tall. As in "Study for Yellow Sky," a vigorously brushed evocation of bright blue buildings against a sulfurous background, done in 1986, she could pack a colossal amount of energy into a confined space.

Now take in the humongous "Yellow Sky," the fully realized manifestation of the small study. The canvas, 10 feet wide, confidently rules the room. The sensation of moving from the study, hung in a smaller viewing room, to this large painting in the main gallery is rather like the "Vertigo effect," the technique named for Alfred Hitchcock's movie in which the camera moves toward or away from its subject while zooming in the



MARTHA DIAMOND TRUST, VIA DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

opposite direction. The subject remains more or less static, while the space around it explodes.

What is surprising, perhaps, is how faithful the larger iteration is to the vagaries of the study. For instance, in "Study for Yellow Sky," the areas above the blue skyscrapers are painted in a peachy orange, streaked with blue, as if Diamond had painted out blue underpainting. (She completed an oil painting in one sitting, often mixing colors

on the surface of the canvas.) But in "Yellow Sky," the painting, the peach is there again, implying either that it was an intentional effect all along or, perhaps, that Diamond made the correction in her study but then liked the way it looked so much that she kept it.

Underestimating Diamond is a trap for careless viewers. Even when her paintings look casual, or simple, she is solving complex problems. Take the large, squat "High-



MARTHA DIAMOND TRUST, VIA DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

way," a seemingly straightforward painting that did not particularly grab me on first appraisal. In time, I understood how Diamond had felt her way around this massive white building, reconstructing it section by section in her wobbly, wide strokes. (She used only her left hand to paint, because, she once explained, "it's connected to the part of the brain that sees space, volume, and probably colors better.") It's the kind of building one takes for granted; Diamond helps us see it anew.

The main gallery of "Skin of the City," hung with big paintings of even bigger buildings, is energized by an astonishing smaller work, horizontal in format: "Pass (Detail)," from 1981. Diamond reportedly made these "detail" paintings to work out how to handle particularly tricky sections of a larger composition; here, we zoom in so close that the subject's totality is jettisoned, along with materiality or texture. Instead, swipes of translucent carmine paint, arranged in deepening tones, alert us to both the paint's thinness and the composition's solidity.

What Frank Auerbach did for Camden Town, and Monet did for Paris, and De Chirico did for piazzas all over Italy, Diamond did for Manhattan. None of these artists were bothered with assiduous documentation of the built environment so much as with conveying how it felt to them — citizens who moved through it daily. Diamond paints the sensation of New York: a place of looming masses, fleeting vistas and overwhelming immersion. It can be a place that in one instant is hard to see and then, the next, is the most recognizable city in the world.