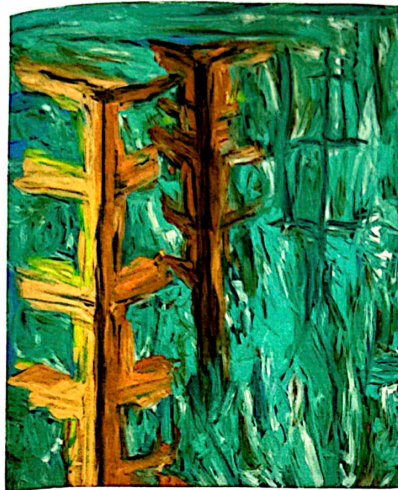


ARTFORUM

Martha Diamond David Kordansky Gallery

Martha Diamond (1944–2023) was one of the grande dame painters of the downtown scene—the ranks of which included Louise Fishman and Mary Heilmann—who found their way to lofts in Lower Manhattan during the 1960s and set about wresting gestural abstraction from the grip of the New York School. In those days, it was no small feat for women to claim the most policed domain in American art, one given over almost exclusively to men, whose experiences were deemed more culturally significant than those of the “second sex.”

Diamond’s objective as a painter had little to do with emotion. Rather, she was interested in perception itself, the sensation of seeing. After she moved to a studio on the Bowery in 1969 and began to delineate what she saw outside her window, New York City served as an enduring inspiration—and foil—for much of her work. As if following the advice of Gauguin—close your eyes and paint what you see; that is the greater reality—she eschewed traditional representation and depicted Manhattan as in a perpetual state of becoming.



Martha Diamond,
After Image, 1991.
oil on canvas,
72¼ x 60¼".

References to scaffolding, rigging, skeletal grids, construction sites, and transparent structures—all the result of Diamond’s economical mark-making—attest to impermanence. An array of architectural prompts—fenestration patterns, zooming towers, dizzying perspectives—add to a repertoire of anonymous and impossible-to-locate properties that Diamond depicted for more than five decades. Whether her views were sourced from walks around the block or hikes up to Midtown, people never appear in her compositions. Yet there is a noticeably pronounced perspective, a singular point of view, that implies the presence of an observer. Her effervescent buildings give way to an experiential realm in which they function as screens to reflect the circum-

stance of being seen, remembered, and rendered.

“After Image” featured eleven of Diamond’s works made between 1980 and 1991—a pivotal time for the artist, when her paintings became looser and more lyrically abstract. The show’s namesake, from 1991, is vertically oriented and dominated by a choppy sky-blue ground occupied by two linear, rust-yellow forms on the left half of the canvas. One is a diminished version of the larger, more articulated figure. If either of these elements is indeed an afterimage, does that then imply that one of them is the “original”? This tension between similarity and difference contests the primacy of vision, vaulting it into an expanded field of sensation.

A kind of shorthand architectural motif Diamond frequently employed consists of a single vertical stroke, crossed by several intersecting, regularly spaced horizontal lines. It’s a polymorphous configuration, calling to mind a building, a ladder, a counting device, or even a kid’s drawing of a tree. In *Facade*, 1989, three of these figures—rendered as monumental forms with bold, hot-red strokes—blazed across the canvas, covering its surface with a skein-like, fragmented grid. Dramatic color assists the momentum Diamond conjured with her restless brushwork. Messy patches of flaming crimson and orange bleed into molten yellow, filling the background. Dark gray seeps into the picture from the bottom edge of the canvas, like murky sediment or sludge, as if to ground or anchor the action and ratify the scale.

The fluidity of Diamond’s painting allows it to obviate the limitations of narrative. New York City might have been the catalyst for her work, but as a subject it proves to be perpetually elusive—again, it’s not about what it *looks* like, but how it makes you *feel*. *White Light*, 1986, at just over six by nine feet, was the largest work in the exhibition. A very loosely sketched grid appears here and there, but it’s mostly subsumed by the torrents of color that sweep over the surface—sunny yellows, cloudy whites, and shimmering blues—to create atmospheric effects. The idea of the city gives way to an enthrallment with open space. We are looking up, past the mirrored towers, all the way to the top and beyond, to greet the day. The work is lyrical, light, and imbued with a sense of pleasure, if not a sustained moment of delirium—aspects that give Diamond’s paintings their unique visionary edge.

—Jan Avgikos