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Martha Diamond Finally Gets Her Own Show in Europe

Admired by fellow artists but little known to wider audiences, Martha Diamond made New York's skyline her own. Her first European solo exhibition, at Finland's Sara Hildén Art Museum, asks us to look beyond the cityscape

George Nelson 28 September, 2026



Martha Diamond, *Yellow Sky* (1986). Photo: Jussi Koivunen, courtesy of the Martha Diamond Trust

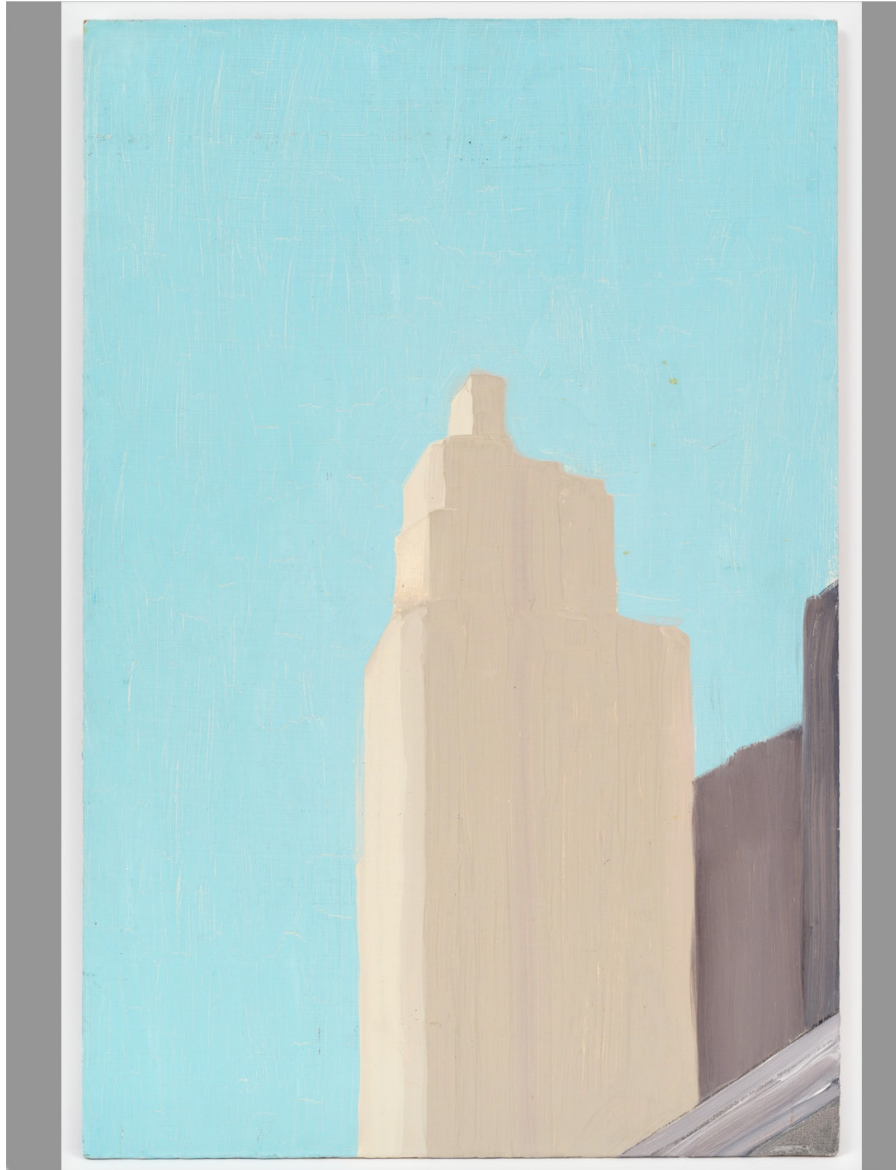
New York painter Martha Diamond had to wait until she was dead before landing her first solo show in Europe. Having toured the self-titled exhibition at the Sara Hildén Art Museum in Tampere, Finland (sadly just on FaceTime), I find it hard to fathom why a European solo exhibition took so long.

The exhibition opened on 19 September and runs until 17 January 2027. It traces her movement between architecture and abstraction, from the geometric, almost archetypal forms of her early paintings to the New York cityscapes that became a defining part of her work during the 1980s. Buildings, windows and high-rises punctuate the show, while many of the canvases are reflected in the museum's polished floor, like shadows of buildings. The museum's geometric architecture and expansive spaces echo the structures and shifting perspectives in Diamond's paintings.

"We kind of felt a perfect match here," Sarianne Soikkonen, the museum's chief curator of exhibitions, told me during the tour.

A Life on the Bowery

Born in 1944, Diamond moved into a loft on Manhattan's Bowery in 1969 and stayed there until her death in 2023, aged seventy-nine. It was her home and studio for more than half a century. Around her was a circle of painters and poets, including her friend Alex Katz. The city outside her windows would give her plenty to work with.



Martha Diamond, Untitled, (1982). Courtesy of the Martha Diamond Trust

Diamond considered herself an abstract painter. Her towering buildings command attention through their scale and her handling of space, light and colour. The buildings give viewers something recognisable to hold on to, while colour and brushwork pull the paintings towards abstraction.

The artist addressed this in a 1983 lecture at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, explaining that she needed a subject through which to communicate with an audience. Architecture became that subject.

Architecture as a Narrative Thread

Diamond grew up among New York's high-rises. According to Soikkonen, her father would take her on Sunday drives along highways, through tunnels and over bridges, "giving her formative experience of the changing geometry and scale of the city".

By around 1980, recognisable New York buildings had begun to emerge in her paintings. *Pink Sky* (1980) is one of the first paintings in the exhibition to fully embrace the New York cityscape, with a high-rise cutting into the left side of the canvas and a row of buildings receding behind it. As Soikkonen explained, the paint is thinner here than in Diamond's earlier work. The city emerges through layers of light and shadow.

In paintings such as *Center City* and *High-C* (1982), skyscrapers become increasingly stripped back and monumental. These works explore different views, times of day and atmospheric conditions, but Diamond was less interested in documenting New York than in exploring what its architecture could do on canvas.



Martha Diamond, *World Trade*, (1988). Courtesy of the Martha Diamond Trust

World Trade (1988), included in the 1989 Whitney Biennial, shows how closely these interests were connected. The buildings dissolve into geometric shapes and fields of colour, although the sense of space remains. From the late 1980s, Diamond also began making purely abstract paintings alongside her cityscapes, continuing to work in both for the rest of her career.

An 'Artist's Artist'

Diamond was far from unknown during her lifetime. She was respected by fellow artists and exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art, but never achieved the wider recognition of contemporaries such as Katz. Her inclusion in the Whitney Biennial, the museum's recurring survey of contemporary American art, was another indication that she had influential admirers.

Her auction profile has remained modest: according to ARTDAI, her record stands at just \$16,000 for the oil-on-aluminium painting *Cement Monument* (1977), sold at Stair

Galleries in 2024. An auction record is only one measure of an artist's market, but the figure makes a striking contrast with her institutional standing.

Katz, who had known Diamond since the late 1960s, helped put her on the radar of mega-dealer Thaddaeus Ropac. The Austrian began representing her estate earlier this year.

Beyond the New York Label

After the tour, I called Olivia Funk, director of the Martha Diamond Trust, to ask why a European solo exhibition had taken so long. She suggested that the association with New York may have narrowed the way curators understood Diamond's work.



Martha Diamond, *Postcard*, (1991). Courtesy of the Martha Diamond Trust

"It's very easy, or I would assume, it's easy for curators or the quote-unquote 'artworld' to pin her as the New York painter and think that's it," she told me. "And so often, even now, when people talk about her work, it's cityscape, cityscape." Funk said the description misses something essential because Diamond's "work is so much more than that".

That may be part of the explanation, though it hardly makes the long wait less puzzling. Funk described Diamond "as an artist who couldn't easily be slotted into a particular movement or category, and whose work seemed to anticipate things that came later".

Then there is the practical business of bringing the paintings together in a gallery. As Funk put it: "It's hard to hang Martha with Martha because it's so powerful."
