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Martha Diamond, a native New Yorker, received a 2001 art award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. At the ceremony last month, Chuck Close presented her with the award and the citation, which read, "Martha Diamond's paintings are based on vision, nuance, gesture, light, reflection and atmosphere. The work is elegant, hip, compelling and thoroughly modern. This is serious painting, uncompromised, deep and infinitely rewarding." Diamond has been a vital member of the New York art world since graduating from NYU with an MFA. She has lived and worked in the same downtown loft for many years, long before fancy shoe boutiques replaced the local Hell's Angels chapter.

In her sun-filled loft, flea market finds like 1950s lamps coexist elegantly with Italian leather sofas. Diamond's art collection includes works by Lois Dodd, Alex Katz, Hunt Slonem, Merlin James, Stephen Westfall and other contemporary artists with whom she has traded work. Her pristine studio boasts no distractions, save whitewashed wooden furniture, neat racks of paintings and Diamond's current work.

Diamond, who is widely known for her gestural urban imagery, has long been regarded as a brilliant oil painter. She works from small, jewel-like studies that she then translates to larger canvases. Her methodology takes on the immediacy of performance art. We spoke in her living room on a recent rainy afternoon.

Ilka Scobie: What were your first encounters with the art scene?

Martha Diamond: It was much smaller. The current scene is much more international. There were a lot of Abstract Expressionist painters to look at. Pop art was happening. Castelli had a small gallery uptown on 77th Street, the shows there were fabulous. Donna Dennis and I went to Paris for about a year, and when we came back, Peter Schjeldahl took us out to parties. I met a lot of people right away. The first party I went to in New York was at Bill Berkson's on 57th

Street. Frank O'Hara, Larry Rivers, Alex Katz were all there. And John Ashberry, who said I brought out his latent heterosexuality, which I immediately told my parents.

IS: Was there a lot of socializing with poets?

MD: The people I knew, and still know, are artists and writers. There was the whole St. Marks scene. Ted Berrigan, who talked to and supported everybody. And Ron Padgett. Anne Waldman edited the Poetry Project at St. Marks and edited *The World*. There were a lot of collaborations between artists and poets. Joe Brainard and George Schneemann were especially active. It was a very dynamic scene.

IS: Which artists were you interested in, early on?

MD: I loved Jackson Pollock, Chinese brush paintings, Piero della Francesca and gothic cathedrals. I wasn't consciously influenced by other artists, until I learned more fundamentals myself.

IS: What inspires you as a painter?

MD: I always look at the city, and I do draw from life. I look a lot, I have a good memory for spaces, places. A lot of times, it's not the building itself that inspires the work. It's the idea of some type of composition to try, or some kind of brush handling to use. And then, you make the image out of it, or find an image that you can use with that idea of space or color.

IS: Tell me about how you work.

MD: I don't use lines a lot. When I put paint down, I hope it's going to have a certain light or weight or space, or to imply the same. The definition of the image comes out of the way the paint is handled. And the formal properties, the light, the space.

I actually began working this way many years before I turned to city images. After school, for a while, I painted with anything but brushes. Then I went back to oil painting and experimented with as many paint handlings as I could think of. It turned out for me to always be the brush.

IS: Tell me about the '70s...

MD: In the early '70s there were a number of people who were putting art work on the ceiling, around the room, growing from the floor up, working from the top down, using materials directly. That was an influence. And I began to go to museums more. And the Bykert Gallery, which was so hot.

IS: Jump start to the '80s...

MD: I remember Julian Schnabel, whose work I saw way early on, before he had a gallery. I was sort of shocked, but I never forgot the experience of seeing those works. They were huge, very tall. Slowly, I began to understand what he was doing, just in terms of scale and energy. And Joel Shapiro, whose work I always paid attention to, once gave me great advice, "Don't edit in advance." Paula Cooper Gallery was the place to look at new art. I began to appreciate Alex Katz's paintings, when I went back to using a brush. And the Italians came, and the Germans came, and there was a lot more kinds of content, from all over the place, all over the world, ranging from Clemente to Keifer. A lot of people began to paint again, when painting was supposed to be dead. The amount of energy in the '80s was a big deal.

IS: Which gallery were you at then?

MD: Brooke Alexander, and then Robert Miller in the '90s.

IS: And what are you working on right now?

MD: Figurative things where all the definition comes from the brush marks. I'm experimenting with anything that comes to me. You try everything, and eventually, all the ideas coalesce into a new idea you didn't know you were going to have.

A monoprint of some skeletal buildings done years earlier can begin a painting. Or the same motif can be repeated again in an identically large format, with only some changes in tonal variation and emphasis. Diamond is unusual among contemporary painters in her interest in working with what she knows well. Her pleasure comes from keeping in touch with how lightly the information is held. She sees the painting as a scaffold on which the painter hangs impressions.

Chinese landscape painting was largely about evocation, its touchstone the particularity of place. Within these polarities was situated an environment of the mind. This classic art has had a clearly deepening influence on Diamond. One of the many revelations of the exhibition is how it discloses Diamond's progression toward a greater adhesion to some fundamental aspects of Chinese painting.

The earliest work shown here, *Orange Light* (oil on canvas, 84 x 56 in. 1983), depicts two buildings that seem animated as they gaze into late afternoon light. The backs of the structures, closest in proximity to the viewer, are in deep shadow. Her characteristic network of loose, buttery brushmarks is already present, but Diamond is equally dependent on the drama of the oddly poignant image and the mysterious quality of the narrative to carry it off.

By the 1988 *Across the River*, (oil on canvas, 72 x 60 in.) the dark vertical forms are more subtly articulated. Though the motif is based in part on the view of buildings across the Hudson River in Jersey City, the unsuspecting viewer might read the work as a fragment of a mountain landscape or some kind of vegetation against a fierce red sky. Diamond creates an illusion of tall chimney-like masses by using a kind of whipped-up, modulated oil paint. The sharp shifts of direction in the brushy patches of red, dark blue and bright yellow that make up the surface move the eye around the rectangle, breaking up the picture into small

events. Most importantly, heavy shadow, which has played an important role in her work up to this time, has disappeared. Lights and darks are present in the massing of forms in contrast to the sky and the empty spaces. Diamond has also deemphasized the graphic power of the overall image.

Artists of the late Ming Dynasty were exposed to European landscape engravings through Jesuit missionaries. They were struck by the sculptural quality of the heavy shadows that were used to create form, but disdained the European work's lack of refined brushwork. Similarly, as Diamond's painting developed in the mid 1990's, we see her using shadow as an element in the overall composition, but further reducing it's dramatic power; it is now one element among many.

In one of the two versions of *Cityscape with Blue Shadow, #3* (oil on linen, 96 x 48 inches, 1994.) Diamond uses a tall vertical format, so common in Chinese painting, which was to become the proportion of many of her most outstanding works of the past dozen or so years. The motif of a collection of massive edifices is summoned up by utilizing the most glancing, attenuated collection of marks. After several limned silhouettes are established, Diamond utilizes a wide flat brush to create combed trails of paint that run horizontally and vertically across the interior of the subject. The sky above is filled in with a wet-on-wet web of overlapping brushstrokes. A blue shadow collapses like flowing water down the face of the outlined facades. How the shape is placed in the frame in Diamond's design further undercuts monolithic frontality. There is an element of lateral movement, like the moment when an ocean liner is seen passing the opening at the end of a corridor of tall buildings.

Also from 1994 are works of identical motif, *Cityscape Black/White #1* and *Black/White/Gray Cityscape # 3* (both paintings oil on linen, 96 x 48 in.). The black, white and gray palette is a reminder that the most notable poet-documentarians of the Manhattan skyline were photographers. Artists such as Bernice Abbott, Paul Strand and Walker Evans were able to exploit the dynamic classicism of the earlier skyscrapers more efficiently than painters or sculptors. Another bridge to

Diamond's approach is from the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, who observed in *Triste Tropiques* that the phenomenon of the buildings of lower Manhattan was only comparable to certain natural landscapes.

Diamond portrays the skyline, again, as if it has an almost vegetal vitality. But this time the reading is tempered by the absence of color. The foreground building, what might be a late 19th century cast iron pile, is backlit by an interruption of glacially angular architecture. Behind this is a noirish, semi-abstract tapestry of city windows, looming from the dark

Diamond seeks to transfigure our understanding of the canyons of lower Manhattan by attempting to meld these views with works such as the Chinese painter-poets Kung Hsien's or Hung-jen's renderings of the cliffs of Huang-shan. She plays with adjustments of tone to achieve an equivalent poetics to the Ming painters, emphasizing brushstrokes and atmosphere, but also includes the harshness of artificial light.

In her twelve by ten inch oil-on-masonite studies, Diamond appears to cross paths with the T. S. Eliot of "Preludes": "The conscience of a blackened street / Impatient to assume the world". In his imagery of newspapers, smoky days, "His soul stretched tight across the skies". Eliot sought to activate the past's hold on the present. Eliot's city, in his early works, is somber, colorless. This is as much of decorative choice, albeit an aesthetic and verbal one, as are the brushstrokes that Diamond hangs on her oil paintings or the ink that Kung Hsien dabs on rice paper. Diamond's group of studies feels drawn from memories of evening urban perambulations. Though color, sometimes vibrant, is present in most of these works, they all contain black.

The frame that is almost always present unites the series as a kind of reiteration of looking, and further of "looking in". Diamond is continuing the modernist persona of the outside observer, the prowler, but what is unique is how the character is a woman, occupying the margins of public spaces. Particularly notable is the way this group portrays the sensation of being in the city. One sees

semi-abstracted lampposts and skylights, but Diamond seems more intent on portraying a feeling. In this way she is a kind of symbolist. Here, the image can be no more than a substitute for an experience, never a correlative.

In the most recent works, from 2004, Diamond appears to have opened her dialogue toward figures that see-sawed between abstraction and figuration, such as *Guston*, *Hartley* and *Soutine*. In the cases of *Untitled* (72 x 48 in.) and *Untitled* (56 1/4 x 40 in. both oil on linen) there is a more active pummeling and twisting of the imagery, as if the manmade landscape had been transformed into bone, muscle and sinew. Of course, this is an aspect of Diamond's subject that was present all along.

This is because ultimately Diamond is a painter of continuities, between the body and what the body constructs, how it is perceived by the mind, and how the body passes through these physical and mental constructions. The city remains one of our primary spiritual metaphors. Diamond selects this subject, as she does certain canonical influences, in the company of such painters as Melissa Meyer, Elizabeth Murray and Pat Steir, contemporary women that are conscious of the necessity of remaking modernism in the light of their own sensibility and in the process, rewriting the history of modernism.

What is unique about Martha Diamond's work is in the unaccountable feeling of stepping off into the phantasmagoria of the city itself. The Chinese painter Kung Hsien taught his students that a painting had to have the right amounts of "stability and strangeness": He wanted his work to be unfamiliar, even startling, yet believable. This very difficult goal is reached in Diamond's work and best describes her continuing achievement.