

## Martha Diamond: 1980-1989

By David Rhodes

New York has an enduring image. It's one that has seduced, awed, and excited in equal parts, the large scale of its built environment, an intense natural light, and the constant artificial light of façades: windows, flickering signs, streaming traffic. Henri Matisse, a master of painted light, visited the city aged 60 en route to Tahiti and saw the Manhattan skyline reflected in the Hudson River like "a sequined dress." He said that if he had visited New York as a young man he would never have left. Martha Diamond, an habitu e of the Bowery since 1969, has herself never left and continues to paint the illuminated forms of the city. This current exhibition at Magenta Plains, a few blocks over from her Bowery studio, presents paintings from the 1980s; on view are large canvases in oil at street level and, downstairs, small painted studies on Masonite.

Diamond's paintings are gestural, wet paint applied into wet paint. She uses her left hand and not her usual right hand to further spontaneity: denying facile skill, skill that is more or less inevitable with painters who are as dedicated, and who have worked for several decades. There is a direct technical line to Ab Ex, for Willem de

Kooning also worked wet into wet, often with the hand he was not in the habit of using, and for very similar ends. But whereas de Kooning's paintings depict movement across an abstract landscape or the kinetic activity of a figure, Diamond paints cityscapes, usually from particular points of view. *Orange Light* (1983) is a canvas 84 by 56 inches; light pours across the surface of the depicted building. Paint flows across the surface of the canvas as it is rendered: vivid orange sky and luminous gray shadow appear as through a filter—think of the cinematographer Christopher Doyle's treatment of urban scenes of subdued, rich color in the films of Wong Kar-wai. The light in this painting is *unheimlich*, and yet any New Yorker can tell you that exactly this light exists here: everyday moments of ordinary magic. It's the kind of sublime experience that northern European Romanticism associated with a mountainside or the edge of a wood at sunset, now recast in this city and seen from a window, balcony, roof, or street.



Martha Diamond, *Orange Light*, 1983. Oil on linen, 84 x 56 inches. Courtesy Magenta Plains.

*14* (ca. 1980s) is an oil on Masonite, 9 by 6-inch painting. A single edifice reaches up centrally, partially blocking a light source, with dark shadow—cloud or smoke perhaps—on the left, a brightening aureole of sunlight emanating from the right. The loose and broad strokes of oil leave any specifics open, which is not to say the image is vague. Like looking into strong daylight, or recalling a view glimpsed, this representation is clear in the same way memories are. In other words, the painting acts mnemonically, as something once seen or imagined and then recalled, as well as itself, paint on board, in front of the viewer. Both the larger paintings and the smaller paintings included here are fragmentary in that they frame vision very distinctly, directing the gaze. They communicate a way of looking at and composing with what is seen. This emphasizes the frontal space and process of painting rather than painting as a simple generic scene in much the same manner as Édouard



Martha Diamond, *14*, ca. 1980s. Oil on Masonite, 9 x 6 inches. Courtesy Magenta Plains.

Manet. And, thinking of the impact of photography on Manet's approach to composition and the way it brought a sense of the transitional and informal to his urban subject matter, I couldn't help but be reminded of the Swiss-American photographer Rudy Burckhardt's images of New York in relation to Diamond's paintings. Take for example, *Menckels Sewing Machine* (ca. 1948), a view of a tightly framed, shadowy New York avenue. As chance would have it, Burckhardt too had an exhibition up in January at Tibor de Nagy, a gallery also on the Lower East Side.