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CRITIC’S PICK

A Jaw-Dropping Show Gives Martha Diamond Her Due

In her cityscapes, a visionary Manhattan painter created delicate registers of light and shadow, and bravura expressions of abstraction and figuration.

A retrospective of the painter Martha Diamond, best known for sleek, semi-abstracted depictions of New York buildings, at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. Left, “John Street,” 1989; right, “New York With Purple No. 3,” 2000. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

By Will Heinrich

Reporting from Ridgefield, Conn.

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Martha Diamond didn’t exactly work in obscurity. A downtown painter who died last year at age 79, she went to college with the critic Peter Schjeldahl, credited the painter Joan Mitchell with changing her practice during a 1970 studio visit and had an early fan in Alex Katz. Her prescient painting of the twin towers as two plumes of smoke was even included in the 1989 Whitney Biennial. But the recognition she enjoyed was never quite in proportion to her achievement, and we can only hope that “Martha Diamond: Deep Time,” a small but jaw-dropping survey now at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, will be the first step in her ascent into the upper reaches of art history.

The pieces that should have made her famous were the stripped-down views of Manhattan buildings she started painting in the early 1980s. In one way they were just portraits of the city where she was born,

or romantic metaphors for the speed and energy of a scene still full of poets and painters. But they were also experiments in perception, delicate registers of light and shadow and, more than anything, bravura expressions of a unique, Gotham-flavored compromise between abstraction and figuration.

“World Trade,” 1988, oil on linen. A prescient painting with two dense, sooty stripes that waver down the middle of the canvas past cloudy stripes of red and blue. Martha Diamond; via The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

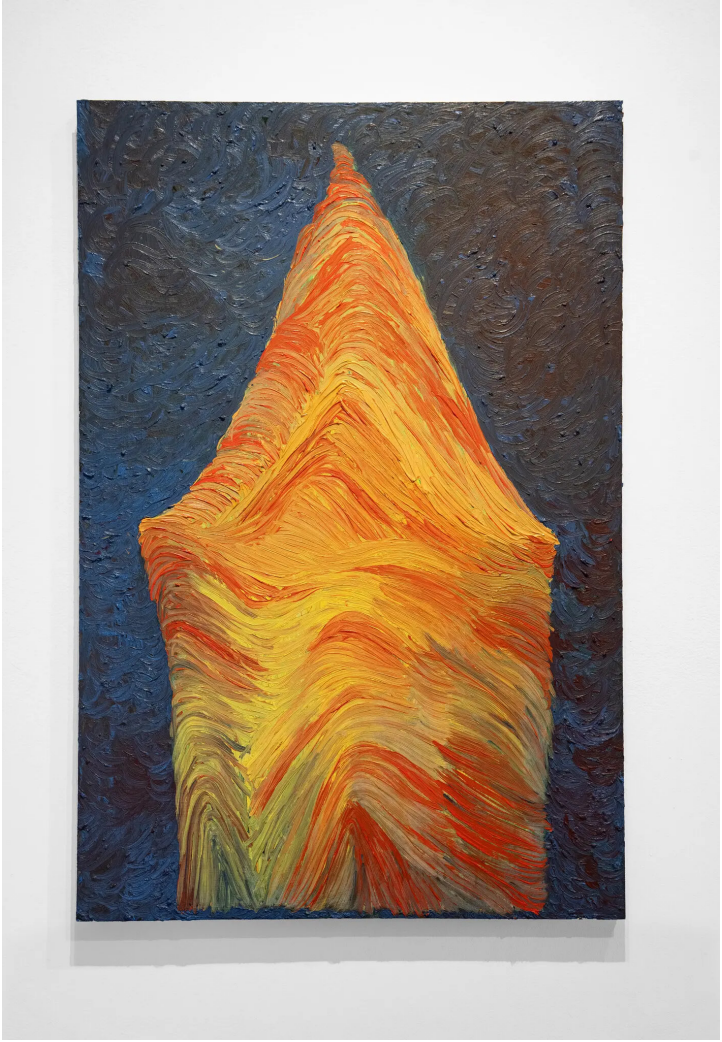
Martha Diamond, “Untitled,” 1973, acrylic on canvas. Communicating a recognizable picture was actually the least of her concerns. She was after the sheer sensual appeal of the marks themselves. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

In 1973, when the Aldrich Museum’s founder, Larry Aldrich, bought the untitled quasi-landscape that leads off the exhibition, Diamond was still playing both sides of the question. A storm of green brushstrokes on the painting’s right half is hard to read as anything but a stand of trees. This turns the black strokes directly underneath them into soil, the dirty peach strokes next door into sand, and a nearby patch of light blue into water. All this recognizable reference to the natural world keeps the picture organized; it neatly ties together what might otherwise feel like a chaos of colorful marks.

But the loose vigor with which Diamond applied those marks makes clear that communicating a recognizable picture was actually the least of her concerns. She was after the sheer sensual appeal of the marks themselves — their color, their texture, the different ways they could be smeared across canvas. And while an imaginative viewer might find some wildflowers or pussywillows on the left, what that half of the painting looks like to me is simply an unconstrained burst of Abstract Expressionism.

One quality that helped Diamond out of this confusion was cutting everything unnecessary out of the frame. In the exhibition’s second room you can watch her develop this technique in the mid-1970s. Some watercolors of ponds and hills, displayed in a line, are so sparse that you can’t help wondering whether Diamond ever left Manhattan. (In fact, she

spent her adolescence in Hollis, Queens, went to college in Minnesota, and traveled extensively in Europe.) Another hill drawn in colored pencil looks like a shapeless hat. But in a pair of oil paintings on aluminum, “Giant Yellow Hogan” and “Pylons,” both from 1978, she makes her key discovery, the same one Mondrian made — that even figuration can be abstract if you simplify it enough.



“Giant Yellow Hogan,” 1978, oil on aluminum. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The pylons are essentially just two reddish-brown, Jenga-like stacks of horizontal lines; the background, of darker brown, is all vertical. There’s hardly any light, and the setting is nowhere in particular, but it doesn’t matter: The action happens stroke by glistening brushstroke. The hogan, a broad shape meant to evoke a traditional Diné dwelling of logs and earth, is somewhat more distinctive, but it, too, quickly dissolves into pure colors and lines — in this case lusciously curved ones that range from orange to yellow and evoke folded hands or gusts of wind.

Though Diamond began closing in on windows, cornices and other features of her environment in the early 1980s, the first fully mature piece you’ll encounter in the show as it’s hung in the Aldrich, the first one in which she’s really fused abstraction and figuration, is “Span,” which dates to 1990. Strictly speaking, of course, the piece may not be figurative at all. Is the yellow, ladderlike form stretching across a white abyss between two crimson stripes really a ladder, or anything in particular? Just barely. But even its slight resemblance to something specific — whether that’s a ladder, a bridge, or a radio antenna — is enough to give it the density

of associations, the instant command of the viewer’s attention, that only representational paintings can typically take for granted.

Then you get to the masterpieces. “Martha Diamond: Deep Time,” curated by the Aldrich’s Amy Smith-Stewart and Levi Prombaum at the Colby College Museum of Art in Maine, where the show started its run, has barely more than a dozen of Diamond’s large paintings of buildings, but they’re almost uniformly spectacular. Any one is enough to overwhelm the room it’s hanging in.

Martha Diamond, “Cityscape No. 2,” 2000. With its grid of windows, Diamond demonstrates just how much material her painter’s eye can wring out of any tiny section of the world. Martha Diamond; via The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

In “World Trade,” the 6-foot-tall piece that appeared at the Whitney, two dense, sooty stripes waver down the middle of the canvas past cloudy stripes of red and blue; an angular stroke across one corner makes the lefthand tower look like the number 1. On the one hand, the painting is exceedingly specific, capturing the ominous silhouettes of two particular New York City towers against a white winter sky as well as every hazy, cloudy detail of how they might have struck the eye at one particular moment. On the other hand, all sense of their physical bulk has been removed, and the painting is less an image than an afterimage, what might remain in your mind after you’ve shut your eyes and turned away.

“Cityscape No. 2,” from 2000, zooms into the corner of a gray glass office tower, leaving nothing visible but its grid of windows. With that grid, though, Diamond demonstrates just how much material her painter’s eye can wring out of any sliver of the world. There’s the dark reflection of another building in the glass, and the quality of the glass itself; there are the window sashes traveling up and down and left to right, like a tangle of subway trains; there’s the angled, perspectival recession of the entire wall; and there are 70-odd separate studies of light and shadow, one for every window. And that’s all before you even think of the chilly gray grid as any kind of metaphor.

My own favorite, though, is “Green Cityscape,” which Diamond painted in 1985 using only tones of gray against a vibrant electric green. Three tall, hollow steps on the left side mark out an office building, with vertically descending black marks that are clearly windows, but just as clearly zippy drops of pure paint. Two more hollow buildings loom behind the steps, and another gray, latticelike complex of lines climbs up the painting’s right side. It’s complicated but simple, tense but stable, and as slick and reflective as water — just like New York.

“Green Cityscape,” 1985. Three tall, hollow steps on the left side mark out an office building, with vertically descending black marks that are clearly windows, but just as clearly zippy drops of pure paint. Two more hollow buildings loom behind the steps. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Martha Diamond: Deep Time

Through May 18, 2025, the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield, Conn., 203-438-4519, thealdrich.org.