Yau, John, “Martha Diamond Found Joy in Paint,” *Hyperallergic.com*, January 6, 2025

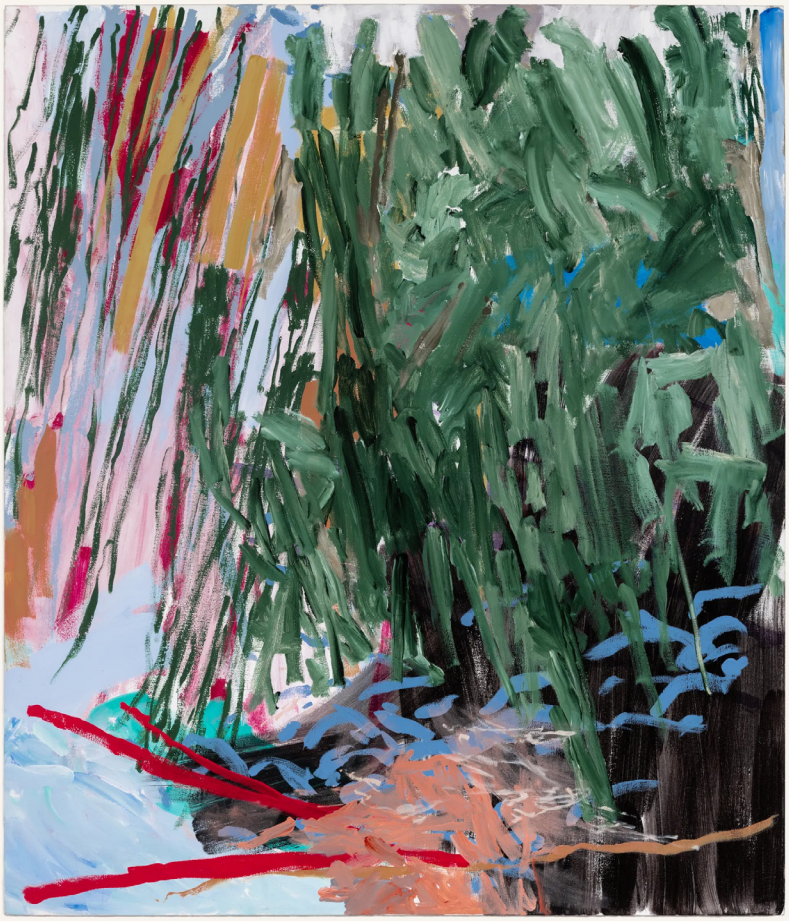
HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews

Martha Diamond Found Joy in Paint

Diamond’s attention to the brush’s capacity to be simultaneously expressive and responsive is visible throughout her strongest paintings.

John Yau January 6, 2025



Martha Diamond, “Untitled” (1973), acrylic on canvas, 84 x 72 inches (213.36 x 182.88 cm); Collection of Jasper Campshure (photo Jason Mandella)

RIDGEFIELD, Conn. — *Martha Diamond: Deep Time* at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, the first posthumous exhibition of work by the artist, who passed away in 2023, is a small survey chronicling 27 years of extraordinary art. Born and raised in New York, Diamond earned a BA in art and art history at Carleton College in 1964, where she became friends with artist Donna Dennis and art critic Peter Schjeldahl. After a period in Paris, the trio returned to New York and met the artists and poets of the second generation of the New York School, including Ron Padgett, Ted Berrigan, and Joe Brainard. These associations and her location contributed to the DIY aesthetic of her work. In 1969, she moved into a loft on the Bowery, south of Houston Street, where she lived and worked for the rest of her life.

The exhibition, co-curated by Amy Smith-Stewart and Levi Prombaum, comprises 30 works. I visited it this past summer when it was at the Colby College Museum of Art (July 13–October 23, 2024), and again when it traveled to the Aldrich Contemporary Museum. I left both shows thinking that by the time Diamond died she had become one of the best painters of her generation. For many reasons, this was never celebrated, starting with the fact that she was a woman painter at a time when painting was considered by critics and much of the art world to be dead.

Martha Diamond, “Under Heaven (Detail)” (1983), oil on canvas, 24 x 22 inches (60.96 x 55.88 cm) (courtesy the Martha Diamond Trust and David Kordansky Gallery, photo Jason Mandella)

A second reason is that she didn’t fit in. She was neither a painterly realist, like the older members of the New York School, such as Fairfield Porter, Alex Katz, Neil Welliver, and Jane Freilicher, nor a member of the Neo-expressionist boys’ club, including Eric Fischl, David Salle, and Julian Schnabel. Although some critics did see her as a Neo-expressionist, the term never stuck because she was simply a better painter than the men, without the dramatic hoopla. Not one to make major claims, she let the paint do the heavy lifting.

The exhibition traces the arc of Diamond’s career from 1973 to 2000, and features paintings, drawings, and monotypes, as well as ephemera presented in a vitrine. While the curatorial selection astutely tracks her preoccupation with architectural structures, starting in the late

1970s, in paintings such as “Giant Yellow Hogan” (1978), she hit her stride in the early 1980s, when she began making large wet-into-wet paintings of New York’s office and light manufacturing buildings from different eras. The collision of eras and architectural styles, facades and raking light and darkness, still surfaces and turbulent skies, solid structures and melting light, became Diamond’s signature subject matter.

Diamond was in her late 30s when she began to exhibit her breakthrough paintings. In an art world always looking for the next relevant thing, she became an “artist’s artist,” forever on the verge of something greater but never attaining it. Maybe this show, along with the accompanying catalog, is a sign that things are beginning to change, and that her paintings will finally be seen and appreciated by a larger audience.

Martha Diamond, “Cityscape No. 2” (2000), oil on linen, 96 x 48 inches (243.84 x 121.92 cm) (courtesy the Martha Diamond Trust and David Kordansky Gallery, photo Jason Mandella)

When I saw her paintings of buildings, I thought of the opening stanza of Frank O’ Hara’s love poem “Steps”:

How funny you are today New York
like Ginger Rogers in Swingtime
and St. Bridget’s steeple leaning a little to the left

One of the compelling things about Diamond’s paintings is the interplay between the paint and the subject, volume, surface, atmosphere, and light. While many observers have written about the dance between abstraction and representation that plays out in her work, that assessment focuses on art historical categories, and not the paint. She once said of her art: “If I express anything, it’s how the brush works, not my emotion.”

Diamond’s attention to the brush’s capacity to be simultaneously expressive and responsive is visible throughout her strongest paintings. Across the 30 pieces on view, we can witness her becoming masterful at this. It’s clear that she cared about working with a loaded brush and drawing in paint from the start.

Martha Diamond, “Cityscape with Blue Shadow” (1994), oil on canvas, 96 x 48 inches (243.84 x 121.92 cm); Portland Museum of Art, Maine (photo courtesy Luc Demers)

In “Cityscape with Blue Shadow” (1994), Diamond changes the viscosity of the paint from a streaky mix of grays and blues to solid yellow ochre accentuated by short horizontal red streaks. While the sky appears to be ever-changing, the building feels solid, but Diamond goes past this juxtaposition by adding another prominent element: Blue vertical streaks compose the shadow cast on the ochre building’s facade from an unknown source. It’s in these dynamics that her skill is most evident. Diamond never filled in a shape. Everything is deliberate, the result of a touch nimbly shifting from feathery to light to direct pressure. What seems casual is anything but.

In “Change” (1981), vertical yellow brushstrokes pick up the underlayer of black without becoming muddy. The direction of the yellow and black strokes articulates the building’s volume and surface. The carefully arranged intensities of blue in “Center City” (1982) culminate in a moody, nighttime view of an unlit building. Paint is always paint even as it becomes light, shadow, cloud-filled windows of a modernist edifice, solid surfaces, or dissolving and melting forms. Walking in Manhattan, Diamond sees the city rising up around her, and admits to the anxiety it stirs up. Her paintings are full of joy and solitude, calm and heightened awareness.

Martha Diamond, “Change (Detail)” (1981), oil on canvas, 28 x 42 inches (71.12 x 106.68 cm); Collection of the Martha Diamond Trust (photo Jason Mandella)

Martha Diamond, “John Street” (1989), oil on linen, 90 x 71 7/8 inches (228.6 x ~182.6 cm)(courtesy the Martha Diamond Trust and David Kordansky Gallery, photo Jason Mandella)

Martha Diamond, “Untitled” (c. 1970s), watercolor on paper, 9 x 12 inches (22.86 x 30.48 cm) (courtesy the Martha Diamond Trust and David Kordansky Gallery, photo Jason Mandella)

Martha Diamond, “World Trade” (1988), oil on linen, 72 x 57 1/2 inches (182.88 x 146.05 cm); Collection of the Martha Diamond Trust (photo Jason Mandella)

Martha Diamond, “Change (Detail)” (1981), oil on canvas, 28 x 42 inches (71.12 x 106.68 cm); Collection of the Martha Diamond Trust (photo Jason Mandella)

Martha Diamond: Deep Time *continues at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum (258 Main Street, Ridgefield, Connecticut) through May 18. The exhibition was co-organized by the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum and the Colby College Museum of Art, and co-curated by the Aldrich’s Chief Curator, Amy Smith-Stewart, and Colby’s Katz Consulting Curator, Levi Prombaum.*