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Martha Diamond: *After Image*

By Ian Cofré



Martha Diamond, *After Image*, 1991. Oil on canvas, 72 1/8 × 60 1/8 × 1 3/4 inches. © Martha Diamond Trust. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery.

The exhibition *Martha Diamond: After Image* at David Kordansky, is a tightly curated selection of eleven works and studies from the 1980s and early '90s that, fittingly, opened on what would have been the artist's eighty-first birthday. This is the first New York exhibition at the gallery since it started representing the artist (now the Martha Diamond Trust, since her death in 2023), and it opens on the heels of the momentous and revelatory survey, *Deep Time*, co-organized by the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum and the Colby College Museum of Art, and co-curated by the former institution's Chief Curator, Amy Smith-Stewart and the latter's Katz Consulting Curator, Levi Prombaum.

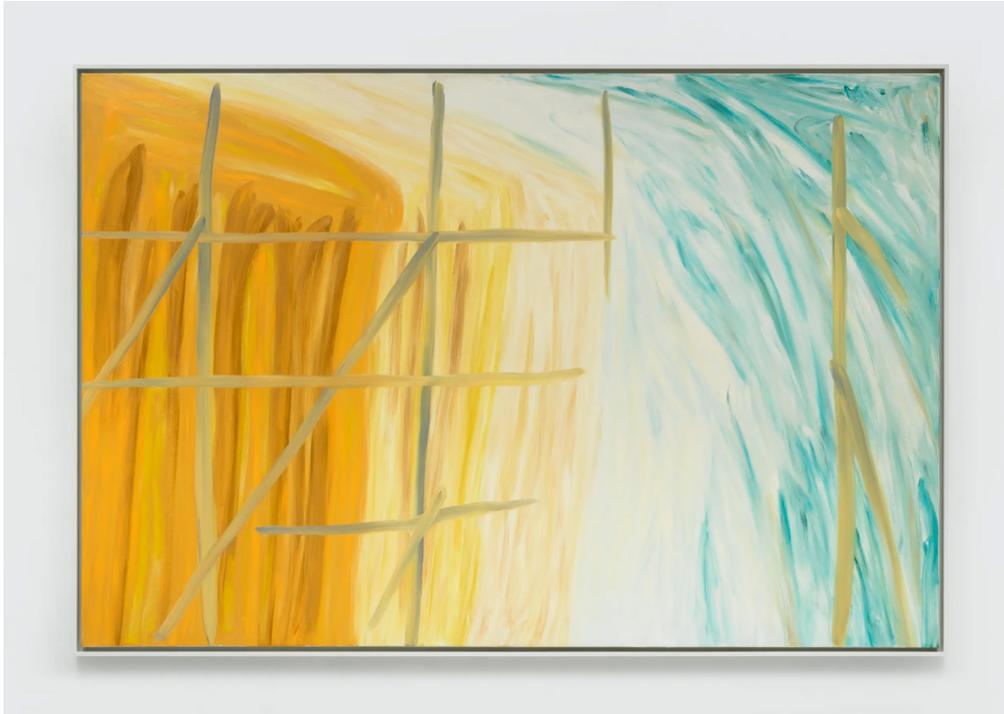
After Image
David Kordansky
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A life-long New Yorker, Diamond emerged in the late seventies and early eighties, recognized primarily for her wet-on-wet paintings of colorful visions of that familiar cityscape. In the first work you see as you enter the gallery, *Spring* (1987), the structures have a striking verisimilitude to three high pitched choir singers that rattle the image and loosen your expectations. The two paintings that follow, an early *Untitled (Study)* (1980) and *On the Street* (1983), however, are as resolved as the imagery gets. Varied and atmospheric, the abstract experiments on view reflect and absorb light in a manner that can be both realistic and wildly distorting. The titular work, *After Image* (1991), has two flesh-colored, left-aligned trusses that are either caught in or emerge from a diluvial cascade. The enigmatic *Light Between Apartment Buildings* (1991), with its swirl of yellow-tinted blue and white light against a gray block and grayer skies, refuses to settle on a fixed position or direction, or accept whether it's natural or artificial. The most abstract work, *Crossing* (1984), is a nocturne where glowing appendages seem to emerge and extend from an ink-dark portal.



Installation view: *Martha Diamond: After Image*, David Kordansky, New York, 2025. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery.

The title of the exhibition, *After Image*, evokes the persistence of vision, a physiological process of optical retention that Diamond translates over and over through the indelible, essential qualities not of architecture, but the skeletal remnants and constructs that provide scaffolding for these examples. The simultaneous speed and control necessary for the studies created from direct observation—for example, *Study for Grey Cityscape* (1989)—give way to the planned choreography for *Grey Cityscape* (1990), one of the large-scale paintings that Diamond was known to finish in one marathon sitting. The effect of seeing both in the exhibition at some distance from each other gives space to appreciate the softening of the lines and details in the latter. Although it’s only on view in the back room, the gap between *White Light* (1986) and its iconic, larger pair in the main gallery underscores the difference the brush size and the artist’s physical commitment make in rendering the strokes that assert the graphic solidity of the golden structure as the image dissolves into a luminous waterfall. The steps taken to complete the larger works bring to mind the notational aspect of Diamond’s work, described in detail in the curators’ essay for the *Deep Time* exhibition publication. These notes for reproduction remind me of Saul Ostrow’s argument in a 2024 essay for *Two Coats of Paint* that, “By stressing the act of painting as a performative and self-aware endeavor, Marden, Reed, and Richter bridge the gap between post-modernist and formalist aesthetics.”



Martha Diamond, *White Light*, 1986. Oil on canvas, 72 1/4 × 108 1/8 × 1 5/8 inches. © Martha Diamond Trust. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery.

Martha's own words from a conversation with the late poet and critic Bill Berkson for the January 1990 issue of *Artforum*:

A familiar subject in a radically generalized or edited treatment is a formalist device I use, so that recognizability or familiarity leads the viewer to look for expected detail. For the most part the details are not there so you look harder at the paint and the painting. You begin to distinguish between paint, performance, image, idea, expectation, and you.

Born too late to be considered an Abstract Expressionist, Diamond was part of the generation that followed the New York School, and never quite comfortably fit in with the association to the neo-expressionists. As she explained to Berkson, "I felt sympathetic to Kline, de Kooning, and Rothko, but I was most influenced and fascinated by Pollock and Warhol." Her internalizing the same realization Allan Kaprow had about performance and painting after Pollock helps us to understand how the dense severity of Pollock could be synthesized with the pop manufacture of Warhol in the intellect and hand of Diamond. Her unfussy, studied nonchalance similarly situates her work in the transition from modernism to postmodernism, in the company of contemporaries like Marden, Reed, Stanley Whitney, and Mary Heilmann, to name a few.

What affirmative qualities does it take to make an artist's artist or a painter's painter? Singular focus? Technical skill? From the number of times Martha Diamond has been referred to as such in writing, you would come to believe the term is merely a justification for being overlooked for so long. Despite having critically successful exhibitions through the seventies and eighties at galleries such as Brooke Alexander and Robert Miller, it took until the previous decade to revive interest in Diamond's work. She may not be with us to experience the recognition that was stubbornly elusive during her lifetime, but as interest rightfully grows in her work, this exhibition creates an opportunity to propel a sustained appreciation of her oeuvre by proving that Diamond's vast archive of work can continue to surprise in multiple outings.

Ian Cofré is an independent curator, writer, and translator based in Brooklyn, NY. Often working collaboratively, he creates spaces for inquiry through exhibitions and programs that critically examine contemporary problems in an interdisciplinary manner. Recent projects include: *Raimundo Edwards: Threshold* (Kastanien Projektraum, Berlin, 2022) and *Bronx Calling: The Fifth AIM Biennial*, co-curated with Eva Mayhabal Davis (Bronx Museum, 2021–22).