

Essay

By: Joe Fyfe

The recent building boom has not yet blocked Martha Diamond's piece of sky. Thus every morning her studio continues to bathe in generous amounts of natural light. It is an orderly room. The floor and the tabletop work surfaces are shiny and gummy from creamy high gloss paint that has been reapplied over the years. One quickly registers an absence of stray spots or splashes of paint on the floor and walls. This is unusual in any painter's workspace, but is particularly surprising in hers.

This is because at first glance the undisguised brushstrokes in Diamond's painterly pictures look expressionistic, though a closer scrutiny reveals a contradiction in this initial reading. There is a willed, very specific quality beneath their undeniable intensity. Her codified realm of painting marks--thick, oily licks, dry drags or transparent washes--reflects and expands on a visual notational system. Diamond's method is based as much on memory as on observation. Like the *capriccios* or fantasy landscapes that constituted a measure of the output of the Venetian painters Guardi and Canaletto, Diamond's paintings are a kind of fiction, but one that imparts the character of downtown New York.

As these artists studied Venice and its environs, Diamond has spent much of her time acutely conscious of her own immersion in her specific urban landscape. This harkens back to the values of the New York School of poets, who placed great emphasis on the everyday and valued the experience of walking in the city. One of these poets, Joe Brainard, who was also an artist, once defined a friend as someone to whom you could walk around the city with and say, 'Isn't that a great building!'

Sketching in the urban outdoors, a kind of metropolitan *plein air*, has occasionally been put into practice. There are also a number of small works on her kitchen wall that are painstakingly detailed portraits of the tops of skyscrapers. Diamond's system of working appears to be not so much about production as reflection. Her real interest is in the conversation that takes place among her works, with her subject and how the experience of what she sees is retained and transformed.

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.

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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 its 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.

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