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# THE CANVAS

MONTHLY



*Mickalene Thomas's 'September 1977' (2021). Rhinestones, glitter and acrylic paint on canvas mounted on wood panel with mahogany frame. 110 x 92 inches. © Mickalene Thomas. From the artist's forthcoming exhibition at Lévy Gorvy, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, the first chapter of a multipart exhibition that will unfold across four international cities throughout the fall that will present interconnected bodies of new work, ranging from painting and collage to installation and video.*



# Capturing *the* Light

*With* Martha Diamond

By: David Carrier

*I*f I were a senior curator with a major museum collection at my disposal, I would love to organize an historical show devoted to urban art. The exhibition would start with one of Bernardo Bellotto's great eighteenth-century scenes of Dresden, then display a Paris cityscape by Camille Pissarro, and continue with a painting of Manhattan by Rackstraw Downes. Undoubtedly, I would show one of Claude Monet's scenes of the Rouen cathedral. And, in my catalogue essay I would include the de-

scription of Manhattan by the greatest modernist painter of light, Henri Matisse. When he first visited America in 1930, reports his biographer, Hilary Spurling, “he was enchanted by the light,” which was, he said, “so dry, so crystalline, like no other,” and “by the combination of order, clarity, and proportion.” Ultimately, I would conclude my exhibition with a 1980s painting by Martha Diamond, whose work extends this grand tradition into the present. Like these prior masters, she is a city artist. However, where Bellotto, Pissarro, and Downes show the details of their urban scenes, what interests Diamond most is the light of the city. In that way, her painting, which moves toward (but doesn’t aspire to achieve) abstraction, propels this way of thinking into the late twentieth century.

*Interview begins ▼*

● **David Carrier:** Late last night, I was thinking of your work, Martha. It's really fascinating to me, this conception of being an artist of the city, and your relation to the Baudelairian notion of the painter of modern life. This idea has been around for so long, and yet it's still clearly alive in your art.

*Martha Diamond:* Well, I always appreciated this idea of 'Old New York.' I was sort of raised up through it.

**David Carrier:** You have this fascinating quote in which you said that "As I child, we did just anything we wanted to do. I was never intimidated by cars, or people, even." That is just a wonderful response to New York City.

*Martha Diamond:* My version of the city was borne out of being raised in Queens. When you're a city kid, I think you're convinced that nothing can hurt you. Although, apparently, when I was a little kid, I climbed outside the window and took away all my mother's jewelry. Evidently, I was not afraid of the outside.

**David Carrier:** And what floor were you on when you did that?

*Martha Diamond:* I don't know, really. I was a little kid, a really little kid. I probably could count, but I don't have any idea.

**David Carrier:** Do you feel that that essence of the city has gone, now? Or is it a place you can still walk around and enjoy?

*Martha Diamond:* I miss all the old stores and the old neighborhoods. You know, like the book area or the area where they designed clothes. Or the jewelry area.. I liked all the neighborhoods that there were, and I don't think there are so many distinct and individualized neighborhoods anymore.

**David Carrier:** I knew an artist, Harvey Quaytman, who lived on your street. When I knew him in the 1980s, the Bowery was close to Soho, but it felt so far away. Now, of course, it's changed completely; the Bowery's just another gentrified neighborhood.

*Martha Diamond:* It was different, then. I mean, the humans were different; the doorways were different; the cars were different.

**David Carrier:** Do you see your art as a kind of chronicle of a New York that's disappeared, or currently disappearing? Or do the scenes depicted in your paintings exist in the present for you.

*Martha Diamond:* I think of them as showing the present. But I don't distinguish my art from what exists outside because my idea of what I make is really kind of primitive. At one point, I remember going to people and explaining, "I make it just like this," and would mimic painting brushstroke by brushstroke in a very simple way. I know that's not how buildings are made, but that's how I understand them. That's primitive thinking!

**David Carrier:** You have a very focused interest in the city's light. You're not interested in the pedestrians on the street, you're interested in the light hitting the building. That seems to me a very peculiar and particular interest.

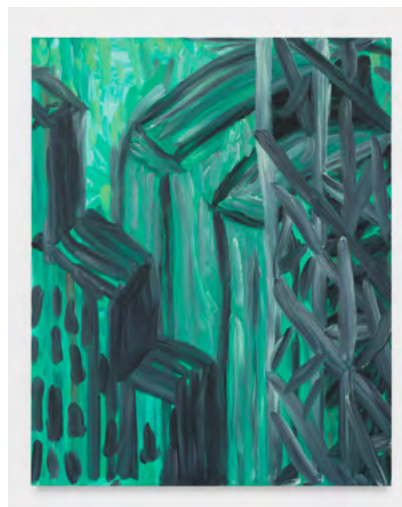
*Martha Diamond:* Well, the pedestrians change all the time. And life doesn't, really. It changes, but not in its essence. I like the consistency of the city's buildings, or at least its early buildings.



Installation view, *Martha Diamond: 1980-1989, Magenta Plains, New York, NY*,

**David Carrier:** I was just looking at the paintings that you're going to show next month, Martha, and I was interested in how you have those structures, those grids. It seems to be really central to this group of paintings. They're very basic, almost primitive, to use that word again. In fact, I would definitely call your *Green Cityscape (1985)* primitive! How would you describe it?

*Martha Diamond:* Green. What else can I say? That's it. It's a realistic painting in greens because I wanted to see if I could get away with doing that. I don't know how I initially conceived of it. Maybe I was thinking of the buildings I saw out of the windows of various places I lived when I was young. But I didn't go up to the Metropolitan and imitate what I saw. The subjects of my art are the buildings around us. These were the buildings outside my window... I'm a very primitive person in that way, I think. And I don't mind that. No, I don't mind that at all.



'*Green Cityscape*' (1985). Oil on linen. 90h x 72w inches. Courtesy of the artist and Magenta Plains, New York.

**David Carrier:** One commentator says, “Diamond is doing for the cityscape what Joan Mitchell does for the greater outdoors.” And I thought, that’s interesting, but also weird, in a way, because what’s more different than a tree and a building? You couldn’t work outdoors? That wouldn’t interest you?

*Martha Diamond:* I’d really have to know more about it in order to feel comfortable doing it, whereas with the city buildings, I take it for granted. I was born in Manhattan. I’ve lived in Manhattan for a long time, and I’ve walked through it for a long time. But trees are specialized, and I guess I don’t think of buildings as particularly specialized.

**David Carrier:** When you call yourself a “primitive” painter, do you mean that the histories of Bellotto in the eighteenth century, and Pissarro, in the nineteenth, don’t particularly matter to you as much as the immediate and visceral experience of being on the street? Would that be a fair characterization?

*Martha Diamond:* I never thought of that, exactly. But, yes, for me, I think that’s true.

**David Carrier:** The German Expressionists of the 1920s were doing scenes of the city, and they were interested in the aggressive, visual life of Berlin, at that point.

*Martha Diamond:* I guess if I were going to paint the people or the social aspect of the city, that’s probably where I’d go with it. It would be interesting. I remember very clearly growing up in New York City and noticing how the other kids I went to school with dressed, and how their parents dressed for their jobs, and other little differentiating details about their families. But now, everybody dresses alike. My closet must have 25 pairs of dungarees. It’s the same every day.

**David Carrier:** You’ve cited two painters – Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol – who, early on, were important to your work. Reading that, I thought, wow! Really? Such different people. Heavens! Can we talk about that for a moment?

*Martha Diamond:* Jackson Pollock tossed paint. But Warhol? I guess I just take him as it comes, you know? If someone’s painting soup cans, that’s okay with me. And if someone’s throwing paint, that’s also okay with me.

**David Carrier:** You remain, in a certain sense, a figurative painter, a painter who needs the city. You didn’t move all the way into abstraction, as did many of the artists who followed de Kooning. You wanted to remain attached to that city grid; that city structure – the life, and the buildings, and so forth. You didn’t want to be an Impressionist painter of the city, but you also didn’t want to make a purely abstract work. You sort of wanted to be in a place in between? Here I think of your painting, *Structure* (1993), as an important example.

*Martha Diamond:* When I made that painting I was thinking, “Can I make an orange cityscape, or can I do it with a different

color?” That’s all I thought. It wasn’t realism...I mean, I really think that is how simple-minded I was. I know I’ve described my approach as primitive before...



*'Structure' (1993). Oil on linen. 60h x 49w inches. Courtesy of the artist and Magenta Plains, New York.*

**David Carrier:** Often, intuitive artists like you have difficulty finishing. Certainly, de Kooning did. Is that ever a concern of yours? How do you know when something is finished and ready to leave your studio?

*Martha Diamond:* Pretty much when I don’t feel like doing anything else to it.

**David Carrier:** In other words, after it achieves a certain kind of rightness?

*Martha Diamond:* Yeah, a point where whatever information I was thinking of putting down seems to exist now on the canvas.

**David Carrier:** Right. And do you ever come back to a painting, over months and years? Or is the process faster than that?

*Martha Diamond:* I put together something that holds together visually, and makes some kind of sense, visually. All the hints should be there, somehow. So, I’m not documenting the city for anybody. I’ve never done wrist work; it’s not what I do. As a matter of fact, one friend calls me “slasher!” I wave the brush around wildly. The fact that I use brushes, I think, is a big part of what I do. Brushes have limited definition. I care more about evoking the light than depicting the details.

**David Carrier: Do you ever look out from the Bowery onto the street and make art?**

*Martha Diamond:* Yes. And I've done drawings on the street, in crayons, in pen. I love the city, so I look at it often. And I have a memory of places which I can also use to my advantage.

**David Carrier: I pulled out this statement I like from Bill Berkson: "The light on buildings against the high, Atlantic sky, makes New York life tenable." The buildings and the light – the combination – it seems like you need both? You don't want to just show the building structure, it really is all about the light against the buildings?**

*Martha Diamond:* That's the New York City I live in. I mean, the buildings are there, and the light is there. I'm not often out in places where there isn't natural light. Unless I'm in a coffee shop.

**David Carrier: Do all of these super skyscrapers give you a sense of how the city has changed and morphed throughout the years?**

*Martha Diamond:* The details aren't interesting. I mean, what am I going to look at? There are some buildings with real decoration, but they were built, 50, 70 years ago. The light's all there is defining anything. I think that must be what I see. I mean, I'm sort of simplified, but there it is.

**David Carrier: What would be the first painting that you would think of as being a work of yours?**

*Martha Diamond:* When I was young, we lived across the street from a relatively new grammar school. I tried to draw my street outside the window of my class, in the second or third grade, or so, and I only had paints that weren't really subtle. Anyway, my first art problem was how to paint asphalt.

**David Carrier: You were a self-trained artist in New York. That's amazing to me. There are so many art schools, yet you taught yourself?**

*Martha Diamond:* I did go to classes on 57th Street, at the art school that was there, and learned from somebody about painting with brushes. I loved that, and I still use those kind of Asian brushes that I first learned about at the time.

**David Carrier: In one of your past interviews, you speak about your time teaching and your female pupils, and the often-difficult place for women in the American art world. Can you say anything more about that, especially now, after looking back at all the changes the artworld has seen over the years?**

*Martha Diamond:* Well, I think the only changes I know of are changes that other people made, really. I taught at Skowhegan a few times, and sometimes the men wouldn't teach

the female students. Obviously, I didn't approve of that. And I wasn't a lunatic about social stuff but, I thought, how could you not pay attention to all the women artists out there? And somehow, at a certain point, I just made a point of teaching the women students and telling them stuff that I thought they needed to know.



*Martha Diamond photographed by Georges Piette in her studio in 1993. Courtesy of the artist and Magenta Plains, New York.*

**David Carrier: Was that when you began to form a community of friends around you who were poets and artists?**

*Martha Diamond:* That came later when I lived in Manhattan. And, with Peter Schjeldhal, whom I met when I was studying at Carlton College, in Minnesota. There were all kinds of people there, and it was great.

**David Carrier: When did you move to the Bowery?**

*Martha Diamond:* 1969

**David Carrier: When you got there, was it already crowded with artists?**

*Martha Diamond:* Yes. Living on the Bowery, that's where I first started really meeting artists in earnest. That was a wonderful time. And it was a great time for parties, really good parties. And you could walk at night and find other parties if the one you were invited to wasn't so great. You could just go up and ask a random stranger if you could go to their party since the one you were at wasn't so good. We would do that all the time when a boyfriend of mine and I hosted parties. People would call and say, "Could we come?" And we'd say, "Yeah!" It was a great and interesting time to meet a lot of artists who were talented at many of the things that I didn't really experience growing up in Queens. Like cooking, for instance. I mean, my mother cooked nothing. So, you know, I discovered food during my time living in the Bowery. You know, after all these years, I've never really had any complaints about living in New York.

**David Carrier: At the end of the day, from your perspective, has the artworld changed over the years?**

*Martha Diamond:* Where is the artworld? If you can find it, sign me up! ■