

eric firestone gallery

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What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries in March

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Martha Edelheit's "Major Deegan Expressway With Fruit," 1972-73, at Eric Firestone Gallery, via Eric Firestone Gallery, New York

NOHO

Martha Edelheit

Through March 18. Eric Firestone Gallery, 40 Great Jones Street, Manhattan; 646-998-3727, ericfirestonegallery.com

Martha Edelheit's paintings caused a minor furor in 1974, perhaps because people object to looking at flesh with more than 18 percent body fat, or, more likely, because she was a woman painting phalluses. Edelheit's nudes are tame by today's standards (and, really, 1974's), not as explicitly sexual as Joan Semmel's or as literally sourced from pornography as Betty Tompkins'. Mostly they simply hang out around town, splayed across rooftops, their pallid skin melting into the white brick skyline, or lazing in Sheep Meadow, like a more equitable "Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe." If Edelheit's protagonists are confrontational it's because they retain the personality of their sitters, their faces slack with boredom, as though showing up in the buff to the Central Park Zoo were as blasé as picking up bagels.

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Edelheit's vision occasionally drifted from New York, imagining bodies stretched across the astral expanse of the Southwest. But her figures achieve true transcendence in the real space of the city. (It's easy to feel unencumbered in the endless vacancy of red sand mesas; try doing it in view of the George Washington Bridge.) The frisson of a rippling deltoid foregrounding the unloveliness of crumbling infrastructure, as in "Major Deegan Expressway With Fruit" (1972-73), both sends up Western traditions and refreshes them.

For Edelheit, the city's built environment is as spiritually revelatory as any desert. Bodies rendered in creamy pastels merge into a single mass before the seal enclosure, or dissolve into Central Park's lake, becoming the landscape itself, a poetic depiction of art's fundamental indispensability from life. MAX LAKIN

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