

# eric firestone gallery

## ARTFORUM



Martha Edelheit, *View of Empire State Building from Sheep Meadow, 1970–72*, acrylic on canvas, 76 × 94".

## Martha Edelheit

ERIC FIRESTONE GALLERY | NEW YORK

In Martha Edelheit's groovy scenes of erotic languor—featuring nudes in unselfconscious poses with intent or with distant facial expressions, usually basking in the sun—the pulsing undercurrent of optimism is most seductive. That, and the THC-Technicolor extravagance of her realist style. The ninety-one-year-old artist's exhibition here, "Naked City, Paintings from 1965–1980" which included several monumentally scaled works, spanned a period of social upheaval, when the artist labored with visionary feminist vigor. She rendered slack dicks and unidealized bodies in detail, holding the sexual revolution to its word in the realm of painting.

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Edelheit, who is based in both Sweden and New York, makes her egalitarian point—vis-à-vis art history, at least—most explicitly in her revision of Édouard Manet’s *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe*, 1863. In the French modernist’s tableau, two men in conversation picnic with an incongruously nude woman, as another woman bathes in the background. The American painter’s *View of Empire State Building from Sheep Meadow*, 1970–72, shows a parallel group—two men, two women—in Central Park. Yet Edelheit’s subjects are all naked, sitting on a bright blanket, gazing together at something out of frame. Edelheit levels the playing field in the verdant meadow, substituting the traditional feminine passivity of the reclining nude with unisex hippie torpor. She depicts her subjects’ bare flesh and air of disengagement democratically—though in truth the men, their legs parted, are more exposed. The urban skyline appears like a frieze beyond the line of trees at the group’s slouching backs.

A nature/culture tension is often at play in the artist’s approach to the figure. New York takes up more space compositionally in the grand vista of *Birds: A View from Lincoln Tower Terrace*, 1974. The canvas portrays a sunbathing man and woman—nude and huge in the foreground—sprawled out on a sheet printed with silhouetted pigeons. On the terrace of a high-rise apartment, they seem to float, soft-hued skyscrapers all around them. They each have one leg bent. The man’s frames a triangle of the metropolis; the woman’s knee points outward toward us, her foreshortened thigh steering our gaze to her centered thatch of pubic hair.

There’s something territorial in Edelheit’s laid-back transposition of such louche vignettes and unembarrassed bodies onto the built environment. Anita Steckel, a contemporary of Edelheit’s in the women’s art movement, was at the same time making her “Giant Women” series, ca. 1969–74. She portrayed nude women, monstrous in scale, conquering New York and towering over its buildings, whose phallic character she underscored. (Steckel founded the Fight Censorship Group, of which Edelheit was a member, alongside such luminaries as Judith Bernstein and Joan Semmel.) Though very different—Steckel was unconcerned, for example, with the kind of painterly beauty Edelheit pursued—both represented the city as a backdrop or foil to liberation. The pair were also deemed obscene, their careers curtailed owing, in part, to their insistence on depicting the penis.

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But that little body part was only a small portion of this show. As important as it was to Edelheit to treat the male nude evenhandedly, she made radical images of women, too. The largest piece on view, the multiracial triple portrait *Women in Landscape*, 1966–68, differently upsets the notion of a pliant and static female model. In each of the mural-like work's three panels, a different woman is shown in a range of positions and moods, her active interiority reflected in this time-lapse effect. Edelheit bridges domestic and mythic space with a lush Edenic background. The island of floral upholstery where the women sit melts into a royal-blue sea at dusk, under a peach-sorbet sky.

Then, there is *Fleshcycle*, 1969. A nude female biker is mounted on a Vespa-ish sex machine composed of pink and tawny curves, its wheels secured by clitoral lug nuts. She drives up a steep mirrored ramp, looking down at her reflection, below a slit of fluffy clouds and cerulean sky visible at the picture's dividing diagonal. It's hard to resist imagining the rider as Edelheit herself, bearing down on her project of feminist figuration. In these radiant paintings, the representation of bodily reality, carnal fantasy, and boundless ambition is where the rubber meets the road.

— Johanna Fateman

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