

eric firestone gallery

Martha Edelheit was born New York City in 1931, where she lived until moving to Sweden in 1993. She currently lives outside of Stockholm. She is known as a pioneering feminist artist whose work of the 1960s addresses female desire, the body, and skin as a double “canvas” for tattoo imagery.

Edelheit studied at the University of Chicago, New York University and Columbia University in the 1950s. Important teachers included artist Michael Loew and art historian Meyer Schapiro. She established herself in the center of the downtown avant-garde, becoming a member of the Tenth Street artist-run space, the Reuben Gallery, where her first solo show was held in 1960. She, like other members Jim Dine, Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenberg, and Robert Whitman, were pushing at the boundaries and definitions of sculpture, painting, and art-making through Happenings and experimental objects. Edelheit exhibited her “extension” paintings which break the frame of the work and utilize utilitarian objects. Her second solo show, in 1961, was held at another significant nucleus of experimental art, the Judson Gallery.

By 1962, Edelheit began to explore the subject of tattooing in her work. She related to the writings of David Levi-Strauss. In his 1955 memoir, *Tristes Tropiques*, Levi-Strauss speculates that tattooing was the first art, before cave art, and that the human body was the first canvas. The flesh of the figures Edelheit depicts become places where the dreams and fantasies of the models emerge. Edelheit's paintings of tattooed figures led to her depictions of circus performers, which have a frank sexuality; the contorted bodies and body parts, along with their costumed appearance, suggest sadomasochistic play.

Edelheit's erotic works on paper, and her series of monumental “Flesh Wall” paintings were exhibited at the Byron Gallery in the mid-1960s. This work prompted Allan Kaprow to write an article for the *Village Voice* addressing the significance of women's contemporary erotic art. Edelheit became an essential voice whose work implicitly challenged social expectations of women as well as formalist paradigms and traditional notions of figurative painting and the nude.

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