

# eric firestone gallery

**Martha Edelheit** (b. New York, NY, 1931) is a pioneering feminist artist whose work confronts dominant art historical paradigms, foregrounding female gaze and desire. Known for eroticism, her lush and vivid work is at once critical, sensual, and humorous. Edelheit was born in New York City in 1931, where she lived until moving to Sweden in 1993. An important voice for feminist art, she is known for both her frank depictions of sexuality and her insistence on their place within an art historical tradition and society.

Edelheit studied at the University of Chicago, New York University, and Columbia University in the 1950s. She studied with artist Michael Loew and art historian Meyer Schapiro, who Edelheit credits with inspiring a new way of thinking about image construction and pictorial space.

Edelheit 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, Rosalyn Drexler, Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenberg, Lucas Samaras, and Robert Whitman, were expanding the definitions of art-making with the creation of Happenings and experimental objects. At the Reuben Gallery, Edelheit first exhibited her "extension" paintings which break the frame of the work and utilize utilitarian objects. They combine impasto paint and found materials into irregularly shaped constructions. In her work from the 1960s, she addresses female desire, the body, and skin as an alternate "canvas" for tattoo imagery.

By the early 1970s, Edelheit began to work with the combination of nude figures, photographs and memory. She was interested in "montage"—this combination of elements and even figures who didn't necessarily pose together. She was exploring what was integral to establish the space and how symbols could become signifiers of the inner life of her models. By this period, Edelheit became more involved in the Women's Art Movement at large as an activist and art worker. She was a member of Fight Censorship, alongside other women artists foregrounding eroticism, including Joan Semmel, Judith Bernstein, and Hannah Wilke. She was also involved with The Women's Caucus for Art, the Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press, and other feminist initiatives.

Edelheit has always been particularly interested in circus performers and the way in which they can contort and manipulate their bodies. As a child, she was a fan of the circus and later she became a gymnast with the hopes of being able to move in the way that these performers could. Circus performers have recurred in her work since the 1960s. In this work, Edelheit explores the fleshy geometries of the circus through a series of figures that balance precariously on each other or leap through the air. All the while, contortions and costuming suggest sadomasochistic play. Edelheit's work has been included in museum exhibitions internationally, including Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Germany; Foundation Vincent Van Gogh, Arles, France; the Jewish Museum, New York, among others. Her work is in the collections of the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota and Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden, among others. Edelheit's work will be featured in the 2025 exhibition *Sixties Surreal* at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

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