

eric firestone gallery

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What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week: Martha Edelheit

by Martha Schwendener
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Martha Edelheit is yet another indication that 20th-century art history is still under construction, with large areas unfinished or invisible. Ms. Edelheit was included in last year's "Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City, 1952-1965" at the Grey Art Gallery, which featured several artists unfamiliar to wider audiences. Now "Flesh Walls: Tales From the 60s" at Eric Firestone is devoted to Ms. Edelheit's work from that era. She was part of the downtown, artist-run Reuben Gallery, where she had her first solo show in 1960.

The "Flesh Walls" title is not metaphorical or accidental. Ms. Edelheit's meaty, sexy paintings and drawings iterate tales of the sexually permissive '60s. She approached the human body through the skin, inspired initially by the writings of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who suggested that the body was the original canvas for painting, in the form of tattoos. Ms. Edelheit's early works, which focus on the body-ink style of drawing of tattooed circus performers, are interesting for their vivid coloring and curious detail.



Martha Edelheit's "Flesh Wall With Ladder," from 1965, acrylic and oil on canvas.

Her work achieved liftoff in the mid-60s, though, in lush, mural-size paintings jammed with nude bodies. "Female Flesh Wall" (1965) is a dense canvas depicting women in a spectrum of colors, while two other 1965 "Flesh Wall" paintings include prosaic objects like ladders and tables, which ground the otherwise buoyant paintings. Ms. Edelheit's paintings are redolent of art history: Rococo church domes, 19th-century academic painting, countless avant-garde artists. (She also studied with the distinguished art historian, Meyer Schapiro, at Columbia University.) Nonetheless, her paintings are bracingly fresh and pertinent. With human (and particularly female) bodies constantly in the news — as objects of violence, politics and commerce — and contemporary figurative painting flourishing, her canvases are full of pleasure — and look like they could've been made yesterday.