

VAN DOREN
WAXTER

ARTFORUM

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Hedda Sterne, *Untitled*, 1983, acrylic and pastel on canvas, 52 × 72".

Hedda Sterne

VAN DOREN WAXTER

I'd never given much thought to Hedda Sterne (1910–2011) until 2015, when her painting *New York, N.Y., 1955*, wowed me in the Whitney Museum of American Art's inaugural show in its then-new downtown home, "America Is Hard to See." Prominently installed on the building's seventh floor alongside works by more famous New York artists of her generation, the canvas stood out and apart. Its sense of speed and gestural energy resonates with Abstract Expressionism, but its architectonic construction does not. While Sterne's mark-making felt impervious to her colleagues' cult of personality, it also eschews the uptight linearity of geometrical abstraction, with its equal and opposite cult of impersonality. Thanks to her inventive use of airbrush and enamel, the work's materiality is

light, effervescent; this quality seems to be the painting's most forward-looking aspect, something that lets me imagine Sterne as a secret forerunner to Katharina Grosse or Mary Weatherford.

The Sterne show "Architecture of the Mind" at Van Doren Waxter featured eight paintings and ten drawings from the 1980s, all *Untitled*. Although she is by reputation something of an eclectic—her *New York Times* obituary dubbed her "an artist of many styles"—this phase of her career, at least, was directly connected to the work from three decades earlier that had beguiled me at the Whitney. Even more than in *New York, N.Y., 1955*, there is something ravishing in the lightness with which these works were executed—in the complexity of effect Sterne could evoke while touching her canvases so sparingly with, in this case, pastels and acrylic paint. One might think she had merely breathed her pale ochers, grays, and a few rare muted chroma onto the surfaces, as though they were a sort of condensation, a weightless blur. Even the black pastel lines that subdivided the fields were soft, almost smoky. All was transparency and reflection; the gaze found no object to rest on other than the canvas itself, a presence never quite effaced by the insistent illusion of dimensional space.

As the exhibition title suggested, urban structures were an underlying reference point. But unlike the gritty New York of the 1950s, these shimmering crystalline constructions of the '80s, always symmetrical yet somehow not quite graspable, evoked instead "the distorting and fragmenting reflections of one enormous glass surface to the other" that for cultural theorist Fredric Jameson—writing at roughly the same time these works were created—made architecture the "privileged aesthetic language" of the era. Yet I can't imagine that Sterne would have agreed with Jameson's notion of hyper-reflectivity as emblematic "of the central role of process and reproduction in postmodernist culture." Rather, the idea seems to have something to do with the interpenetration of the transitory and the eternal. Carol Kino, in her essay for the exhibition catalogue, quotes an entry in Sterne's diary that describes the mind during meditation—which she had begun practicing in the mid-'60s—as "a sphere with endlessly faceted surface[s], each facet a point of departure just discovered." In the 1950s, Sterne's eye was on the structure of the urban world around her, but by the 1980s her attention had shifted to the structures of thinking itself, rendering external referents merely residual. And yet the works' insistent left-right symmetry kept threatening to anthropomorphize, to resolve into a face or a body. But it never did. The effect was sometimes downright eerie, but no less captivating for that.

— Barry Schwabsky