

Art in America 1985

Marcia Clark at First Street Gallery

In painting Manhattan, Marcia Clark joins the ranks of older artists like Jane Freilicher, Rackstraw Downes, Yvonne Jacquette and the late John Button. In such company, it's no wonder that Clark has had to hit upon her own approach to the city, her own style and viewpoint, indeed, her own Manhattan.

Clark's New York is one of the most stunning yet seen. She approaches the city from two vantage points: one from her apartment on the Upper West Side, around 106th Street. *Night, Upper West Side* is a brushy but naturalistic, relatively intimate view of the neighborhood from the 12th floor. The buildings are delineated in browns and grays, and the light from street lamps reflects off cars and in the streets. A pastel, *Morning, Upper West Side*, echoes the night scene with its gray and brown buildings, while *116th Street* shows Riverside Drive on a brighter morning, with cars parked along those rounded Drive buildings, a sketchy view of Riverside Park, and a blue sky.

The other vantage point from which Clark limns her city is a borrowed office high up in the World Trade Center—indeed, most of her paintings are executed here. And what vistas! There's *From the World Trade Center #1*, a vertical panel (a favorite format) in which we have a bird's-eye view of downtown Manhattan buildings in painterly creams, yellows and umbers; heading out toward the East River, the buildings go more umber and purple and become indistinguishable from one another. We get the same view—from a little closer up, it seems—in *Gray*

Morning, lower Manhattan in dully lustrous grays, greens and pinks.

At one point, Clark descends from her 104-story perch to paint *Wall Street Sunday Morning*, a three-piece canvas that eloquently enunciates an empty, daytime-dark Wall Street, with cars parked on the right and sun-splashed buildings in the upper right corner. But it's those paintings from the World Trade Center that walk away with the show—especially the 8-by-6-foot triptych *Twilight*, which shows downtown at closing time, buildings ever more absorbed in purples and deep blues, traffic mere strings of light along the never-ending streets, the view encompassing the river, the 59th Street Bridge and even the far Queens shore. It's a pinkish Renaissance landscape, as Clark sees it.

There are, of course, other painters closer to Clark's age who paint the city—Bill Sullivan and Darragh Park come to mind. But neither of these gifted painters takes on Manhattan in quite the same way Clark does for its epic grandeur and—I hesitate to say—its fairytale beauty.

Clark's paintings reach an apotheosis of sorts in *From the World Trade Center, Night*, when sunlight has flown and Manhattan is self-lit and self-powered. This is visionary painting of a bold sort. Where Button caught the edges of city buildings at sunset, or Downes takes an almost Constable-like approach to ground-level city streets, or Jacquette watches the city from an airplane window, Clark takes it *all* in—at least, a good chunk of it—and yields a stellar beauty from urban chaos.

—Gerrit Henry



Marcia Clark: *Twilight*, 1984, oil in canvas, triptych, 92 by 72 inches overall, at First Street Gallery.