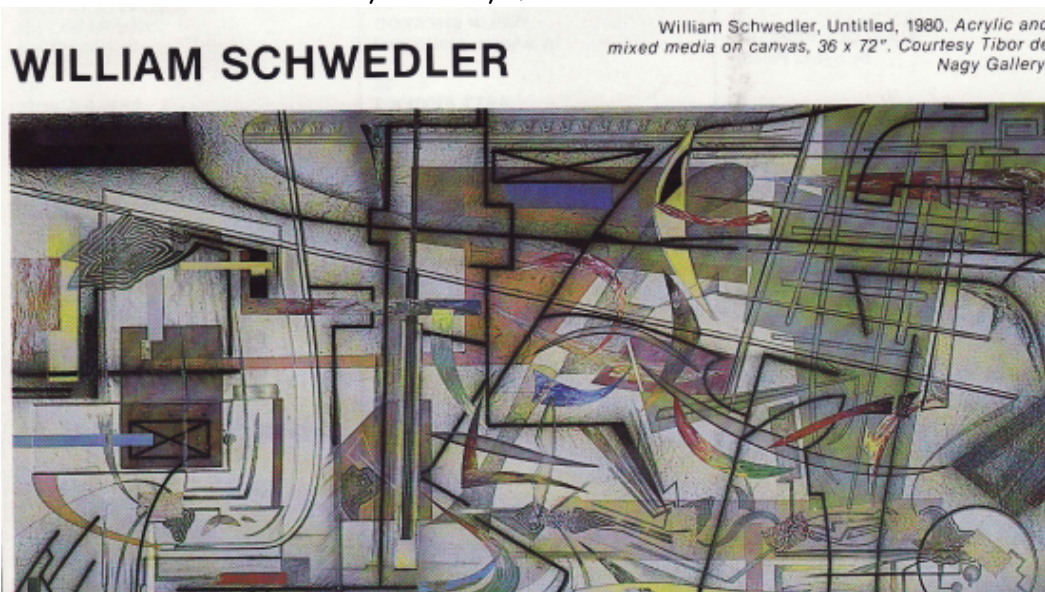


Haber, Ira Joel. "William Schwedler," *Review*, 1983.



William Schwedler's tragic death at the age of 40 (that's right, 40) has robbed me of a friend, and the art world of one of the more engaging and complex painters to emerge from that sometimes murky, pluralistic, "me" decade of the Seventies. A tragedy, yes, but the large memorial exhibition that was mounted in February at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery will help secure Schwedler's position as the major painter that I always felt he was. Being an artist isn't always easy, but Schwedler always gave the appearance that it was. Where I found the waters to be choppy and cold, he would beckon "to come on in, the water's fine."

Schwedler's paintings from the beginning to the bitter end were ripe with a surreal, abstract poetry filled with references to landscapes (seen from above), architecture (segmented and blown apart), texture (cracked), line (broken, chopped, and pulled to pieces), and delicate, but voluptuous color. His work also had a dark sense of humor of a Buñuelish, *Exterminating Angel*/kind, where you want to leave (I've had enough) but you can't.

Schwedler was born in Chicago in 1942, and the literature that has been written about his work makes much of the architectural influence this city had on him. I can imagine him in "potato city," as he used to call his hometown, studying at the Art Institute with his friends Cynthia Carlson, Jim Nutt, Art Green, and Karl Wirsum, taking in the grains, textures, spaces, and elevated structures of this oh-so-American city. I have in front of me two catalogues of his work. How much like Schwedler that the titles for his paintings say as much about his life and work as the essays included in the catalogues do. A sample: *Time Flies*, *In The Long Run*, *Time Is Money*, *A Blessing In Disguise*, *Turn For The Worse*, *Going Over The Edge*, *All Show-No Go*, *Ups and Downs*, *All That Glitters Is Gold*, *Individual Needs*, *Misery Loves Company*, *Falling For Flattery*, *A Perfect Stranger*, *Thank You*, *Come Again*, *An Easy Out*, and *Against The Grain*. One would be hard put to find more accurate and pungent titles to describe an artist's sensibility and style of life better than these autobiographical titles assigned to Schwedler's work by himself and his friends.

The early work, which I first saw in 1970 (and there were a few fine examples of this period in the de Nagy exhibition) consisted of strange and marvelous architectural elements resting in serene, soft color-field landscapes. Contradictions in both scale and imagery abound in these works. Wooden phallic-like shapes nestle cozily next to chain-link fences. Girders and beams bend around each other in friendship; chunks of wood and brick spheres and other

geometrical shapes (all wonderfully rendered) float in and around knotted ropes and limp trestles. Landscapes of the weird. The stuff that nightmares are made of.

In 1974 a dramatic change came about in Schwedler's paintings. Gone were the architectural references, to be replaced by a more abstract view of the world. These large canvases, shown at the Andrew Crispo Gallery in 1975, presented the viewer with an impressive body of work based on landscapes as if seen through the eye of a bird in flight on acid. For the most part these beautiful topographical paintings consisted of what seemed like thousands of finely drawn, web-like charcoal lines, crisscrossed by "states" of soft colors and "zones" of wood-grain patterns. Interspersed within these lands were more heavily drawn charcoal lines, sometimes leaving a hazy layer of dust across the colored areas and zones. For me this mode of operation came to its finest realization one year later in his one-person exhibition at the Alessandra Gallery. Here Schwedler started to explore the use of gel as a means of sculptural relief or embossment. Built up and up, sometimes clear, sometimes tinted and patterned, bands of gel crisscrossed and meandered across the canvases, like restless rivers and lakes. These works also contained a fine dose of his now familiar amorphic, microcosmic, and Phallic imagery. These can be most readily seen in the work on paper of 1975-76 titled *Itala*, which can be read either as a pun on the map of Italy or as an homage to his close friend, Italo Scanga.

The most recent works shown in the de Nagy exhibition were the painful (painful only in the sense that these were the final works), irregular, densely packed shaped paintings on plywood of 1980-82. Relatively small and of various eccentric sizes, they were arranged on one large wall, jutting out into real space to confront the viewer with a joyous sadness. These bending, curving, sculptural paintings made extensive use of the rich vocabulary that Schwedler developed over his much too brief career of barely twenty years.

Brightly painted wooden dowels covered in texture and design, patterns of charcoal lines careening next to small, obsessively built-up areas of color, and relaxed patches of loose washes that sit comfortably next to shapes of acidic purples and oranges make up these final paintings. There are even collage elements: wallpaper borders, pictures of slain President Kennedy's face cut from matchbook covers, and membership cards and vouchers from that notorious gay watering hole and hangout, The Anvil. Exploding areas of everything. In fact, these last works seem like so many explosions in a gay disco on a hot summer night. In his short, important, highly personal career as an artist, William Schwedler has left us with a rich body of work. Taking the title of his painting from 1978-79, he will be *Sorely Missed*. (Tibor de Nagy, *February 5-March 9*)