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# ARTFORUM

**William Schwedler**  
TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

William Schwedler has a special place in recent American art. His death last year, at the age of 40, left an impressive pictorial legacy, surveyed in this memorial retrospective of paintings and works on paper. The display included work ranging from the early '70s through the early '80s —the period when the Chicago-born artist, then based in New York, found his own distinctive course. Deep concerns with image and surface are at the source of his vision's persuasiveness.

Educated at the Art Institute of Chicago, Schwedler revealed traces of his hometown's peculiar brand of funky representation in his work of the early '70s. In *Magic of Roseville*, 1971, a rose-and-gray ceramic form stands alone but is monumentalized in a strange, theatrical setting, laid on a carpet featuring a dark crackle pattern. The crackle pattern emerges as a major motif with the gradual disappearance of easily recognizable objects (chairs, turnstiles, chains) from the work, which occurred by 1974. Throughout the mid and into the late '70s Schwedler developed his approach to the crackle pattern, making all-over, repetitive, intricately detailed compositions from different configurations varying in relative density and openness. Mediums and methods in this period ranged from drawing directly on the canvas to pouring and spraying acrylic; incising patterns with sponges, etching needles, and knives; and collaging wrappers, wooden strips, and textured papers (for example, cigarette-rolling paper). These resulted in a breed of articulate paintings and drawings which stress the integration of luminous, layered surfaces and geometric images toward expressive ends.

In the late works, those from the period 1978 to 1981, the crackle patterns are reduced into small but strategically located islands which punctuate linear and coloristic compositional rhythms within maplike, intercrossing arrangements of lines, bars, and curves. In this group, represented here by *The Acid Test*, 1980–81, Schwedler's ability to turn abstract imagery into perceptual and extraperceptual information is strikingly illustrated. In this canvas, which curves gently inward, the precise relief rendering and pervading luminosity of the surface seem to evoke outer space, and the syncopated structure brings to mind transportation arteries for some futuristic city, or the circuits made by unseen electronic impulses whizzing about inside computers. While vivid sensations of directionality and speed seem on first glance to dominate viewing, the painting's metaphoric/symbolic aspects come through with prolonged viewing. *The Acid Test*, like many of Schwedler's late works, impresses as a statement of consciousness and order. Schwedler's singular vision has much to say about contemporary American painting.

- Ronny Cohen