

# SUSAN SCHWALB

Spatial Polyphonies:  
New Metalpoint Drawings

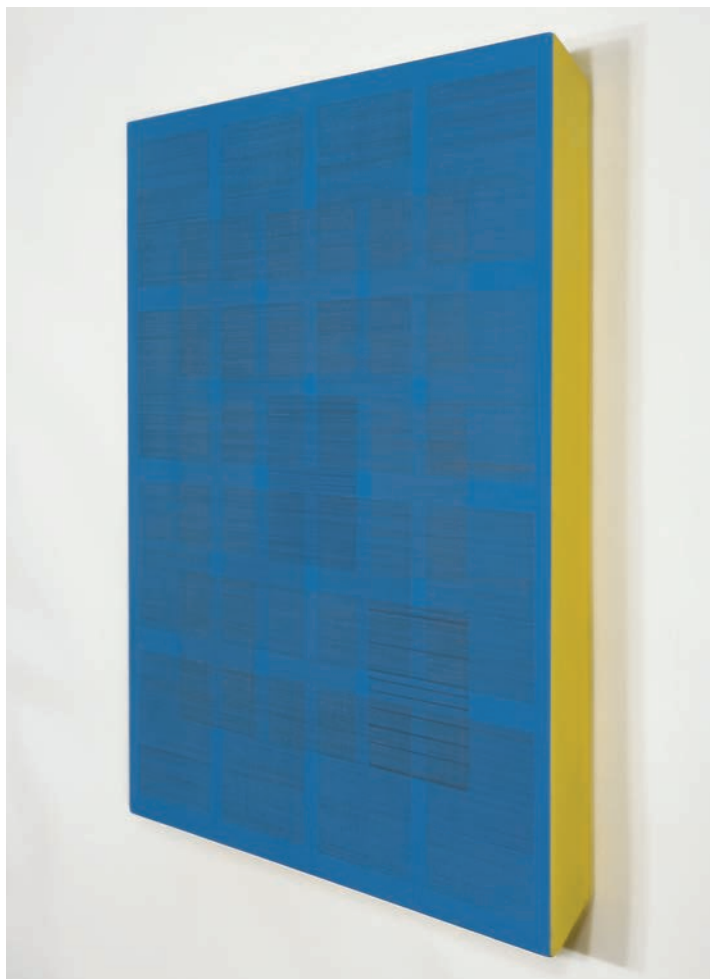
COVER: *Polyphony IV*, 2013, silverpoint, red gesso on paper on panel, 16 x 16 inches.  
Collection of Patricia Grant and Michael Appelbaum.

# SUSAN SCHWALB

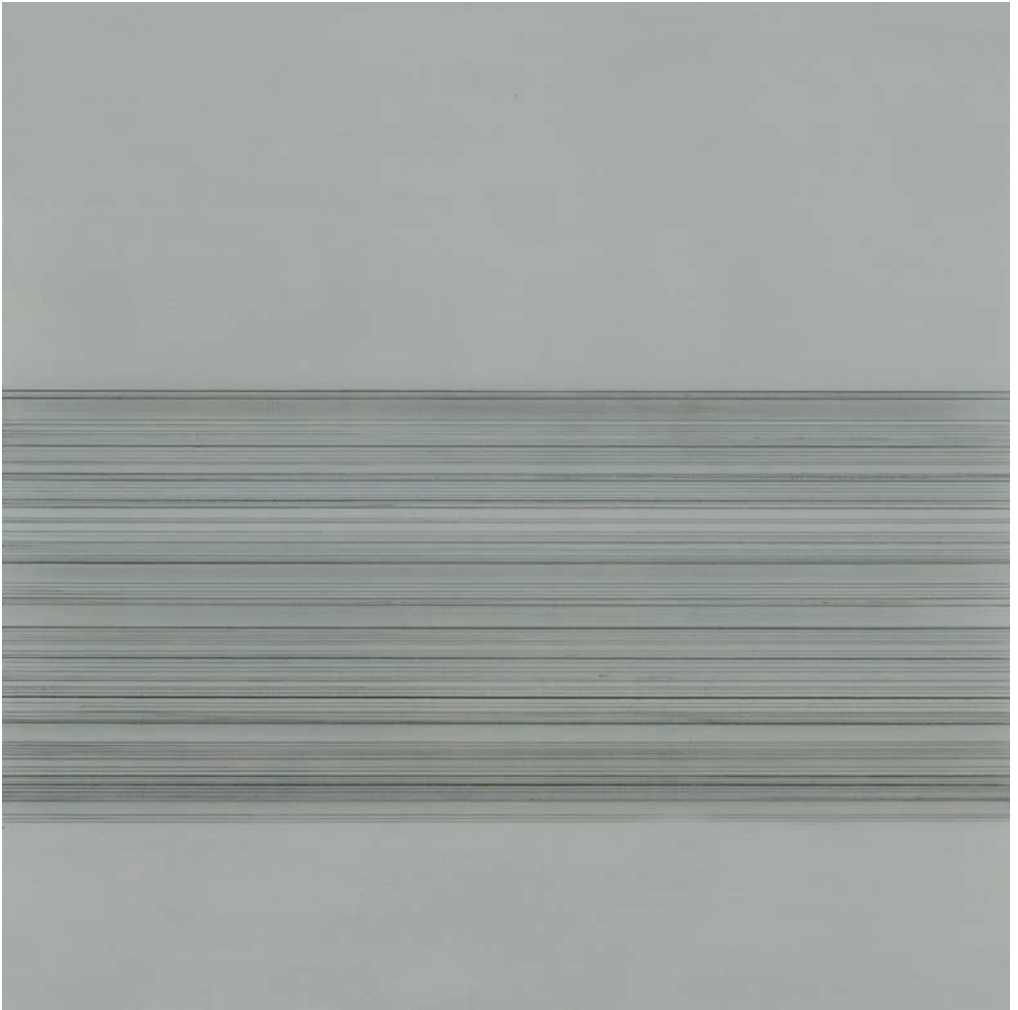
Spatial Polyphonies:  
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October 2 – November 2, 2013

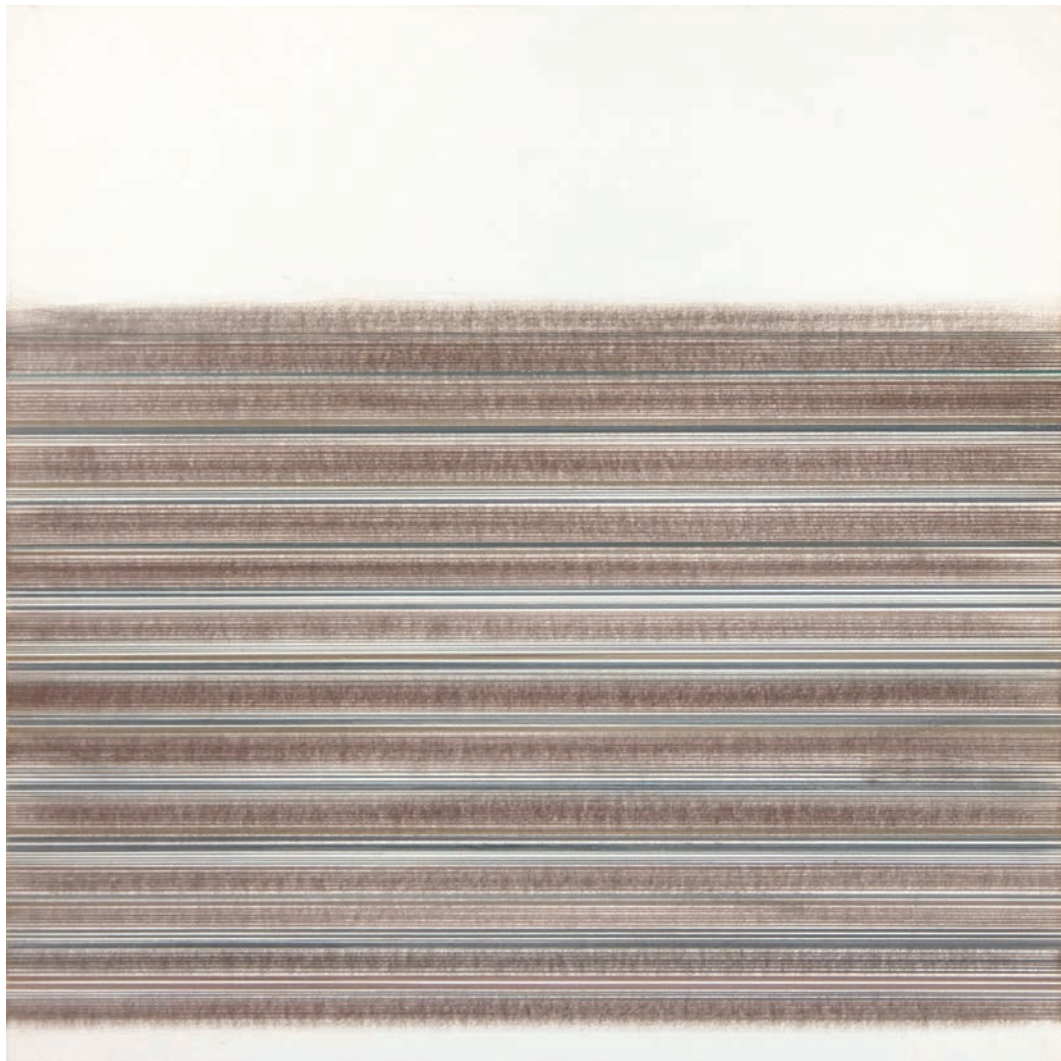
Essay by John Yau



*Polyphony VII* , 2013 (side view)  
silver/gold/copperpoint, acrylic, blue and yellow gesso on paper on panel, 16 x 16 inches.



*Toccata #57*, 2012, tin/silverpoint, pencil, gray gesso on paper, 12 x 12 inches.



# THE RECENT WORK OF SUSAN SCHWALB

*I cannot tell how Eternity seems. It sweeps around me like a sea...*

Emily Dickinson

From a letter to Louise and Frances Norcross,  
November, 1882

John Yau, 2013

1.

For more than thirty-five years, Susan Schwalb has worked in silverpoint, an unforgiving medium that can neither be erased nor corrected. She uses a metal stylus to draw lines onto prepared wood panels and gessoed paper. She also occasionally uses a woodworking tool to cut into the surface of the panels. Beginning with the preparation of the surfaces, her process is incremental and decisive. Although she started out drawing flowers, she soon pared her vocabulary down to horizontal lines made of silver, gold, tin or copper, the color matching the composition of the metalpoint.

In Schwalb's work, each line releases a glow that can, at times, seem barely there – even as it changes as it moves across the surface. Stacked on top of each other, the differently colored lines become both geological strata and layers of light. With remarkable economy, she has bonded the materiality of her medium – the faint trace (which, in certain works, can have a barely-there presence), thin scar or tactile groove running across the pristine surface – with the immateriality of light.

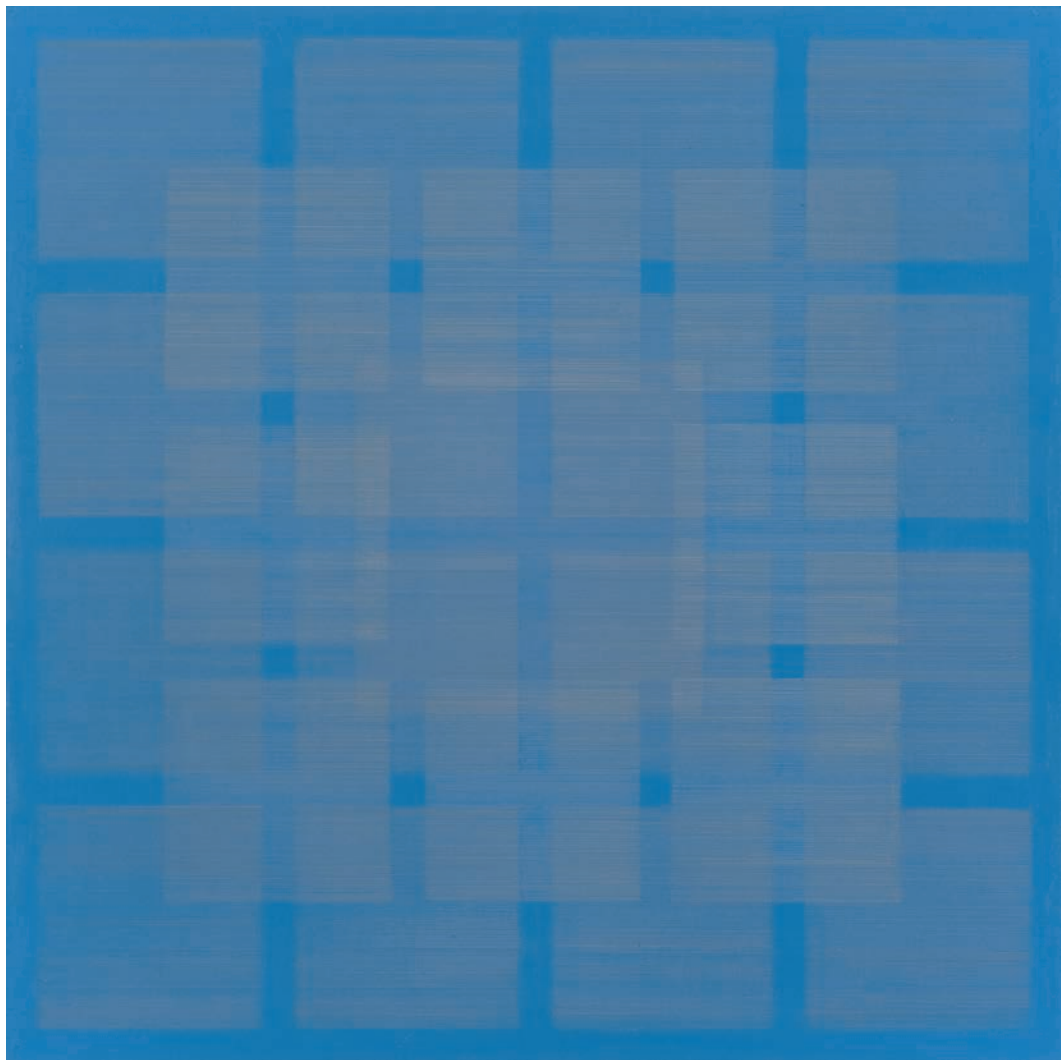
In recent years, Schwalb seems to have gotten more delicate, rigorous and adventuresome in her approach. In "Polyphony" (2012 – 2013), a series of square panels, ranging from 16 x 16 inches to 30 x 30 inches, she compresses as many as four palpable layers within a single composition. The series' title, "Polyphony" is a musical term (as are many of Schwalb's titles), defined as a texture consisting of two or more simultaneous lines of independent melody.

In *Polyphony VI* (2013), the four distinct layers (in reverse order, starting with the bottom) consist of a luminous blue ground, two metalpoint grids of twelve and nine squares respectively, and, finally, a square. All the squares are scrims defined by faint horizontal lines.

Sequentially, it is possible to deduce that Schwalb began with the radiant blue ground and superimposed a grid of twelve squares over it, filling the painting's square and transforming the solid blue bands between the drawn squares into a skeletal framework. Over this grid she drew a grid whose nine squares equal the size of those in the larger grid. Finally, in the center of the painting she superimposed a simple square.

In the areas where three layers of squares overlap, I found myself focusing and refocusing my attention, trying to distinguish where one square begins and the others end. It was like looking at three translucent curtains hung in front of one another. Like the other paintings in the series, *Polyphony VI* is a palimpsest of three semi-transparent layers, a series of superimposed geometric textures. Rhythm and interruption, repetition and difference, have been made to embrace.







We don't see *Polyphony VI*; we adjust to it. We don't look at its finely worked, layered surface; we examine it. For all of its restraint and rigor, *Polyphony VI* is an intensely subjective painting that gains its eloquent expressiveness through self-discipline and structure, opening up a realm of contemplation and reflection.

2.

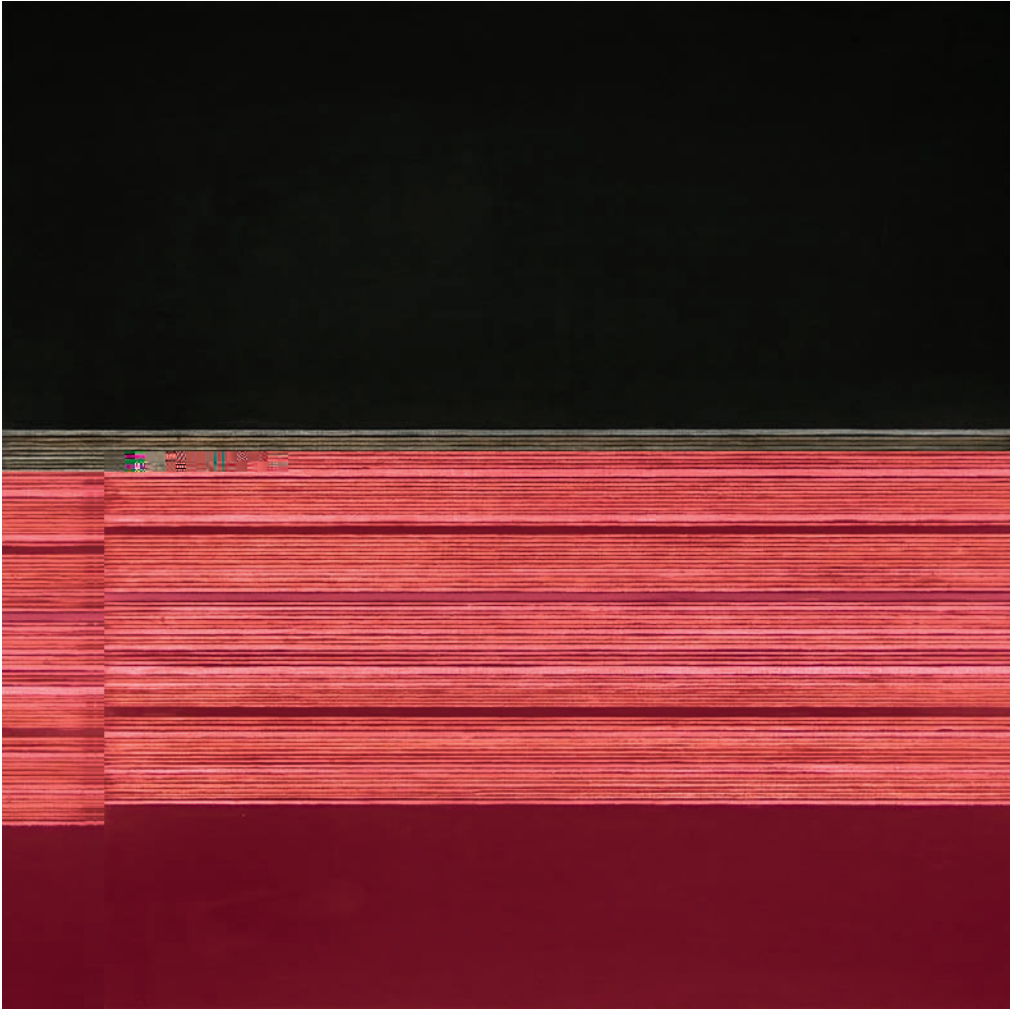
It seems to me that Schwalb's process is indistinguishable from time passing, and she knows it. I would also advance that her lines are a way of consciously slowing down time, making it into a palpable thing that can be closely scrutinized. This is why the lines are individual, why she draws or incises each one by hand rather than relegating the task to a machine. Her works are meticulous out of necessity. Make no mistake about it. They have to be made this way because Schwalb knows she cannot stop time, that she can only structure its passing.

At the same time, Schwalb recognizes that no matter how much control she is able to exert on her work, both she and her art are material things vulnerable to time's vicissitudes. By folding this consciousness into her work, Schwalb is able to bestow upon it an emotional resonance that distinguishes her project from those we associate with Minimalism and reductive art. Her work is not static and makes no claim to being timeless. Rather, her work is about passage on many different levels, the myriad distinctions and differences that constantly reveal themselves in the face of constant change. Her work underscores her belief that nothing – including the seemingly simple act of drawing a line – is mundane, and that all activities are inextricable from time.

Here it might be useful to look again at Schwalb's work in terms of the solitude of its implementation. It is a daily ritual in which an artist prepares a surface that will



*Interlunar Vibrations XXIX*, 2013, silverpoint, white gesso on panel, 16 x 16 inches.



*Interlunar Vibrations XXV*, 2012, gold/silver/tin/aluminumpoint, acrylic, black gesso on panel, 16 x 16 inches.



*Intermezzo, IV*, 2013 (side view), silverpoint, colored pencil, gesso on panel, 6 x 6 inches.



LEFT: *Intermezzo II*, 2013, silver/goldpoint, colored pencil, gesso on panel, 6 x 6 inches.

RIGHT: *Intermezzo III*, 2013, silver/copper/goldpoint, colored pencil, gesso on panel, 6 x 6 inches.

be simultaneously brimming with color and blank. The surface is pristine, the color saturated. If it is black, it might evoke a starless night sky, the universe before life began. The lines form a horizon, but not necessarily one we would encounter on earth. Here I am thinking of the aptly titled series, *Interlunar Vibrations*. We are looking at lines of light implying a horizon, but one that hardly seems earthly.

Once the surface is prepared – and this may take days or even weeks – Schwalb slowly and methodically marks its surface. Sitting at a table – in my mind, she is bent over it, like a scholar – holding a T-square and a stylus with a point of silver, gold or some other metal, she seems intent on registering the ineffable, measuring the little bit of infinity she inhabits.

The ritual consists of adding one line to another. The distance between the lines is as important as the lines themselves. Eventually, a swath of lines, each a different color, forms to become a constantly changing texture, a subdued shimmer.

If Schwalb switches her metalpoint from silver to gold, or from copper to tin, the differences become more pronounced, but never overtly dramatic. While the ritual does not vary in any significant way, each work attains a distinct character. This goes against the grain of ritual, which is supposed to produce the same results time after time. But replication is not what Schwalb is after. In some cases, especially when she works in a series, the results might be seen as members of the same family, but you would never mistake one member for another.

3.

Recently, Schwalb has literally and metaphorically expanded the parameters of her work with two series, *Toccata* and *Intermezzo* (both 2013). Both series are done





on the same format – a 6 x 6-inch panel that is 1½ inches thick. The works, which are mounted on the wall, jut forward. Their modest size invites viewers to move closer and scrutinize them, something they share with the artist's two-dimensional works. The difference is that Schwalb has drawn and incised lines on the front of the box's immaculate, milky white surface, as well as on the two flanking sides. Are they drawings? Paintings? Or reliefs? In some way, they are all three.

*Toccata* is a musical term derived from the Italian *toccare*, "to touch." In *Toccata IV*, Schwalb used silver, gold, aluminum, copperpoint and pencil to incise the lines, which go across the entire surface and continue onto the flanking sides on the left and right. Despite its small size, we obviously cannot see all three incised sides of the box at once. As we move back and forth to view the piece in its entirety, the three evenly spaced clusters of lines evoke a musical instrument for the eyes, rather than the hands. It is as if Schwalb is suggesting that *Toccata IV* can be played by sight, rather than by touch. By using the woodworking tool to make physical grooves in the box's surface, she collapses together sight and touch, underscoring that our senses are connected – that, for her, art should not be purely optical.

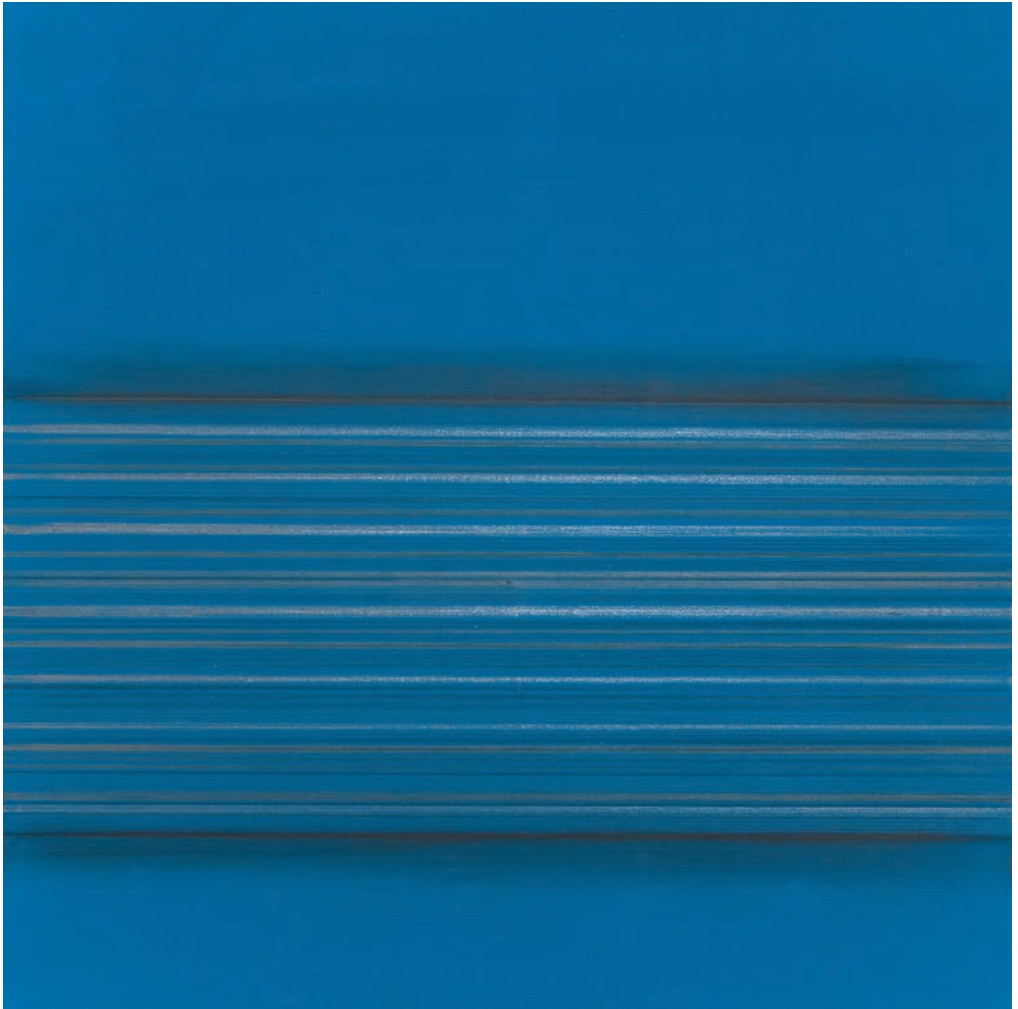
In *Intermezzo*, Schwalb goes a step further, doing something uncharacteristic: instead of horizontals, she incises diagonal lines across the box's front surface as well as the left and right flanking sides, sometimes at sharp angles to each other. Moving around the box affords us different views and configurations. They literally shift – sometimes radically – as we move from side to side.

Also a musical term, "Intermezzo" is a short instrumental movement connecting two scenes of an opera. We might see one of Schwalb's *Intermezzo* pieces as connecting two things together, but what those things are eludes identification.

Each "Intermezzo" comes across as self-sufficient and mysterious, an object we can never fully grasp because it changes as we move around it.

According to astrophysicists, there seems to be a series of interconnected, underlying structures governing the universe, but we have only gained very small glimpses of them. The *Intermezzo* pieces are maps of small bits of infinity, which can change in ways both logical and unimaginable. At one point – and for no rational reason – it occurred to me that an *Intermezzo* box is not only a bridge between an unknown past and an unforeseeable future, but it is also a mystical object whose story we will never know. Art that can transport the viewer to such a place of possibility is doing something special.

John Yau is a distinguished art critic, essayist, curator, poet, fiction writer, and publisher. His reviews have appeared in *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Art News*, *Bookforum*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. He was the Arts Editor for the *Brooklyn Rail* (2006 – 2011). In January 2012 he started the online magazine, *Hyperallergic Weekend*, with three other writers.



*Toccata #54*, 2012, copper/gold/silver/aluminum/tin/pewterpoint, graphite, blue gesso on paper, 12 x 12 inches.

## CHRONOLOGY

- 1944 Born in New York, NY  
1965 BFA Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA

### FELLOWSHIP/GRANTS

- 2010,'07,'92,'73 The Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Sweet Briar, VA  
1994 Artist-in-Residence, Mishkenot Sha'ananim, Jerusalem, Israel  
Artist-in Residence, Tel Aviv Artists' Studios, Tel Aviv, Israel  
1991 Massachusetts Arts Lottery Grant  
1989,'85,'77 Exhibitions Grant, Committee for the Visual Arts, Inc.— Artists Space, New York, NY  
1989,'75,'74 The MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, NH  
1981 Yaddo, Saratoga Springs, NY  
1980 International Communications Agency Travel Grant, Copenhagen, Denmark

### SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 *Spatial Polyphonies: New Metalpoint Drawings*, Garvey Simon Art Access, New York, NY  
2011 *Music of Silence: Recent Metalpoint Paintings*, K. Imperial Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
2011 *A Gathering Quiet*, Galerie Mourlot, New York, NY  
2009 *Interior Voyages: Recent Silverpoint Paintings*, Simon Gallery, Morristown, NJ  
2008 *Music of Silence: Recent Metalpoint Paintings and Drawings*, Galerie Mourlot, New York, NY  
2006 *Metalpoint Paintings*, Page Bond Gallery, Richmond, VA  
*Atmospheric Disturbances*, Winfisky Gallery, Salem State College, Salem, MA  
*Atmospheric Disturbances*, Simon Gallery, Morristown, NJ  
2005 *Shards of Memory: Recent Metalpoint Paintings*, Solomon Fine Art, Seattle, WA  
*Drawn in Metal*, Robert Steele Gallery, New York, NY  
2004 *Red Mesa*, Cervini Haas Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ

- 2003 *Afterimage: Recent Metalpoint Paintings and Drawings*, Robert Steele Gallery, New York, NY  
*Recent Metalpoint Paintings and Drawings*, Simon Gallery, Morristown, NJ  
2002 *Let There Be Light*, Adair Margo Gallery, El Paso, TX  
*Palimpsest: Recent Metalpoint Paintings*, Cervini Haas Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ  
2001 *Palimpsest: Recent Metalpoint Paintings*, Miyako Yoshinaga Art Prospects, New York, NY  
1999 *Moments of Resonance: Recent Metalpoint Drawings and Paintings*, Andrea Marquit Fine Arts, Boston, MA  
*Improvisations on Outer Space: Recent Metallic Works on Paper*, Birke Art Gallery, Marshall University, Huntington, WV  
1997 *Improvisations on Outer Space*, Arthur B. Mazmanian Art Gallery, Framingham State College, Framingham, MA  
1996 *Galaxies & Other Matter: Recent Metallic Paintings*, Andrea Marquit Fine Arts, Boston, MA  
*Intervals: Silverpoint Paintings*, Watson Gallery, Wheaton College, Norton, MA  
1994 *Susan Schwalb: Silverpoint Drawings 1986-1994*, American Cultural Center, Jerusalem, Israel  
*Intervals: Silverpoint Paintings*, Andrea Marquit Fine Arts, Boston, MA  
1992-94 *The Creation Series*, (tour: May Museum of Judaica, Lawrence, NY; Chase/Freedman Gallery, Greater Hartford JCC, West Hartford, CT; Robert I. Kahn Gallery, Congregation Emanu El, Houston, TX), B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum, Washington, DC  
1990 *The Creation Series: 15 Years of Silverpoint*, Yeshiva University Museum, New York, NY  
1989 *Susan Schwalb: Silverpoint Drawings*, Brad Cooper Gallery, Tampa, FL  
*Susan Schwalb: Silverpoint Drawings*, SOHO 20 Gallery, Invitational Space, New York, NY  
1986 *Susan Schwalb: Large-Scale Silverpoint Drawings*, Saint Peter's Church, New York, NY  
1985 *Silverpoint Drawings, SOHO 20 Gallery*, Invitational Space, New York, NY  
*Susan Schwalb: Silverpoint Drawings*, Simmons College, Boston, MA

- 1983 *Silverpoint Drawings 1978-1982*, U.S. Embassy Exhibition Program, sponsored by the United States Information Agency, The American Center in Belgrade, Banja Luka, and Skopje, Yugoslavia
- 1978 *Orchid Series: Gold and Silverpoint Drawings*, Loyola University, Chicago, IL
- 1977 *Orchid Series: Gold and Silverpoint Drawings*, Rutgers University, Newark, NJ
- Orchid Series: Gold and Silverpoint Drawings*, Douglass College, New Brunswick, NJ
- The Primacy of Paper: Recent Works from the Collection*, RISD Museum of Art, Providence, RI
- 2009 *Group Exhibition: Preview 2010*, Blank Space Gallery, New York, NY
- Some Things the World Gave: Jan Lhormer and Susan Schwalb*, Simmons College Boston, MA
- The Luster of Silver*, Evansville Museum of Arts and Sciences, Evansville, IN
- Re-Inventing Silverpoint: An Ancient Technique for the 21st Century* (tour: Cummings Arts Center, Connecticut College, New London, CT), Kentler International Drawing Space, Brooklyn, NY

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 *Lines of Liminality: Susan Schwalb and Clifford Smith*, Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe, NM
- Straight Lines in Five Directions: Kate Carr, Susie Rosmarin, Susan Schwalb, James Siena, Dan Walsh*, Garvey Simon Art Access, New York, NY
- Working It Out*, The Painting Center, New York, NY
- Inside Out: Selections from the Kentler Flat Files*, Kentler International Drawing Space, Brooklyn, NY
- Paperwork*, Telfair Museum, Savannah, GA
- 2012 *New Prints 2011/2012 Benefit Exhibition & Silent Auction*, International Print Center New York, NY
- New Prints 2012/Summer*, Selected by Shahzia Sikander, International Print Center New York, NY
- Uncovered: Prints, Selected from the Kentler Flatfiles*, Curator: Sallie Mize, Kentler International Drawing Space, Brooklyn, NY
- 2011 *Group Silverpoint Exhibition*, Tinney Contemporary Art, Nashville, TN
- Sofia International Paper Art Biennial 2011*, curated by Thalia Vrachopoulos, Sofia, Bulgaria
- Drawings for the New Century*, Minneapolis Museum of Art, MN
- 2010 *Recent Work by Gallery Artists*, Etherington Fine Art, Marfa, TX
- Luminous Lines: Contemporary Drawings in Metalpoint*, Scripps College, Claremont, CA
- Modern Drawings: Tracing 100 Years*, Academy Art Museum, Easton, MD
- 2008 *Artists and Books*, The Art Complex Museum, Duxbury, MA
- Equilibrium: Susan Schwalb & Nan Tull*, Soprafina Gallery, Boston MA
- No Chromophobia*, OK Harris Gallery, New York, NY
- Winter Group Show*, Galerie Moulot, Los Angeles, CA
- 2007 *Control/Chance: Susan Schwalb, Valerie Constantino & Rainer Gross*, Gráficas Gallery, Tucson, AZ
- Contemporary Metalpoint Drawing*, Art Students League, New York, NY
- Selections from the Kentler Flatfiles*, Brooklyn Academy of Music, NY
- In Residence: Artists and the MacDowell Colony Experience*, Thorne-Sagendorph Art Gallery, Keene College, Keene, NH (tour: The Art Gallery, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH)
- Abstraction Updated: Deborah Muirhead, Susan Schwalb & Suzanne Volmer*, G.A.S.P. Gallery Artists Studio Projects, Brookline, MA
- Chance and Necessity*, Kentler International Drawings Space, Brooklyn, NY
- Black and Red, All Over*, Michele Mosko Fine Art, Denver, CO
- 2006 *Figure/Ground*, Kentler International Drawing Space, Brooklyn, NY
- Never Done: Works by Women Artists from the Puzzioli Miller Collection*, Huntington Museum of Art, Huntington, WV

*Words to Live By*, Solomon Fine Art, Seattle, WA  
*From Sea to Shining Sea*, District of Columbia  
Art Center, Washington DC

*The Luster of Silver: Contemporary Metalpoint  
Drawings*, Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah, GA

*Boundaries: Book Arts Between the Traditional  
and the Experimental*, Erie Art Museum, PA

*The Square*, The Temporary Museum of  
Painting, Brooklyn, NY

2005 *New England/New York New Talent*,  
Hampden Gallery, U. Mass/Amherst, MA

2004 *Drawing Show*, Robert Steele Gallery, New  
York, NY

*National Drawing Invitational*, Arkansas Arts  
Center, Little Rock, AR

## SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Academy Art Museum, Easton, MD

Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, Fine Arts  
Museums of San Francisco, CA

Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, AR

The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, England

Athenaeum Music and Arts Library, La Jolla, CA

B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum,  
Washington, DC

The British Museum, London, England

The Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY

Boston Public Library, Boston, MA

Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA

The Columbus Museum, Columbus, GA

Danforth Museum of Art, Framingham, MA

Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley  
College, Wellesley, MA

Evansville Museum of Art and Science, Evansville, IN

The Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University,  
Cambridge, MA

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

The Houghton Library, Harvard University,  
Cambridge, MA

The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel

Kupferstichkabinett - Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,  
Germany

The Library of Congress, Washington, DC

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN

Museum of Art/Rhode Island School of Design,  
Providence, RI

Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, St. Louis, MO

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX

The Museum of Modern Art, Belgrade, Serbia

The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), New York, NY

The National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

The National Museum of Women in the Arts,  
Washington DC

The National September 11 Memorial & Museum,  
New York, NY

The Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL

The Old Jail Art Center, Albany, TX

The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA

Simmons College, Boston, MA

Telfair Art Museum, Savannah, GA

Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England

Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North  
Carolina at Greensboro

Wesleyan University, Davison Art Center,  
Middletown, CT

West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV

Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT

Yeshiva University Museum, New York, NY

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