

The background is a solid blue color with subtle, wavy horizontal lines. Four horizontal, brush-like strokes in a golden-orange color are positioned across the middle of the page, creating a layered effect.

SUSAN SCHWALB

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GRÁFICAS GALLERY

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In Susan Schwalb's drawings the medium is integral to the message. That medium is the exigent and antique technique of metalpoint. We think of the pencil (if we think of it at all) as an elemental, basic tool, one that has always existed. But Schwalb works with the precursor to the pencil. Traditionally, metalpoint is just that, a sharpened metalpoint—usually silver, copper, lead or gold—held in a stylus. With its heyday in the 15th century, its most famous practitioners include Leonardo da Vinci and, slightly later, Albrecht Dürer.

Metalpoint was conventionally used for precise drawing or drafting. Silver was the most common metal to be used because it is more permanent. The drawing surface historically included paper, parchment, ivory and wood. The surface must be specially prepared to receive the metal marking. Traditionally, this consisted of a coating of white lead and ground bone in a glue or gum suspension. Contemporary practitioners use an opaque medium made with gouache or gesso that they prepare themselves or purchase commercially. Though smooth in appearance, the preparation must have a slight tooth to allow for the transfer and retention of metal to the surface. Precision is the key to the medium as it cannot be erased. Even shading is

difficult; if the pressure is too light, no mark will be left; if the pressure is too heavy, the paper will stretch or tear. There are advantages, however. Metalpoint is archival, permanent and inert, and is purported to reveal the hand of the artist better than any other media. Tarnishing of the metals, which occurs over time, is a valued quality; silver grey turns to soft brown, while copper takes on a greenish hue. Though metalpoint enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in the 19th century with the Pre-Raphaelites, only a few contemporary artists have the patience to work within the strictures the technique demands.

So, why choose a technique that is so demanding and difficult? And why use it to create images that differ so sharply from their early precedents? Schwalb began using this challenging medium in 1975. Over the course of three decades, she has developed her own methods of working the material to obtain her desired results. She works on paper or board which is sometimes mounted onto a wood panel. The paper is coated with an opaque ground followed by several layers of subtly-colored acrylic wash. The application must be entirely even to avoid interfering with her precise line. The resulting surface is velvety smooth and rich to the touch. Schwalb has largely discontinued the use of the stylus and now draws with thin rectangular bars of metal. The wider, more even marks they make are more suitable to her grid format. With her adaptations, the medium's innate chiaroscuro, tonal depth, precision and delicacy ideally articulate her spare abstractions. The intentionally-limited palette of minimalism is intrinsic to metalpoint. The artist's own response to those previously-asked





questions is as follows: “I use the classical Renaissance technique of silverpoint and metalpoint in a way which challenges the traditional concepts. My work is abstract and my handling of the medium has become increasingly bold.”

Schwalb is an heir to the minimalist legacy, most directly from the pioneers, Kasimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian, then, later, Robert Ryman and Donald Judd. Like those esteemed predecessors, she favors the ideal geometry of the rectangular or square. It is purged of metaphor and covered with all-over, continuous patterning imparting neutral surfaces with the non-hierarchical equality of the entire grid: the absence of subject and ground. Process, formal aspects and materials are generally stressed over content and emotion. The viewer is confronted with immediate visual impact, and allowed to experience the work of art directly.

But upon closer examination of Schwalb’s work, we notice that there is something else going on here as well. Though elegant and spare, the subtle waving of line belies the minimalist ideal of mechanical precision. Schwalb’s medium is antithetical to the minimalist aesthetic, which would favor industrial materials. Her repetitions offer too much modulation; the lines fluctuate and waver. There is shading and movement and even the suggestion of receding space. The depth in her marks opens up the flat surface of the picture plane. From a distance, there is even the suggestion of an image—anathema to minimalists! When compared, say, to Malevich’s Suprematist work, Schwalb’s appears positively Baroque. It is precisely this, her eloquent expression of

subtle variation and delicate divergence within the framework of precision, which is so seductive.

Schwalb's process is both additive and subtractive. She applies successive layers of paint followed by metalpoint drawing, and then sands away areas to reveal the strata underneath. These may be further enhanced with the addition of more paint or metal. Her palette is deceptively broad encompassing tans, ochres, shades of gray, frosty blues, greenish yellow and rust. There is an alluring luminosity to the surface ranging from a slight glint to an overall sheen or even shimmer. Negative and positive bands diverge in width from a single line to a wide swath. Schwalb makes her drawings in series. One series is appropriately entitled *Strata*. In this, and much of her work, stratification is elemental. The materials themselves are stratified, layer upon layer and the imagery implies stratum, like the geological striations that are revealed through erosion. There is the hint of representational content in certain of the drawings. Some suggest a graph traced by the arm of a Polygraph machine. Some imply the reflection on water or a stack of neatly folded linens. Some conjure Dan Flavin's neon tubes spilling their light onto walls.

In looking at Schwalb's work, one cannot help but bring to mind Agnes Martin. Each of these two artists examines a limited geometric vocabulary within a rectangular format. Each creates linear compositions reminiscent of music scores. Martin's minimal canvases were made of delicate pencil lines slightly colored by pale washes on a painted atmospheric ground. In her case, they express positive inner states of existence: egolessness,

humility, the Tao of life. At a critical point in Martin's life, after she had garnered considerable reputation and recognition as a minimalist painter, she rejected the tenets of that movement; indeed, she rejected materialism. She moved from New York to New Mexico where she lived alone in an adobe house she built, deliberately isolating herself in order to pursue her pure artistic and personal expression.

Schwalb has been similarly influenced by the desert, its soft hues, its quality of light, its uncluttered terrain. Though structurally akin to Martin's work, Schwalb interjects the vibrations found in the rhythms of nature. In her work we see more of a celebration than a denial of material. She finds metalpoint the ideal medium to capture the subtle light and to express the characteristic atmosphere. The color modulations inherent in the medium are exactly those suggested by the muted earth tones. Her controlled images, stripped down to their most fundamental features, are apt reflections of the reductivist landscape of the Southwest. ■

JOANNE STUHR

Independent Curator

EXHIBITION LIST

Afterimage II
24 x 24 x 2"
2002
silverpoint, acrylic
on paper on wood

Afterimage III
30 x 30 x 2"
2003
silverpoint, acrylic on
museum mount board
on wood
[page 2]

Afterimage IV
30 x 30 x 2"
2003
silverpoint, acrylic on
museum mount board
on wood

Afterimage V
30 x 30 x 2"
2003
silverpoint, acrylic on
museum mount board
on wood

*Atmospheric
Disturbances III*
24 x 24 x 2"
2005
silverpoint, acrylic
on wood
[cover]

Mesa II
24 x 24 x 2"
2002
silverpoint, acrylic
on paper on wood

Mesa III
24 x 24 x 2"
2002
silverpoint, acrylic
on paper on wood
[page 5]

Mesa V
24 x 24 x 2"
2003
silverpoint, acrylic
on paper on wood

Incident in the Mist #2
8 x 28 x 1.5"
2004
silverpoint, acrylic
on wood

Strata #227
9 x 9"
2004
metalpoint on
video media paper

Strata #273
9 x 9"
2004
metalpoint on
video media paper
[page 6]

Strata #398
9 x 9"
2005
silver/brass/copper/
aluminumpoint
on video media paper

Strata #395
12 x 12"
2004
copper/brass/silver/
goldpoint on
video media paper

Palimpsest L
24 x 24 x 2"
2001
silverpoint, acrylic
on paper on wood

*Atmospheric
Disturbances IV*
12 x 12 x 1.5"
2005
silverpoint, acrylic
on wood

Strata XXXIV
12 x 12 x 1.5"
1998
metalpoint, acrylic
on paper on wood

Palimpsest #141
12 x 12"
2001
silverpoint, acrylic
on video media paper

Palimpsest #125
12 x 12"
2001
silverpoint, acrylic on
arches watercolor paper

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