

*Susan Schwab*

AFTERIMAGE: Recent Metalpoint Paintings and Drawings

October 16 – November 15, 2003



**ROBERT STEELE GALLERY**



Metalpoint is one of the oldest and most venerable of drawing techniques. Although it is usually associated with the elaborate drapery studies or finely modeled portrait drawings of fifteenth-century artists such as Fillipino Lippi and Leonardo da Vinci, this most beautiful of drawing methods continues to enjoy a devoted following among a small, albeit expanding, group of artists. One of its most creative and original practitioners is Susan Schwalb. Since her first use of metalpoint in 1975, Schwalb has been furiously inventive, expanding the parameters and possibilities of the medium in exceptionally intelligent and genuinely innovative ways.

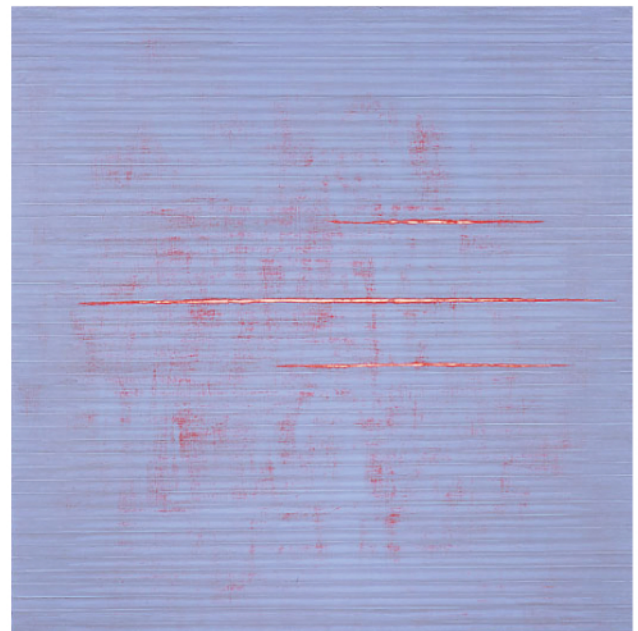
Traditionally, metalpoint drawings have been made using a stylus with points of metal such as silver or gold. In order for the stylus to mark a piece of paper, the surface of the sheet must be covered by a ground layer. In the Renaissance this usually consisted of multiple coatings of white lead and ground bone, tempered with glue size. Today, artists such as Schwalb continue to mix their own grounds, often using gesso, brushing it directly onto the paper or, as an alternative, using a commercially prepared paper. Although smooth to the touch, the ground is sufficiently abrasive to remove a very fine deposit of metal from the stylus as it is drawn over the ground's surface. This thin trace of metal then tarnishes over time to leave a delicate and refined line.

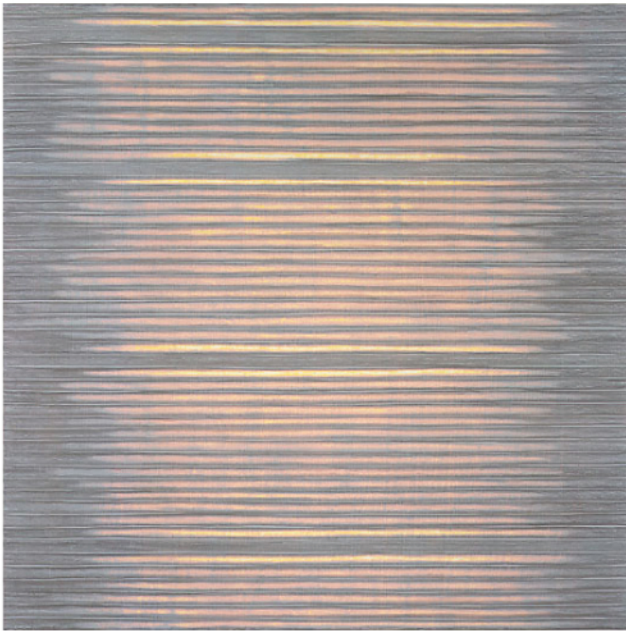
The limitations of the medium are demanding. Metalpoint cannot be erased, nor does the traditional stylus lend itself easily to rapid or extemporaneous draftsmanship. Tonal shading is also restricted; press hard with a metalpoint stylus and the line will darken only slightly before it starts to gouge and rip the surface of the ground layer, and ultimately, the paper itself. Often, artists who use metalpoint work unquestioningly within these constraints, their drawings characterized by carefully rendered contours and an exactness of line.

Schwalb is one of the few artists to have actively embraced the difficulties and refinement of metalpoint in order to push its graphic capabilities to compelling and vibrant new heights.

Schwalb's current work has its immediate precedent in an on-going series of works on paper that she began in 1997. In these so-called *Strata* drawings, Schwalb forsakes the metal stylus in favor of small pieces of a variety of metals (silver, gold, brass, copper, platinum, pewter, bronze and aluminum) which, when drawn across the paper, leave bands or strata of the most beautiful and softly effusive tonality. Using this simple technique, Schwalb creates works of astonishing complexity, as the different tones and colors of the metals gently meld and slip into one another. Far from confining or restricting the line, in Schwalb's hands the exquisite facture of the metalpoint is reminiscent of the fluidly rendered and luminous transparency obtained from that most instinctive and spontaneous of techniques, watercolor. It is a remarkable visual effect, one that not only reveals a highly attuned sensibility to the beauty and sensuousness of delicately defined tonalities, but which also dispels any perceived limitations of the medium itself.

Schwalb characterizes her creative process as a "journey". Although she always proceeds by series, creating a group of works together, her working method is one without a preconceived notion of how each individual work will evolve. Instead, she describes how a composition or image will come about through its interaction with other drawings and paintings in her studio. This continually evolving connection between her older and newer work becomes especially apparent in the close relationship between her current paintings and the *Strata* drawings. As Schwalb sought a means to make the transition from drawing to painting, she first introduced color into her drawings by tinting the ground layer with the delicate and muted colors, such as light yellow and

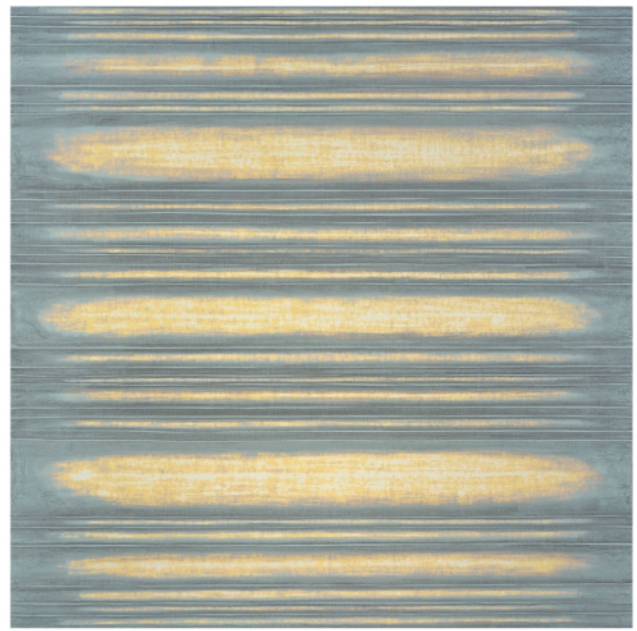




soft green, that are common to Renaissance grounds. Excited by the results, she sought a means to work on a larger and freer scale by fusing together elements of both painting and drawing, blurring the traditional distinctions between the two media.

Although her paintings, such as *Palimpsest LXI* or *After-image III*, appear to be made on a simple wooden panel, the surface of the wood is in fact usually covered by a sheet of paper, upon which Schwalb brushes as many as six layers of gesso. Over this she applies layers of differently colored paint; in the case of *Afterimage III*, for example, she uses grey, blue and yellow. On the surface of the final paint layer, Schwalb draws with her metalpoint sheets in a manner similar to the *Strata* drawings. Once the drawing is complete, she uses sandpaper to erase the surface of the work in order to reveal the colors of the lower paint layers as well as to create the most beautiful shimmering surface on the painting. The technique not only heightens the illusory sense of depth and recession, but also suggests the emanation of a very soft and muted light from within the internal space of the work.

Although the works are resolutely abstract, and are not defined or structured by any literal source, they are informed by the experience and memory of the particular qualities of light at certain moments: perhaps a reminiscence of the sun or clear light over the Hudson River, or maybe the diffused modulations and quality of light and shadow that one is aware of through half-shut eyes. Other paintings from the *Mesa* and *First Mesa* series, in which an explicit "horizon" line is evident, are informed by the rich desert colors and haunting shapes that she experienced on travels to Arizona and New Mexico. Above all, though, her work allows us the freedom and opportunity to arrive at our own interpretation and understanding of these most beautiful of images.



Schwalb's abiding connection with her immediate environment is most evident in the series of works entitled *red/white/blue*. Prompted by the bombardment of images of American flags throughout New York after the tragic events of September 11th, Schwalb memorialized their powerful visual effect in a series of drawings and paintings that are based on the red, white and blue of the flag. By sanding away the topmost somber gray layer of the paintings, the underlying colors bleed or smolder to the surface through gash-like openings which evoke, quite hauntingly, the ripped and torn facades of the Twin Towers before their collapse. The creation of such moving and powerful works through such refined and subtle means makes them all the more impressive as both drawing and memorial. They are perhaps the ultimate testament to Schwalb's mastery of the medium.

#### **Edward Saywell**

Charles C. Cunningham Sr. Curatorial Associate  
Department of Drawings  
Fogg Art Museum  
Harvard University Art Museums

#### THIS PAGE

- Left: *Palimpsest LXI*, 2002, 24" x 24" x 2",  
silverpoint, acrylic on paper on wood  
Right: *Palimpsest LXVII*, 2003, 24" x 24" x 2",  
silverpoint, acrylic on paper on wood

#### OPPOSITE PAGE

- Top: *Afterimage III*, 2003, 30" x 30" x 2",  
silverpoint, acrylic on paper on wood  
Bottom: *red/white/blue VI*, 2002, 24" x 24" x 2",  
silverpoint, acrylic on paper on wood

# Susan Schwalb

BFA Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA  
High School of Music and Art, New York, NY

## Solo Exhibitions (selected)

- 2003 Robert Steele Gallery, NYC  
Simon Gallery, Morristown, NJ
- 2002 Adair Margo Gallery, El Paso, TX
- 2001 M.Y. Art Prospects, NYC
- 1999,'96,'94 Andrea Marquit Fine Arts, Boston, MA
- 1998 Birke Art Gallery, Marshall University, Huntington, WV
- 1997 Arthur B. Mazmanian Art Gallery, Framingham  
State College, MA
- 1996 Watson Gallery, Wheaton College, Norton, MA
- 1994 American Cultural Center, Jerusalem, Israel
- 1992 B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum,  
Washington, DC
- 1990 Yeshiva University Museum, NYC
- 1989 Brad Cooper Gallery, Tampa, FL

## Group Exhibitions (selected)

- 2003 National Museum of Women in the Arts, Wash., DC  
*Insomnia: Landscapes of the Night*
- 2002 Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX  
*Recent Acquisitions*  
Cervini Haas Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ  
*Three Person Show*  
Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, CA  
*Recent Acquisitions*  
Fitchburg Art Museum, Fitchburg, MA  
*A Nation Mourns: Artists Respond*  
Kenise Barnes Fine Art, Larchmont, NY  
*Ordinate/Coordinate*  
Robert Steele Gallery, NYC  
*Abstraction: Gallery Artists*
- 2001 Dorsky Gallery, NYC  
*At the Edge: The Horizon Line in Contemporary Art*  
Jim Kempner Fine Arts, NYC  
*Minimalennialism*  
Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL  
*Burn: Artists Play with Fire*
- 2000–01 The College of Santa Fe, NM  
*Jewish Artists: On the Edge*  
Hebrew Union College, NYC  
*Living in the Moment*
- 2000 Basel Art Fair, Switzerland, with Van Straaten  
Gallery, Chicago, IL  
The Rose Art Museum, Waltham, MA  
*Visual Memoirs: Paintings and Drawings*  
The Stockholm Art Fair 2000, Sweden  
The Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA  
*A Decade of Collection: Recent Acquisitions*  
Robert Steele Gallery, NYC  
*Group Exhibition*  
The Art Store, Charleston, WV  
*Vernal Equinox*
- 1999 Fuller Museum of Art, Brockton, MA  
*Ninth Triennial*

- 1998 Margaret Thatcher Projects, NYC  
*Vibrations*
- 1997 The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY  
*Current Undercurrent*  
Wynn Kramarsky Inc., NYC  
*Recent Acquisitions*
- 1996 Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, AR  
*Large Drawings and Objects*  
Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ  
*25 Years of Feminism, 25 Years of Women's Art*
- 1994 Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA  
*Power, Pleasure, Pain*
- 1993 Museum of Contemporary Religious Art,  
Saint Louis University, MO  
*Recovering the Holy in Contemporary Art*
- 1992 Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, AR  
*Silverpoint Etcetera*

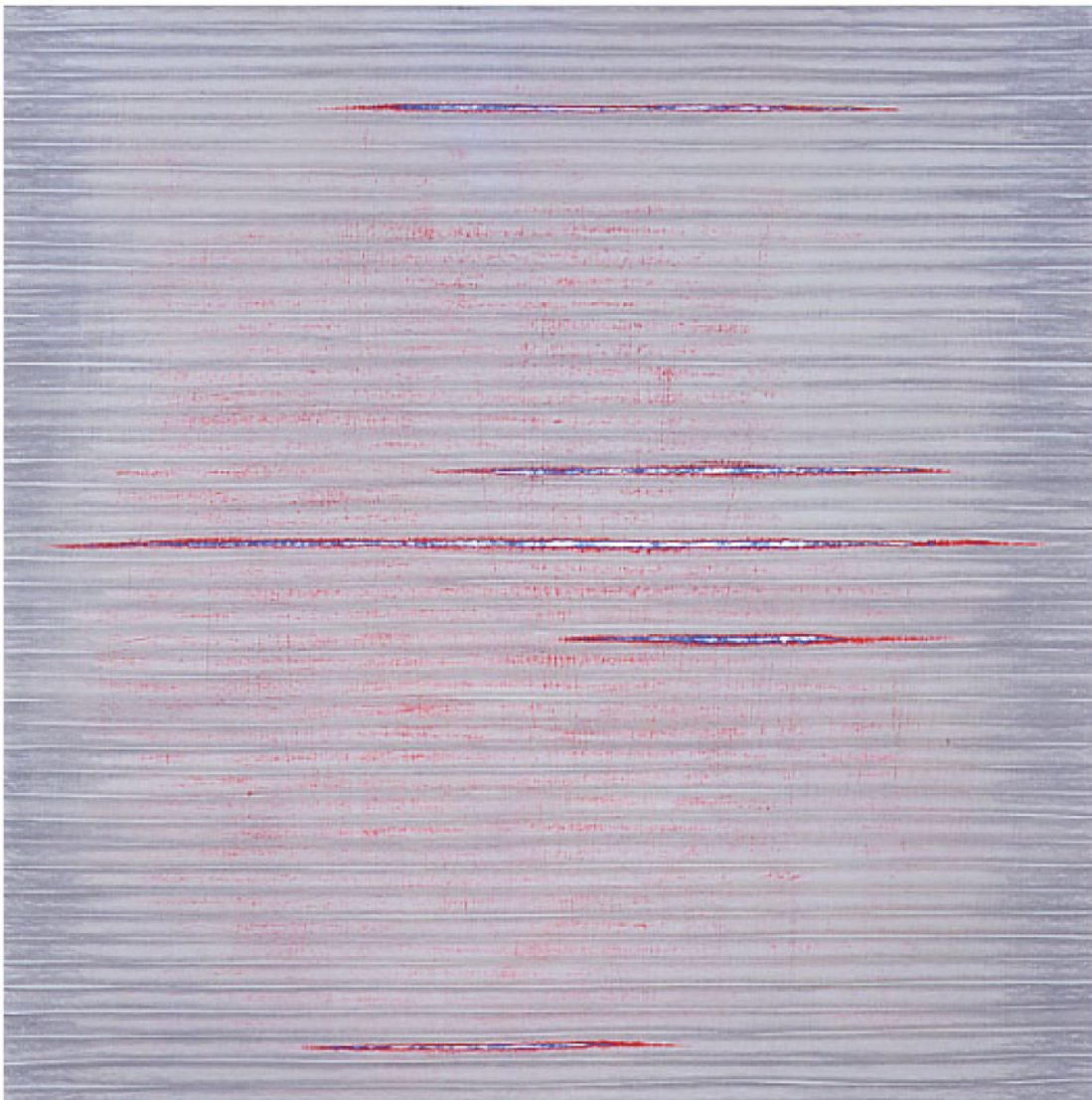
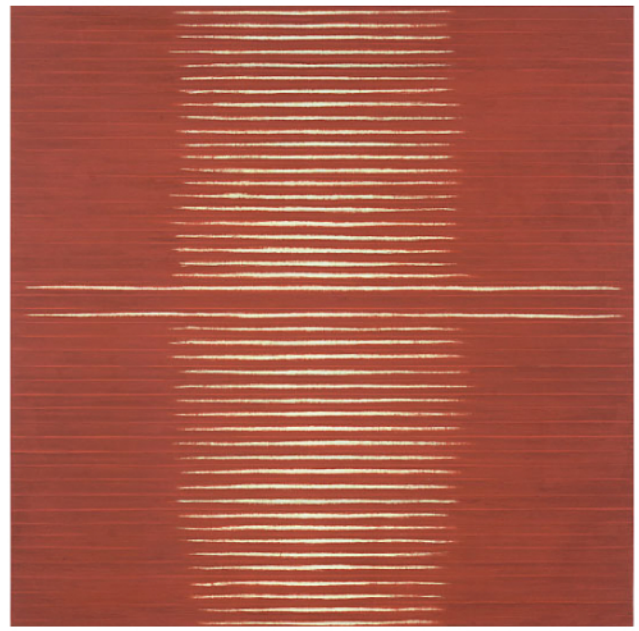
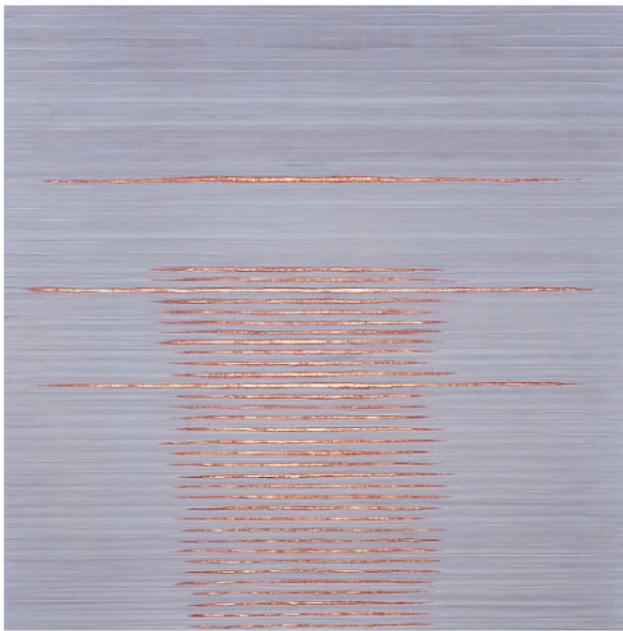
## Public Collections (selected)

- Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, Fine Arts Museums  
of San Francisco, CA
- Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, AR
- The British Museum, London, England
- The Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY
- Boston Public Library, Boston, MA
- 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
- The Library of Congress, Washington, DC
- 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 National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
- The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC
- The Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL
- The Old Jail Art Center, Albany, TX
- The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
- Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of NC at Greensboro
- Wesleyan University, Davidson Art Center, Middletown, CT
- Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT
- Yeshiva University Museum, New York, NY

## Corporate Collections (selected)

- The Art Hotel, New York, NY
- Beth Israel Hospital, Boston, MA
- Bromberg & Sunstein, Boston, MA
- Chase Manhattan Bank, New York, NY
- C.S.C. Index, Chicago, IL
- Crown Plaza Ravinia Hotel, Atlanta, GA
- Fidelity Investments, Boston, MA
- Independence Investments Associates, Inc., Boston, MA
- Mount Auburn Hospital, Cambridge, MA
- Office Environments of New England, Boston, MA
- Pfizer Inc., New York, NY
- The Ritz-Carlton, Boston Common, Boston, MA
- Sonesta International Hotels Corporation, Boston, MA
- West Bay Lagoon Hotel, Doha, Qatar

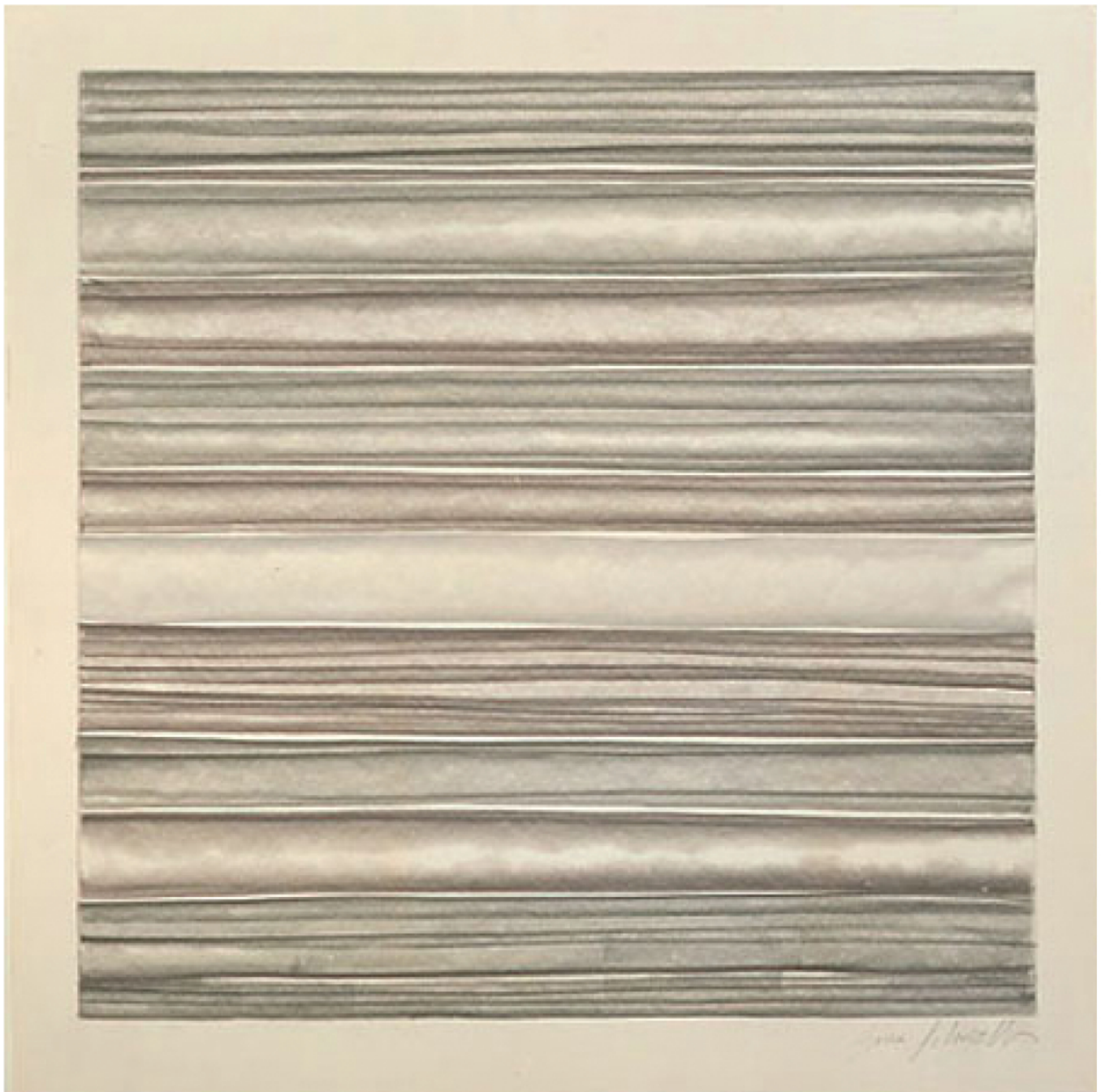
(Full biography on request.)



TOP LEFT:  
*Mesa I*, 2002,  
24" x 24" x 2",  
silverpoint, acrylic  
on paper on wood

TOP RIGHT:  
*Mesa III*, 2002,  
24" x 24" x 2",  
silverpoint, acrylic  
on paper on wood

LEFT:  
*red/white/blue IV*,  
2002, 24" x 24" x 2",  
silverpoint, acrylic  
on paper on wood



**ROBERT STEELE GALLERY**

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Gallery hours: Tues–Fri 10–6, Sat 11–6

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PHOTOGRAPHY: SUSAN BYRNE  
DESIGN: BIG PICTURE COMMUNICATIONS

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FROM THE FIFTH FLOOR FOUNDATION, NYC.

## Susan Schwalb

### AFTERIMAGE:

Recent Metalpoint Paintings and Drawings

October 16 – November 15, 2003

Opening: Thursday, October 16, 6–8 p.m.

ABOVE: *Strata #318*, 2001, 12" x 12", copper/brass/steelpoint on paper

COVER: *Mesa IV*, 2003, 24" x 24" x 2", silverpoint, acrylic on paper  
on wood