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ART REVIEW: "ALB to NRT"

Specs in the city

By Luke Strosnider on June 3, 2009



Dense with humanity and concrete, cities are the amalgam of three periods of time: past, present, and future. Plans made long ago create successes, as well as nagging, current needs, while residents (and their elected officials) hammer out hopeful visions of the future. Thus, slow but wrenching change is the only urban constant. Once-vital aspects of a city are demolished, new structures rise in their place, identities are attempted and abandoned, and the city consistently recalibrates how it looks and how it feels.

This tension of times gives urban areas an energy that has long attracted visual artists. Nowhere is the record of civilization more visually present than in a city, where clashing eras of architecture and the human-formed lay of the land whisper the careful design (or complete lack thereof) that shaped the urban landscape. Artworks about cities often seek to commemorate only what the city is now, but my favorite city-themed pieces also offer a nod to yesterday and cast an eye toward tomorrow.

Ben Schwab senses the simultaneous presence of many eras when visually contemplating cities across the globe. "ALB to NRT," his current exhibition at the University of Rochester's Art and Music Library gallery, takes its name from the airport codes of Albany and Tokyo (views of both are featured), and offers us a look at several densely populated metropolises through Schwab's eyes. With his brush, he reduces streets,

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Part of the "ALB to NRT" exhibit by Ben Schwab, currently showing at UR's Art and Music Library.

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buildings, and bridges to shapes of nearly pure color; with his pencil, his talents as a precise draughtsman recreate supple architectural textures and details.

Considered individually, Schwab's work in these two different media might read as bland art school assignments, rudimentary exercises in perspective, geometry, color, and line. But his works reach beyond skill-driven retellings. As he looks out over a municipality, Schwab sees a swirl of past, present, and future, expressed in the human-made peaks and canyons of the urban landscape.



Part of the "ALB to NRT" exhibit by Ben Schwab, currently showing at UR's Art and Music Library.

Old cities fuel Schwab's visual exploration. Currently hailing from Albany (founded 1614), Schwab spent three years prior living in Philadelphia (founded 1682), and glimpses of that venerable town make up the majority of the show. Schwab acknowledges the city's aesthetic splendor: "Philadelphia was a great city to live in and work as a cityscape painter," he told me via email. "It has a lot of great architecture dating from 1800's to present, [and] these two eras of time contrast with one another, yet fit together so well. Philadelphia can be very visually compelling, when seeing old and new coexist."

All of Schwab's views of Philadelphia are from the perspective of someone gazing out from a lofty vantage; we are above the city, but not looking down. Most show a respect for the role of the sky in defining a skyline; in "Cloudy Day" puffs of white float through the blue, beautifully indifferent to the hulking, boxy warehouses below. His painting "Light Over Dark Over Light" straightforwardly depicts the mix of old and new construction common to aged municipalities. Glimmering, modern towers of glass and steel scrape the sky, while closer to our vantage a staid brick building dominates the canvas. His painting "Brandywine" is a jumble of squat row homes, church towers, and modern buildings. Color and illumination are the focus: sunlit bricks glow burnt orange, while in shade the same material reads as dark maroon.

As a former denizen of Philadelphia, I find Schwab's delicate, impressionistic paintings swell with my own personal nostalgia, an effect lost on most viewers. But his drawings invite a broader audience to see his conceptual aim. The vagueness of his paintings gives way to meticulous detail in his pencil work. "Ben Franklin Bridge" is a nearly identical view as the aforementioned "Cloudy Day," but is rendered in crisp, grey lines on a stark white background. Schwab's thoughts on urban evolution become visible on the gesso panel; his lines define building and bridge, but they also continue off the vertical edges of the structures. Reaching into the sky, the lines mistily fade from black, to grey, to nothing. A ghostly, three-dimensional grid is implied, inspiring thoughts of city elements that once were or may someday be.

Schwab's most recent works combine the terse lines of his graphite drawings with the emotive colors of his paintings. "Troy" and "Nihonbashi, Tokyo" are intricate, color-saturated cityscapes that exist among a three-dimensional grid seen in his earlier drawings. The grid offers a reminder that cities are an accumulation of blocks (both their streets and structures), and the vibrant hues and soft edges of the shapes maintain the feeling that these are breathing, expanding places. It's a fresh approach, and Schwab sees it as a reaction to his prior explorations.

"Much of the older work was too atmospheric for me and not specific enough," he writes. "I wanted the work to be more specific to what is there, while still having the feeling of being in flux." Schwab's new direction signals his commitment to gradual change, a suitable temperament for an artist tracking the slow but significant shifts of urban landscapes.

ALB to NRT

By Ben Schwab

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