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Artist Ben Schwab finds inspiration in architecture

By Tim Kane Special To The Times Union
 Published: 01:00 a.m., Sunday, July 18, 2010

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Artist Ben Schwab works on a small oil on canvas Tokyo scene at his studio in Troy Tuesday morning July 6, 2010. (John Carl D'Annibale / Times Union)



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In his 32 years, artist [Ben Schwab](#) has lived in and traveled to at least a half-dozen cities, including his most recent stop in Albany after taking a faculty position at The [College of Saint Rose](#) in 2006. Along his journey, he's gravitated toward exclusively doing taut and intricate cityscapes that explore the built and human environment in a surprisingly expressive way.

His skills as a draftsman, through his shimmering black-and-white renderings, are most evident these days, although he still paints regularly. Back when he was a graduate student, Schwab was a figurative artist who never examined his architectural surroundings as source.

Then came Italy. In cramped quarters and no studio space, Schwab participated in a six-month fellowship and was forced to look out his window to draw what he saw without models or

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anything else. The result of that work five years ago is a growing body of urbanscapes he's been exhibiting in the past year locally.

After showing work at [Albany Center Gallery](#) and Lake George Arts Project, he's now paired with [Marjorie Derrick](#), a painter who turns popcorn into wonderfully fluid forms. "The Space Within" at the [Saratoga Arts](#) in Saratoga Springs displays Schwab's most current frames, including his compact graphite drawings that steal the show. A monthlong visit to Tokyo in 2008 turned his focus to pencil and paper, adding a new dimension to his repertoire.

Q: What do you think of the Capital Region?

A: I'm pleasantly surprised. I had no idea what to think. I applied for the Saint Rose position without having the vaguest idea of what it was like. I didn't think there was even a city. When I arrived, I remember going over the bridge from the train station and seeing it. I'm really intrigued by the old and new. But I was really surprised by how strong the arts community is. I had moved from Philadelphia, so this area has a friendly, small-town feel, with lots of artists and good opportunities. It didn't take as long to meet people here as Philadelphia.

Q: So your focus on architectural paintings and drawings came by accident?

A: Yeah, basically. I took a fellowship towards the end of my MFA in Florence that didn't allow me to do any work that was taxable, so the city became my subject matter, and it went from there. I found I really liked the examination of space through buildings and streets. But I really didn't take it seriously until Philadelphia.

Q: What happened there?

A: I found a place with this great view of the city and couldn't resist doing them. They became more visceral, with subtle hints of abstraction like a having small spaces without paint.

Q: Your studio is in Troy and it's making more regular appearances in your work. What stands out about Troy?

A: There's something about the light.

Q: What impact did Tokyo have on your work?

A: It has had the most influence. Its density is amazing, yet very old, with smaller buildings

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mixed in with the modern. There are huge sections that were rebuilt after the bombings (in World War II). The two coexist as you walk down the street. That duality pushed me to small drawings, packing more visual information inside. I've started incorporating them in my paintings.

[little life saved](#)

Tim Kane is a freelance writer from Albany and a frequent contributor to the [Times Union](#).

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