

# Two painters in Troy exhibit offer study in visual contrast

Two painters featured in "Vantage Point" exhibit offer study in visual contrast

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## IMAGE 1 OF 10

Ben Schwab, Points of Interest (oil on canvas) credit William Jaeger

It's difficult at first to see the reason for the pairing of two painters in "Vantage Point," though the title is surely a clue. We are made to think about seeing, and how our point of view affects the result. Both artists are methodical and consistent in their approaches, but couldn't be more different in result.

Ben Schwab's impressive and complex views of buildings and cities begin by simplifying the appearances of things into flattened parts, then assembling these parts back into a dazzling, colorful and confounding paintings. In opposition, James Thatcher's carefully modulated and simplified geometric shapes are about how things look if seen in a particular way, which he approaches with decreasing complexity and subdued color.

It is Schwab who should sweep you away first, especially in his larger works that teeter perfectly between something we can recognize and something that is too confusing to fully figure out. They might be seen as jigsaw puzzles with the pieces not quite fitting together (and sometimes lots of empty space between). Or as urban abstractions broken into little shards, visual deconstructions that are reassembled into demanding and unfinished expanses.

All of them are cityscapes, overall, at least in their origins. The flatness of the many small irregular parts that layer and suggest these actual urban spaces make an immediate formal play of two against three dimensions, with a sensibility something like a giant (and complicated) silk screen print. Irregularities keep these from becoming mechanical, surprising you the further you look.

### More Information

**If you go**

**"Vantage Point: Ben Schwab + James Thatcher"**

"What You Thought Were Concerns of Yours Do Not Exist" is as massive as its title. The thousands of fragments that float in an almost impossible chaos gradually order themselves enough to convince us it is a crowded city view, or

**Where:** Arts Center of the Capital Region, 265 River St., Troy

**When:** Through March 18

**Hours:** Monday-Thursday 9 a.m.-7:30 p.m., Friday 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Saturday 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Sunday noon-4 p.m.

**Admission:** free

**Info:** 273-0552;

<https://www.artscenteronline.org>

maybe several views compacted together. The effect of a dense urban neighborhood pulses forward. But you can also see the parts themselves, most of them fairly small and irregular in shape, though each without painterly brush marks or chromatic variation. In fact, the use of flat, unmodulated color is a kind of organizing key, because other oddly shaped pieces nearby share the same color, or related color, and your eye grasps spatial relationships.

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There are so many of these different hues and saturations in related groups, some of them scattered wide of the canvas, it takes time to gradually assess and organize them, vaguely, so that the painting can vibrate as these layers co-exist and yet wrestle for pertinence. It's a strange feeling, especially when all the parts are so methodically made, as if analyzed by computer and projected for the artist to then paint.

The source materials of some remain a mystery, though the largest states, in parentheses, where Schwab gathered his photographic starting points – Homs, Syria – which adds a political, human edge to the otherwise visual rush.

Which brings us to paintings of James Thatcher, which are spare and restrained even without the comparison to Schwab's colorful exuberance. Thatcher's novelty of painting on roofing felt – an asphalt-impregnated paper we might loosely call tar paper – is not just a gimmick. The ambiguous surface, dark and without surface shine, makes the white, gray and brown hexagonal shapes hover and hesitate. The basic form Thatcher repeats is a boxy species of gem shape, a square with a triangular top and bottom. Looking at some of his drawings, it's clear there is a rigid, and unwavering, basis rooted in this simple geometry. What the artist proposes is that the nuances from

one piece to another will keep us going.

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This wasn't always the case for me, as I didn't find enough to rekindle an interest with each repetition. What worked best was simply finding the delicate, odd surface effects of paint on dark, dense felt. Physical presence is crucial, as many feature dripping lines of wet paint, and others have areas where the pigmented surface breaks apart.

The more ongoing generation of ideas and visual invention found in Schwab's work repeatedly pulled me back to his paintings, large and small, for their demanding and rewarding abundance.

*William Jaeger is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.*

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