William Schwedler's tragic death at the age of 40 (that's right, 40) has robbed the world of one of the more engaging and complex painters to emerge from that sometimes murky, pluralistic, "me" decade of the Seventies. A tragic and complex figure, Schwedler used the title of "me" for his work and the essays included in the catalogues did. A sample: Time Flies, In The Long Run, Time Is Money, A Blessing In Disguise, Turn For The Worse, Going Over The Edge, All Show—No Go, Ups and Downs, All That Glitters Is Gold, Individual Needs, Misery Loves Company, Failing For Flattery, A Perfect Stranger, Thank You, Come Again, An Easy Out, and Against The Grain. One would be hard put to find more accurate and pungent titles to describe an artist's sensibility and style of life better than these autobiographical titles assigned to Schwedler's work by himself and his friends.

The early work, which I first saw in 1970 (and there were a few fine examples of this period in the de Nagy exhibition), consisted of strange and marvelous architectural elements resting in serene, soft color-field landscapes. Contradictions in both scale and imagery abound in these works. Wooden phallic-like shapes nestle cozily next to chain-link fences. Girders and beams bend around each other in friendship; chunks of wood and brick spheres and other geometrical shapes (all wonderfully rendered) float in and around knotted ropes and limp trestles. Landscapes of the weird. The stuff that nightmares are made of.

In 1974 a dramatic change came about in Schwedler's paintings. Gone were the architectural references, to be replaced by a more abstract view of the world. These large canvases, shown at the Andrew Crispo Gallery in 1975, were the final works, irregularly drawn charcoal lines, crisscrossed and meandered across the canvases, like restless rivers and lakes. These works also contained a fine dose of his now familiar amorphic, microcosmic, and phallic imagery. This can be most readily seen in the work on paper of 1975-76 titled Itala, which can be read either as a pun on the map of Italy or as a homage to his close friend, Italo Scanga.

The most recent works shown in the de Nagy exhibition were the painful (painful only in the sense that these were the final works), irregularly packed shaped-paintings on plywood of 1980-82. Relatively small and of various eccentric sizes, they were arranged on one large wall, jutting out into real space to confront the viewer with a joyous sadness. These bending, curving, sculptural paintings made extensive use of the rich vocabulary that Schwedler developed over his much too brief career of barely twenty years.

Brightly painted wooden dowels covered in texture and design, patterns of charcoal lines careening next to small, obsessively built-up areas of color, and relaxed patches of loose washes that sit comfortably next to shapes of acidy purples and oranges make up these final paintings. There are even collage elements: wallpaper borders, pictures of slain President Kennedy's face cut from matchbook covers, and membership cards and vouchers from that notorious gay watering hole and hangout, The Anvil. Exploding areas of everything. In fact, these last works seem like so many explosions in a gay disco on a hot summer night. In his short, important, highly personal career as an artist, William Schwedler has left us with a rich body of work. Taking the title of his painting from 1978-79, he will be Sorely Missed. (Tibor de Nagy, February 5-March 9)