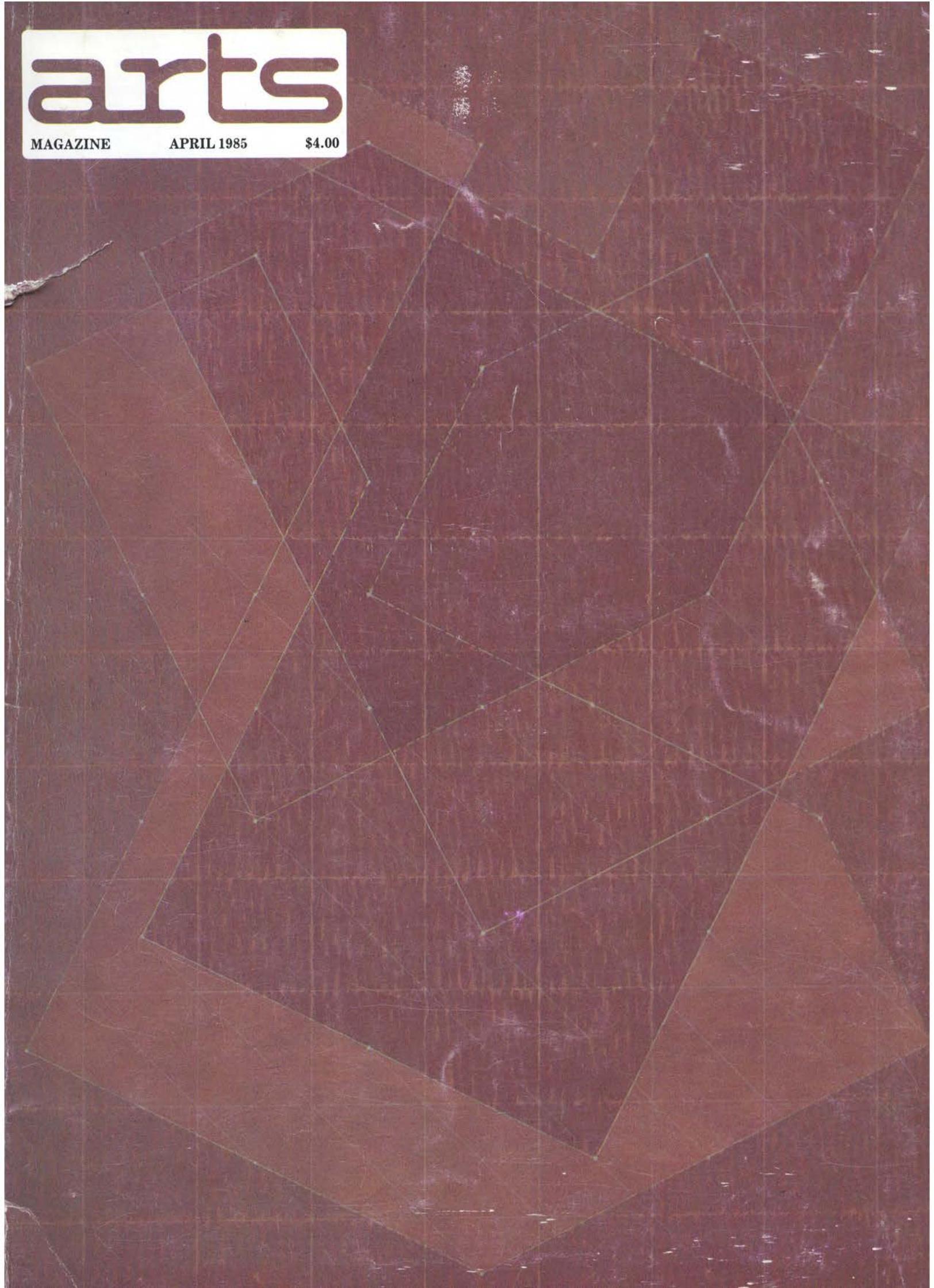


arts

MAGAZINE

APRIL 1985

\$4.00



THE LATE PAINTINGS OF JACK TWORKOV

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The constant problem underlying Jack Tworok's mature work is how to sustain painting so it will continue to sustain him.



Jack Tworok, *Bin* (NY-Q1-72-#3), 1972. Oil on canvas, 80 x 80". Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery.

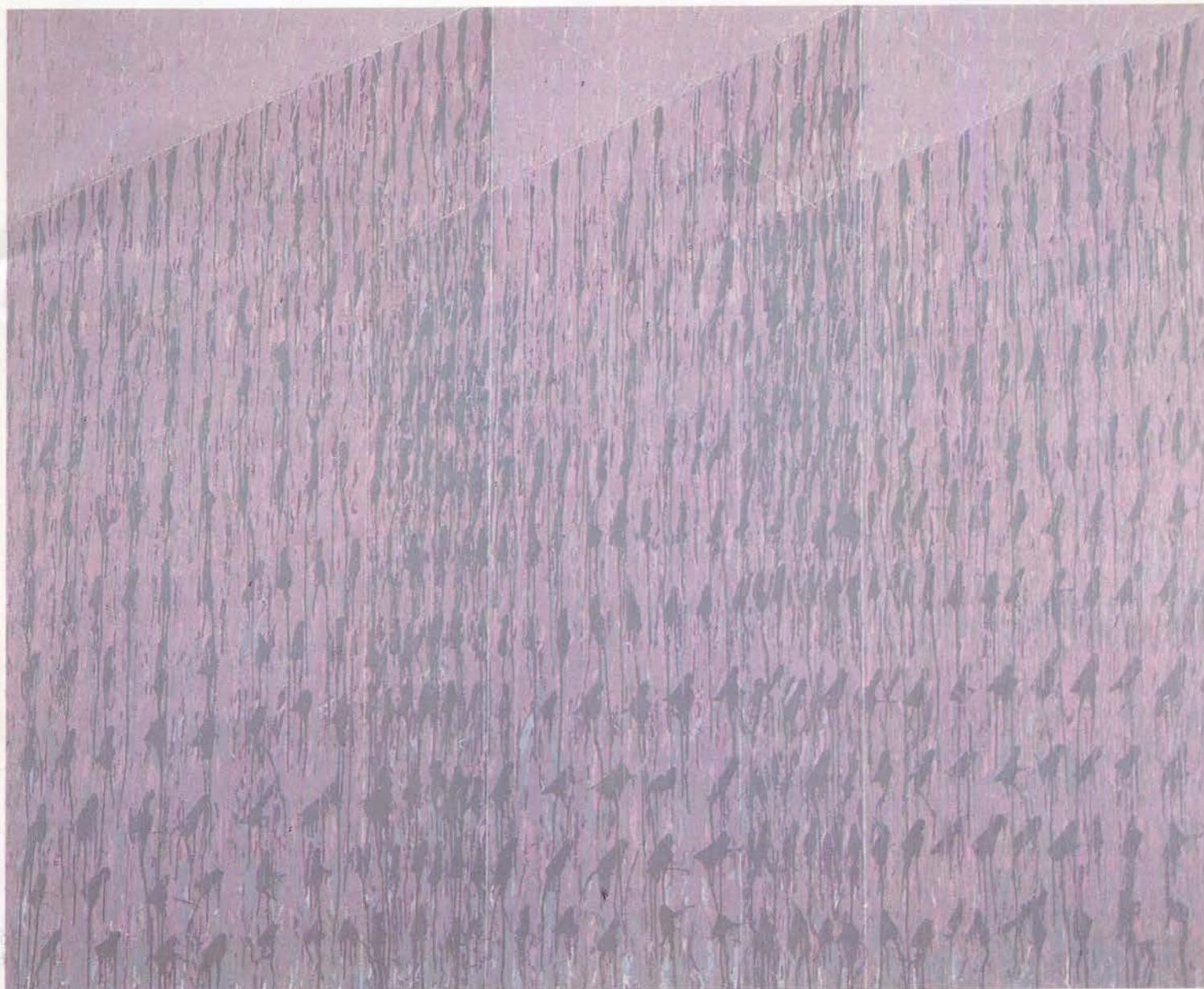
The paintings of Jack Tworok's prolific last decade are as abstract as you please, but they are also emblematic of problems and tensions that cut across all pictorial styles and touch the life of every serious painter. The constant problem underlying Tworok's mature work is how to sustain painting so it will continue to sustain him. He acknowledged the problem in these words in a 1979 interview: "Beyond an actual description of what I do, I really have no theories about my work, except, as I say, it's a constant search for me to find something in my own work. Every so often I get some sort of satisfaction from it. Very often I can be disappointed. I find it very difficult now to formulate general ideas about art and its rationale, except that I feel there's a kind of self-completion, a kind of process of self-formation in it. Now it seems strange that at my age I'm still involved in self-formation, but it's true. I'm still in that position, where I look for self-completion in the work I'm trying to do."¹

By 1979, Tworok had left the febrile gestures of his Abstract-Expressionist manner far behind. Yet it is hard not to hear in his statement an echo of the Existentialist ethos so often associated with the New York School. In the yearning for an act of self-completion I find a reminiscence of Sartre's notion that "consciousness is . . . a project of founding itself; that is, of attaining to the dignity of the in-itself-for-itself."² For Sartre, the desire to combine the indeterminacy of consciousness with the fully externalized being of material objects was the fundamental restlessness of humanity, the secret impulse driving us all to originate our own actions, whatever they may be. Tworok's late painting appears to be very remote from such highly charged images of what it is to live and work. But restlessness, struggle, and doubt pervade his pictures. This is more easily seen in an overview of the work, such as the current exhibition at the Nancy Hofmann Gallery offers, than in any single work. The geometric structures that govern so many of the late paintings appear at first to remove uncertainty by dictating how large areas of each picture's surface might be handled. Yet even in paintings where design decisions appear dominant, such as the "Knight Series" pic-

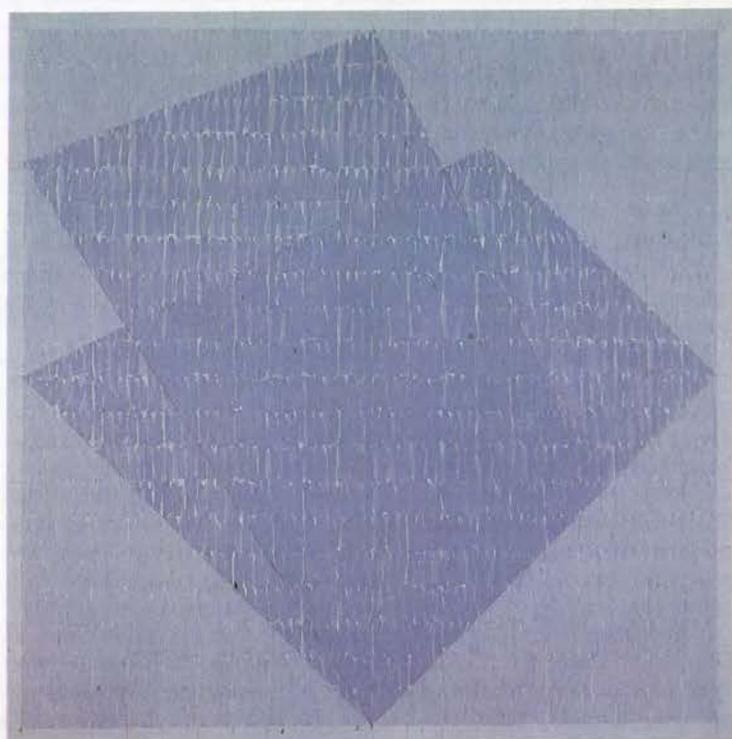
tures, the flickering touch with which the paint is applied attests to the difficulty and need of continually renewing the impulse to act and the justifications for having made a specific choice. And although the "Knight Series" paintings are quite rigidly structured, their figural derivation from the moves available to the knight in chess redoubles metaphorically the emotional and intellectual weight of every decision taken on the canvas. Chess is after all a game in which the restrictions on movement and the values assigned to different pieces stand for the constraints and opportunities for action in life. But, like painting, it is meaningless to those who are not playing the game, or are not willing to play.

In interviews, Tworok spoke somewhat pessimistically of painting's incapacity to signify the individual's experience of contemporary life. Representation is clearly doomed to nostalgia, or is the province of automatic media like film and video that can convey the sensations of flux we now see as central to our awareness of life. Abstraction collapses almost inevitably into a kind of admission of defeat in the struggle to take control of the indeterminate relations between painting and reality. In Tworok's abstractions we can sense his effort to shift imaginative emphasis away from what is missing, from what abstraction eliminates, to what it provides. His paintings show, among other things, that abstraction provides a means of isolating aspects of life or experience, without illustrating them, so they can be thought about. What his abstractions bring into focus is the problem of time: its givenness, its unspecifiable finiteness, its relentlessness and irreversibility, and the fact that, in the world of work, it always has a price.

Every painter's output attests to his use of time, but this is not something we think about when we look at most contemporary painting. In looking at Tworok's late work, however, the thought of time is inescapable. Scores of late pictures are divided into grids or



Jack Tworok, Partitions
(Q3-#2-71), 1971. Oil on
canvas, 72 x 90". Courtesy
Nancy Hoffman Gallery.



Jack Tworok,
Q2-76-#1, 1976. Oil on canvas, 80 x 80". Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery.

tiers filled with what seem like metronomic strokes of paint. One tier of colored strokes overlaying another sometimes suggests the work of different days or weeks. And the march of the brushstrokes themselves can look like a means of marking time for someone who, like a prisoner, has no calendar. In this sense, the rhythmic brushstrokes of gray paintings such as *Q2-76-#1* become an almost symbolic index of the artist's absorption in painting to the point of forgetting the world's enslavement to the calendar. But the pessimistic note sounds in this reading as well, for the implication that he condemned himself to a sort of solitary confinement by his absorption in painting is hard to overlook.

There is ambivalence in almost every aspect of Tworkov's late paintings except their sheer abundance. In their ambivalence is their depth, for at a glance they seem so serene, if occasionally somber, so neatly governed by internal geometry. Only slowly do they reveal airs of anxiety, conflict, defiance, and intellectual sophistication. Presented with a fair number of the late pictures, you cannot help wondering how Tworkov felt about devoting so much of his own time on earth to filling empty canvas with colors and marks. Even if you know nothing of his attitudes and remarks on art, simply looking at the work will convince you that he was too intelligent an artist not to have sensed the absurdity that haunted his productive activity. Yet he seems to have counted on the absurdity of abstract painting—its incomprehensibility in the flatfootedly pragmatic view of life—to give meaning to what he was doing. And I believe he was right to do so. Not only did his rhythmically executed, non-signifying abstraction enable him to isolate human time as a subject for the static art of painting. It also gave his work a political meaning more profound and immediate than what can be seen in most of today's more deliberately political art.

Tworkov had the courage to let painting look like the waste of time people too busy for art take it to be. That is, he let it look like a waste of labor, and in this way confronted everyone with their own repressed consciousness that clock time is an abstraction, and that the time we live by is labor time, the time we can sell. The fact that Tworkov was able to live decently by his work takes nothing away from the meaning the display of labor in his art takes on in the context of the capitalist world of work. To cover thousands of yards of canvas with paint, no matter how intelligently, meant withholding his energy from every form of productive activity conventional society might have deemed useful. There is an element of pure contrariness in this effort that makes the work seem "upright" and "true" as he admired Cézanne's work for being in somewhat different terms. But whatever Tworkov's own feelings about withholding his energy from the construction of the going social reality of his time, he turned his paintings into tokens of the meaning of human choice that take on a heroic stature in the context of contemporary art, where so many decisions reflected in art boil down to career choices, mere palpitations of ambition. The physical character of Tworkov's late pictures causes us to see and think about painting as an activity that gets its meaning not so much from the look of an object as from the relationship of this course of action to the context of other possibilities for action that the world and the times offer. In this way, he succeeded in giving an extra-pictorial meaning to abstraction, making of it a kind of code for the determination not to do countless things deemed important or worthy by the various authorities that form popular thought in America.

Formally, there is tremendous variety in Tworkov's late work, even though virtually every picture is governed by a fairly strict set of decisions about how to divide the surface and form shapes or color areas. The artist said he came to feel in the early 1960s that the swashbuckling gestural attack of Abstract-Expressionist painting had lost most of its credibility by being replayed too many times and attenuated through imitation. He began then to seek more systematic means of determining how to fill a canvas. He soon found that even limiting himself to a flat grid and a few diagonals left him with a large number of decisions about where paint and color should go, which shapes should be brought forward as figures and which left implicit, the kind of emphasis that should be given to line in relation to brushstroke, and so forth. Again, he often lamented that these decisions apparently had so little to do with the need to connect painting to other regions of reality. But as you can tell by looking at the

paintings, what ultimately mattered was sustaining the activity of producing pictures. The emphasis in his more expressionistic paintings of the 1950s might have been on the sources of human spontaneity, but after the mid-1960s it shifted to the problem of renewing the impetus to act, for in the long view of life the problem is not how to begin, but how to continue on a chosen course of action for as long as the commitment to that action demands.

Only a close look at Tworkov's paintings reveals the secret of his indefatigable capacity to renew his productive impulses, for only up close is his love of painting manifest in his touch and in the details of color. From a distance, you can understand a lot of the play with pictorial space that goes on in a complex canvas such as *Partitions (Q3-#2-71)* in which three planes defined by blotches of moss green appear to recede against a ground of pink like the angled facades of tall buildings. Every stroke of green has been allowed to drip, putting the illusion of recession in constant tension with the material's own adherence to the surface. But the illusionistic depth of the picture matters less than the density of color that reveals itself at close range. The apparently pink ground is only the topmost layer of a very thickly painted surface. Several shades of pink, yellow, blue, and green flicker across the canvas giving the painting a shimmer of internal light that justifies the picture to the eye with an immediacy that shortcuts language.

Tworkov was capable of lavish painterly effects like those in *Partitions*, but he clearly believed they were not always appropriate. The paintings of his last years display an extraordinary range of moods, despite their affinities of geometry. *Bin (NY-Q1-72-#3)*, for example, seems a world away from the near giddiness of *Partitions* done the previous year. Here somber greens and browns set the tone of the painting, almost extinguishing the flickers of blue, yellow, and pink beneath. The pleasant surprise is that the moods of the paintings do not seem to be the artist's moods: they are like the emotional colorations of weather which Tworkov simply revealed by deploying paint and color in the ways he did. It is also good to be able to see the effort in Tworkov's art. Though his touch is everywhere assured, the larger structures that dictate the formats of his paintings often vibrate with uncertainty or an ambivalence about arbitrariness. Clearly Tworkov wanted his decisions about how to set a painting going to make sense, but not too much or too discursive a sense. Though his seriousness about painting never flagged, he did allow himself humor when it cropped up, as in the "Roman numeral" paintings (of which there are none in the present show), so named because the color areas generated by systematic divisions of the pictorial rectangle happened to take the form of "I's" and "X's."

To my eye, Tworkov's pictorial judgment was not unerring, though his touch may have been. I find some of the large canvases in which he dispensed with rhythmic marking, such as *Airgame (Q2-3-76)* and *Q3-78-#2*, flaccid and incoherent, despite occasional passages of sumptuous color in each. But it is a relief to see an artist of Tworkov's assurance falter once in a while. It is proof of the struggle one senses in his many paintings that come off so elegantly.

This is an excellent moment to study Tworkov's work, a moment when there seems to be a decided shortage of credible abstract painting. People who look hard at his late paintings will have to wonder how many of today's prodigies of expressionism are really expressing only the desire to flee from the problems Tworkov was trying to face squarely in every picture. Though their manifest visual content is refined, even severe at times, Tworkov's paintings lodge a powerful protest against the historical circumstances that have put art and humanity itself on the defensive. The maturity of Tworkov's art shows in his refusal to pretend that he can determine the relations of painting to the larger realms of historical reality. Those relations have to be discovered, and no pretense to being a painter of the *Zeitgeist* is going to accomplish that discovery. It comes only by way of sustaining painting as a form of almost votive practice that dissolves ego and ambition rather than fueling them. In the way that it is out of step with art fashion, Tworkov's late painting could hardly be more timely.

1. Interview with Marcia Tucker in "Jack Tworkov: Paintings 1950-1978" (Glasgow: Third Eye Centre, 1979), p. 13.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press), p. 789.