

JACK TWORIKOV

MITCHELL-INNES &
NASH, NEW YORK

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Of all the American artists who caught the mid-century disease known as Willem de Kooning, none had it earlier, longer, or less profoundly than Jack Tworikov. At least that is one way to diagnose the recent exhibition of Tworikov's drawings and a few paintings.

The show amounted to a grab bag of works mostly from the artist's estate and made no claim to be more than that. Despite the fact that 2000 marks the hundredth anniversary of Tworikov's birth, this was no retrospective. Yet it had the virtue of focusing on the most interesting part of his career, from roughly 1953 to 1965, after he renounced de Kooning and before he found himself.

In the '50s nearly everyone seemed to be singing, "I'm just wild about Bill," even painters who would later prove as distinct from one another as Al Held, Grace Hartigan, Lester Johnson, and Tworikov himself. What made de Kooning such an attractive model while Jackson Pollock proved so hard to follow? Was it that de Kooning remained an encouraging presence in downtown Manhattan while Pollock nursed his paranoia on Long

Island? Or was it that de Kooning offered something broad enough to be called a manner while Pollock seemed to offer only his signature, over and over again? Whatever the case, for many of his acolytes de Kooning was an affliction.

Tworikov met de Kooning around 1935 when both were working on the WPA's Federal Art Project. Tworikov's 1934-36 painting *Seated Woman (Wally)* suggests that he may have influenced de Kooning's turn toward the solitary, alienated figure. But that was the last time Tworikov, who was four years older than de Kooning, had the lead. In the mid-'30s and early '40s de Kooning made the figure his own, first fusing Depression-era affect with Roman mural style, then making a Picasso attack on human anatomy, while Tworikov clung to the tamer School of Paris stuff he had learned from his previous mentor, the elegant colorist and neocubist Karl Knaths.

By the time Tworikov caught up several years later, de Kooning had already moved on to the tough, masterful abstractions of 1948-50. Tworikov tried at once to come to grips with those works, and that's where this exhibition really begins, with the 1949 painting *Ballston Spa* and several related drawings. With their scraped and spattered ink, the drawings look at first like pure homage. But while de Kooning's line carves up the surface like a high-powered jigsaw, Tworikov's strokes are something more, well, French. They skip along and lift off the surface gently, and the shapes keep a respectful distance from the edge, weakening the abstraction by suggesting a figure floating on a ground. These are significant differences, and they indicate that Tworikov's case of de Kooning, while protracted, was not that serious.

At this point the two artists had adjoining studios on Fourth Avenue and were key players in The Club, the social and intellectual hub of the New York School. But around 1954 Tworikov began to cut his ties with de Kooning and company.

This process is



Above: Jack Tworikov, *Barrier Series #5*, 1963, oil on canvas, 64 1/2 x 80".

Below: Jack Tworikov, *Untitled*, ca. 1950, oil, ink, and collage on paper, 20 1/2 x 19 1/2".

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clearly visible in the 1957 painting *Duo III* (which was not shown, presumably to allow more space for the drawings; it is illustrated in the catalogue, however, and was available for viewing). The imposing door-shaped canvas still betrays a lot of de Kooning, in both the theme of two "figures" (note the upraised arms) and the vigorous handling of paint. But Tworikov imposes geometrical structure on de Kooning's lustiness, forcing the figures into rectangular confines and using slanted brushwork that recalls the "constructive stroke" of his longtime hero, Cézanne. Only the high-octane red and some penciled scribbles across the middle and bottom of the columns make a protest against order.

From here on it is a gradual triumph of structure over impulse. Tworikov found another Post-Impressionist ally in Seurat, whose dense charcoal drawings must have inspired the 1966 painting *Trace*, which pulls light and form from darkness.

By this time Tworikov had sublimated de Kooning's slash and splash into what he called a "brushing . . . analogous to the beat in music." He was also learning from his students at Yale, where he taught from 1963 to 1969: He credited Jennifer Bartlett with introducing him to the Fibonacci series, which inspired his '70s geometrical explorations (not on view).

The high point of the show was a large painting and several drawings from the early-'60s "Barrier" series, when Tworikov's stroke was still poised between gestural slash and musical beat. In the drawings, different weights of graphite and directions of line set up a close dissonance. A cynic might see Tworikov grasping at the shapes of Kline or the textures of Johns. But there is something entirely personal in *Untitled (Study for East Barrier)*, 1959, something uniquely disturbing in the way its thicket of strokes reaches across the field to menace the whiteness of the page. The drama is Ahabesque.

Tworikov wrote (probably in the early '70s) that he turned to geometry "to impose calm on myself." No doubt the move was a psychic necessity. But, as this exhibition suggested, he was at his best in the storm before the calm. □

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