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Art

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Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

On "Jack Tworikov: Against Extremes, Five Decades of Paintings" at the UBS Art Gallery.



Jack Tworikov, *Thursday* (1960), courtesy Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC / Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase Fund

We think of painting as a window, but for Jack Tworkov painting was a home. “My striving is not for the far-off or far-out landscape,” he once wrote, “but for the identification and naturalization of a home ground.” So he became the master contractor of Abstract Expressionism. In color and gesture he rarely dazzled. In the construction of work, however, he could be flawless. Rather than seek affection, he commanded admiration. His paintings do not seduce, they secure. They dig a foundation, erect four square walls, and put a roof over your head that is built to last.

In 1960 Tworkov complained that “I’ve been second-rated by every critic, large or small.” Two first-rate productions now allow us to reconsider this estimation. At no other moment, including 1964’s Whitney survey and 1987’s Pennsylvania retrospective, could this artist be so fully examined. At the UBS Art Gallery in midtown Manhattan, the curator Jason Andrew has assembled a must-see show called “Jack Tworkov: Against Extremes, Five Decades of Paintings.”^[1] The exhibition presents numerous Tworkov drawings and twenty-nine major paintings, from *Untitled (Still Life with Peaches and Magazine)* (1929) to the large *Compression and Expansion of the Square*, completed just before the artist’s death in 1982. At the same time, Yale University Press has published the definitive collection of Tworkov’s writing in a book called *The Extreme of the Middle*, edited by Mira Schor.^[2] This 480-page volume brings together Tworkov’s artist statements, published reviews, and correspondence, but most notably it unearths extensive selections from Tworkov’s diaries. In their philosophical and artistic introspection, these rigorous notations may just be the New York School’s answer to the journals of Delacroix.

Born in Biala, Poland, in 1900, Yakov Tworkovsky emigrated to the United States in 1913 with his mother and younger sister Janice, joining his father on the Lower East Side. The sister took the name of her Old World hometown to become a famous painter herself, a jet-setting Parisian expat, and the common-law wife of Ford Madox Ford. Jack proved to be much less facile in putting down roots. He wrestled with the despair of alienation. “I have the perverse desire to be completely known as a Jew to non Jews but deny that fact to Jews,” he wrote of his religion in 1954. “My predicament is that I’m essentially a religious man—a religious man without a religion and so abstract art is perhaps the nirvana towards which

I reach,” he reflected in the 1970s.

The order one can impose on painting became Tworokov’s support. “Geometrics or any systemic order gives me a space for meditation, adumbrates my alienation,” he wrote in a revealing letter to the painter Andrew Forge in 1981.

Tworkov studied at New York’s Stuyvesant High School and entered Columbia University to major in English Literature. He thought of becoming a poet. Then exposure to Cézanne and Matisse lured him to painting. Upon graduation in 1923, he enrolled in the National Academy of Design to study with Ivan Olinsky and Charles Hawthorne. He followed Janice to Provincetown and met Karl Knaths. At the Art Students League he trained with Guy Pène du Bois and Boardman Robinson.

Like many of the older members of the New York School, Tworokov took up painting with the Public Works Project. His genre work from this period, such as *Afternoon Bridge (The Card Players)* (c. 1935), is eminently forgettable, a fact he was quick to acknowledge. He became disillusioned with loaded political subject matter and stripped his work down to the bone. Tworokov may be known as the Abstract Expressionist who turned increasingly minimal in the 1960s, but the importance of structure is apparent from his early work. “I turned to still life as a release from subject and spectacular composition,” he wrote in 1947. His *Untitled (Still Life with Blue Pitcher and Grapes)* (1946) demonstrates an engineering hand, as line twists through space to connect elements into a unified whole. In 1948 he rented a studio next door to his friend Willem de Kooning. As a founding member of the Eighth Street Club, Tworokov then emerged alongside de Kooning during Abstract Expressionism’s rapid ascendancy in the 1950s.

Some of Tworokov’s paintings from this period endure as masterpieces of post-war American art. *House of the Sun* (1952) ranks with de Kooning’s 1948 *Painting* in the MOMA collection as a supreme demonstration of gesture tied to form, here in primary colors. *Watergame* from 1955 is another example. Yet while Tworokov’s structure was always strong, often his color choice and brushwork lacked assurance. His painting could be stiff and overbuilt. *Nausica* (1952) is one instance where pastels produce a cartoonish riff on a de Kooning *Woman*.

The Dionysian expression that came to define Abstract Expressionism held little interest for Tworokov, and he gradually moved towards a more Apollonian center. “I would not be comfortable with a painting that was too aggressively stated or too sleek or too self-consciously simple, or too beautiful or too interesting,” he noted in 1973. “I am uncomfortable with extreme portrayals. I let reason examine disorder.” He recognized the uplifting quality in mid-century art: “The abstract-expressionist movement, although negative in its rejection of all tradition and especially of the French art of the first half of the century, did reflect this positive element, the postwar euphoria, the sudden feeling of strength both physically and

spiritually.” Yet he turned against the violence of de Kooning: “We all dissent from de Kooning’s example of defacing, of painting out the painting, of throwing the defiled scrapings back on to the surface, in a gesture of contempt and hatred... . My attitude was to abandon the angry gesture, to wear in this respect a neutral face.”

Tworokov’s home life reflected his desire for order. He rejected the licentiousness of bohemia. He identified with middle-class America and lived accordingly. “Jack took care of everything—his car, his house, his lawn, his tools, his studio, his brushes, his family, himself,” noted the poet Stanley Kunitz. “Nobody could have led a more admirably moderate, regulated, or disciplined life.”

His diaries reveal a rigorous self-questioning that emerged from a revulsion with both Nazism and Communism. “The left has become the biggest cesspool,” he wrote in 1958. This sentiment matured into his identification with a patriotism that led not towards ideology but to freedom from ideology. “Only bourgeois society as we know it in America today gives me the freedom to join nothing, no organization and protects me from its vengeance,” he wrote in 1959. “We had and still have in this country the chance to take a new turn towards humanity and human society,” he continued, “Not Russia, not India, but America is the hope of the world.” He then proclaimed in 1960: “My Americanism amounts to a total conversion. I know myself to be Jewish, but my desire is for identification with those people and those forces that move towards making this country a reality of the Bill of Rights.” Tworokov saw the direction of his philosophy for what it was: “Rereading some of these notes I am struck by the conservatism of some of my views, how uncongenial they are to the prevailing intellectual point of view. However these notes are a response to the most serious self-questioning... . They represent not what I ought to believe, but what I know I believe.”

As Tworokov found his home in middle-class America, it meant an exit from artistic bohemia and the sacrifice of his own reputation. He despised Dada and its new formulations. (“A Jew is out of his head if he is for Dada,” he wrote in 1959, “like a hare running with the hounds.”) Yet rather than despair at his falling out, Tworokov found an additional spur. Many of his signature works emerged during this period. “I think the time has now arrived for me to do the best work of my life,” he wrote in his journal in 1960. He was right: *Thursday* (1960) is a standout of the UBS show. A red armature binds together the painting’s green and white forms, which come alive through an ambiguity of figure and ground. Although Tworokov says his dealer Leo Castelli once worried over them, one of Tworokov’s heraldic flag-type paintings, *RWB #3*, is also a triumph. “They are all in red, white and blue, and perhaps unconsciously an ironic comment on my growing patriotism.”

Tworokov moved to academia. In 1963 he became the chairman of the art department of Yale. He discovered a greater interest in mathematics and geometry. Unfortunately for an artist who once remarked that “all

programs represent future sorrows,” much of the work from this period comes off as programmatic. *Idling II (1970)* might as well be the prototype for stain-concealing wallpaper. Even his writing seems increasingly formulaic. “The painting activity stands in ironic contrast to the measuring activity,” he noted at the time. “The brushing represents a purely random activity.”

The diagnosis of bone cancer around 1980 reawakened his human touch. Conventional wisdom dismisses all of Tworokov’s post-1960s work as bloodless noodling. Yet *Compression and Expansion of the Square (1982)* may just be the most assured painting in the show. In this three-panel work, structure becomes gesture. Tworokov built the animation of the piece into its form, not its brushstroke.

Tworokov could be a captive of his own intellect. “I had a revulsion against the intellectual in my own nature and in art,” he wrote in 1947. “I am a man condemned—behind bars—a prisoner,” he lamented in 1954. “I need desperately to be alone again—to stop the endless verbalizing of all my thinking, and to paint.” Yet he could also harness his intellectual pressures to build great structures in paint. “Reason chooses the ground where the play of feeling is set free. ... It does not so much limit as it contains,” he remarked. While his paintings became marked by a greater sense of order, in fact he always exercised a high level of control, even in his more gestural work. “His paintings have a quality that other American-type non-objective paintings do not have,” Fairfield Porter rightly observed. “Though superficially just as broad and dashing, they are entirely conscious... . Tworokov’s power, which gives his paintings their lasting effectiveness, comes from his never letting go of awareness.” Tworokov believed in an “aesthetic morality,” and it began with the trueness of his line. “Art can become the true square and level of all things,” he wrote. Rather than a mere concern for structure and gesture, for Tworokov “trueness and pleasure add up to the most fundamental quality in a painting.”

Notes

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1. “*Jack Tworokov: Against Extremes, Five Decades of Paintings*” opened at UBS Art Gallery, New York, on August 13 and remains on view through October 27, 2009. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. *The Extreme of the Middle: Writings of Jack Tworokov*, edited by Mira Schor; Yale University Press, 480 pages, \$45. [Go back to the text.](#)