

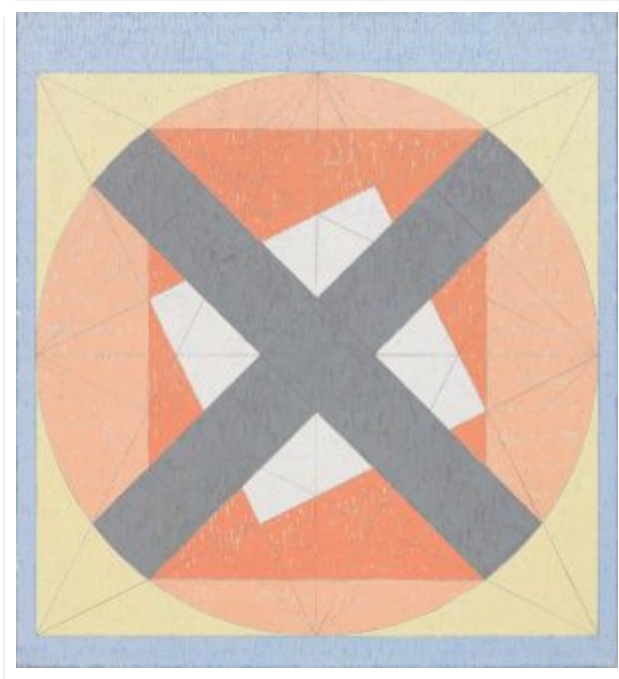
Jack Tworkov: Becoming Himself

By Carter Ratcliff, May 2017

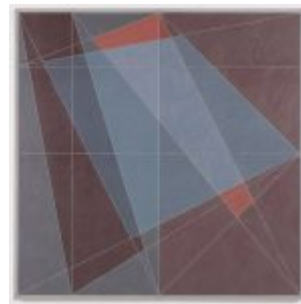
Jack Tworkov developed an acclaimed Abstract Expressionist style and then left it behind, seeking to transcend style and achieve true self-expression through painting.

In 1958, the [Museum of Modern Art](#) in New York launched one of its most influential exhibitions. Titled “The New American Painting,” it sent works by leading Abstract Expressionists on a tour of eight European cities. Responses were varied. Some Old World critics saw canvases by Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, and their colleagues as unnecessarily large and aesthetically naïve. Others acknowledged, with differing degrees of reluctance, that the unfamiliar imagery confronting them was genuinely innovative. A critic in Berlin praised Jack Tworkov for dispensing with ready-made premises and assumptions, seeing the world afresh, and painting what is “real.”

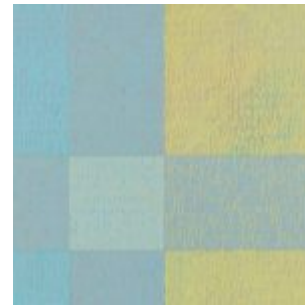
“The New American Painting” advanced an ambitious hypothesis: the Abstract Expressionists now formed the modernist vanguard. Convinced that they were no less significant than Impressionists or Cubists, the painters themselves had come to this conclusion a decade earlier. No longer American provincials, they had merged personal ambition with historical destiny.



Jack Tworkov, X on Circle in the Square (Q4-81 #2), 1981, acrylic on canvas, 49 x 45 in.; Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © Estate of Jack Tworkov / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



Understandably, then, when an Abstract Expressionist achieved a mature style he—or she, in the cases of Lee Krasner and Joan Mitchell—tended to stay with it.



Of course, signature styles evolved over the years. Mark Rothko's imagery grew darker. Until the last years of his life, Willem de Kooning's painterly gesture became, by fits and starts, ever more splashy and uninhibited. Nonetheless, unbroken lines of development are easily discernable in the careers of these artists—a rule with only two clear exceptions. In 1967, Philip Guston's lushly brushed imagery suddenly leapt from abstraction to a figurative style with overtones of cartooning. And earlier in that decade, Jack Tworkov exchanged his characteristic gesture, expansive and vigorously improvised, for patterns of small marks organized—one might say magnetized—by geometric structures.



A year before his death, in 1981, Tworkov was interviewed by Gerald Silk, who asked him about the “sudden change” his art underwent as the 1960s began. Tworkov's answer is complex, a sign of the intellectual subtlety he brought to painting even when he was a gestural abstractionist of the kind certain European critics had dismissed as untutored primitives in 1958. Tworkov's response to the question begins with the observation that the shift from gesture to mark wasn't sudden, nor was he “completely disenchanting with the work that I was doing.” However, he had come to feel that there was a problem with the Abstract Expressionist method

Working on a blank canvas, unguided by preparatory drawings, he often brought a successful painting to completion. The problem emerged when a painting was successful only in part. How, if he always started from blankness and worked spontaneously, could he make use of that partial success? His solution was to provide himself with a “constant” on which experiments could be conducted, a structured and reusable starting point of a kind that painterly spontaneity did not permit. These constants took the form of drawings, geometrical configurations, that allowed Tworkov to play variations on a pictorial possibility until he achieved a completely satisfactory result. With this use of drawing came the change in his brushwork that made it seem, at first, as if he had become another artist. The change his art underwent was undeniably dramatic, yet certain pictorial traits persisted, giving his oeuvre an easily overlooked unity.

Tworokov was a native of Biala Podlaska, a city that belonged over the centuries to Lithuania, the Russian Empire, and Poland. Born in 1900, he emigrated to New York with his family when he was 12 years old. The transition was painful. Decades later he recalled, “Everything I loved in my childhood I missed in New York, everything that was painful in my childhood grew to distressing proportions.” He found refuge not in art but in literature. Introduced to books by the public library, Tworokov became an enthusiastic, even a compulsive, reader—and, after initial difficulties, a good student. Upon graduation from high school, he entered Columbia University, intending to become a writer. Then, after encountering the paintings of Paul Cézanne and Henri Matisse, his path took a new direction.

Encouraged by his sister, the painter Janice Biala (she had replaced her family name with that of her first city), Tworokov enrolled at the National Academy of Design in New York. There his instructors included Charles Hawthorne, a realist with Impressionist leanings. Next he studied at the Art Students League, where he studied with a number of painters, including the stylish realist Guy Pène du Bois. Spending his summers in Provincetown, Mass., on Cape Cod, Tworokov met a painter named Karl Knaths, who became a close friend. Ten years Tworokov’s senior, he introduced younger artist to Vasily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and Joan Miró. Tworokov responded to modernism in a series of deliberate steps. By the early 1940s, his admiration for the later work of Cézanne and Braque had begun to show in patches of color that hover on the verge of abstraction. Tworokov was abandoning figuration, a development postponed, for the moment, by wiry outlines with unmistakably representational intent.

During the previous decade, Tworokov had joined the Treasury Department’s Public Works of Art Project and later the easel division of the Federal Art Project. Established to help artists survive the Great Depression, these agencies made it possible for Tworokov to continue painting during a time of hardship. And they introduced him to an art world inhabited by de Kooning, Pollock, Rothko, Arshile Gorky, and others who would later be dubbed Abstract Expressionists. Nonetheless, Tworokov found it unbearable to be entangled in federal bureaucracy. “It was the worst period of my life,” he said in a 1963 interview, “an extremely bleak, dreary, and stupid period. If I had to live my life over again on the Project I wouldn’t do it.” Institutions are oppressive, unless one joins in their founding, as Tworokov did in 1949.

Two years earlier, Tworokov had a solo exhibition of new work with Charles Egan, one of the few New York dealers who supported the Abstract Expressionists in that period. Buyers for their work were few and, despite the approval lavished on them by reviewers at Art News, the painters felt isolated—even beleaguered. To counter that feeling they formed a club, a place to meet and continue conversations that had begun, in some cases, during the 1930s. Among this institution’s founders were the sculptor Philip Pavia, Franz Kline, de Kooning, and Tworokov. Housed in a loft on East 8th Street, it needed a name. Unable to agree on one, the artists called it simply the Club. Entrance was by membership only. The doors of the Club opened in late 1949 with a program in place: Wednesday evenings were reserved for unstructured discussions between members; on Friday there were lectures and, later, panel discussions. On weekends, the floor was cleared for dancing, with music supplied by a phonograph. Purchased with money donated by anyone able to contribute, liquor was served in paper cups.

In 1952 *It Is*, an artists' magazine, published an excerpt from Tworokov's journal:

"The Club is a phenomenon—I was at first timid in admitting that I like it. Talking has been suspect. There was the prospect that the Club would be regarded either as bohemian or as a self-aggrandizing clique. But now I'm consciously happy when I'm there. I enjoy the talk, the enthusiasm, the laughter, the dancing after the discussion. There is a strong sense of identification. I say to myself these are the people I love, that I love to be with. Here I understand everybody, no matter how inarticulate."

Tworokov continued to exhibit with Charles Egan during the 1950s, moving on to the Stable Gallery in 1957, and then to Leo Castelli the following year. He would show with Castelli annually until 1963, when he left the gallery, feeling that he could not remain on a roster that was becoming crowded with Pop artists and Minimalists. In 1964, the Whitney Museum of American Art mounted a Tworokov retrospective. There would be another, at the Guggenheim Museum, in 1982.

Tworokov found his first teaching job at Queens College in New York in 1948. A series of temporary stints at American University in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere led, in 1963, to a professorship at the Yale School of Art and Architecture. Almost immediately, he was made chairman of the Department of Art, a position he held for the next six years. Like de Kooning, Kline, and the entire unruly band of Abstract Expressionists, Tworokov struggled to avoid facility, habit, mannerism. Style, as these artists saw it, is a trap.

Nonetheless, it is inevitable and thus it posed difficulties for Tworokov as he recruited new faculty members. Any painter able to qualify for a post at Yale was bound to possess a recognizable way of working, as did Tworokov himself, having just exchanged his earlier style for his later one—a change he may have made to avoid the dangers of stylistic routine. In any case, the Yale Department of Art never developed a characteristic look on Tworokov's watch, in part because he assembled the visiting faculty from every corner of the stylistic map. Everyone from Robert Rauschenberg and Frank Stella to Larry Poons, Brice Marden, and Philip Pearlstein was invited to spend a semester at Yale.

For all their confident finesse, Tworokov's Abstract Expressionist paintings are restless. His extended, predominantly vertical brushstrokes seem to confront the flat, usually vertical canvas with a quiet vehemence. Colors are bright, sometimes almost garish, and the build-up of painterly texture conveys a certain impatience. It looks as if, for Tworokov, painting is an endless interrogation: how does one come to terms with the blankness of the canvas, this zone of unbounded possibility? How does one make it one's own while respecting its flatness and rectangularity? There are no satisfactory answers to these questions. Moreover, Tworokov believed that one must avoid the illusion of an answer that a trademark image supplies. So he returns to the void each time he begins a painting, and ends when he has inflected that void with his presence. Reviewing Tworokov's 1954 exhibition at Egan, Martica Sawin said, "We confront a fully mature painter who has forsaken the interpretation of the visible world in order to discover and record an abstract reality, subtle, elusive, fragmentary, of his own making... he is at home in the realm of sensation, ambivalence, nuance." Tworokov's later paintings him take to another region of the same realm.

In a review from 1951 Robert Coates noted the flat, “ribbony” quality of Tworokov’s brushstroke. Later, his long, swerving ribbons of color contract to short, straight marks, and as these marks accumulate they generate textures akin to the ones that spread across the surfaces of his Abstract Expressionist paintings. Now, however, texture is calm, not impatient. It is guided by large, geometric structures—planar outlines that present variations on the rectilinear shape of the canvas; and sometimes these outlines multiply, acquiring a luminous near-solidity, as if Tworokov were about to become a geometric abstractionist. This transformation never takes place. At every stage of his career, Tworokov is an artist of touch, of the expressive gesture, and even as his gestures merge into fields of light we can sense his improvisatory impulses.

His paintings encourage us to see how they came into being, and how they serve as the medium of his being. In 1974 the journal *Leonardo* published Tworokov’s short memoir, “On My Outlook as a Painter.” After tracing his life in art, he ends with a declaration:

“Above all else, I distinguish between painting and pictures (between Cézanne and Picasso). Where I have to choose between them, I choose painting. If I have to choose between painting and ideas, I choose painting; between painting and every form of theater, I choose painting.”

He chooses, in short, the process of becoming himself.