

# Of the Stark and the Spartan: Tworkov in the 70s

by Jason Andrew

The New York School was characterized as a movement based more on attitude than on the art itself. It centered on the act of painting rather than on the images portrayed. Its adherents attempted to transfer freely associated ideas to canvas, whereby the painting became more about the performance of paint than the work itself. Jack Tworkov was a key contributor to this movement—an intellectually demanding figure among the Abstract Expressionists.

Yet unlike other members of the Abstract Expressionists, Tworkov had a sensibility that allowed him direct and fruitful contacts with the rising stars of the next generation. Jasper Johns, and especially Robert Rauschenberg, found a close and supportive ally in Tworkov.<sup>2</sup> He embraced composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham,<sup>3</sup> and encouraged Dorothea Rockburne<sup>4</sup> and Yayoi Kusama.<sup>5</sup>

As chair of the Art Department of the Yale School of Art and Architecture from 1963 to 1969, Tworkov envisioned a new era. He was one of the first to question Abstract Expressionism's commodification, its cult of personality, and its absorption into academia. He recognized that the art world of the 60s, far more than that of the 50s, had become a "larger and more visible, cohesive, dynamic, and commanding force." As the historian Irving Sandler wrote, Tworkov turned Yale into "an arena of competing ideas and attitudes [...] In keeping with the diversity of New York art in the sixties, he made the school responsive as never before."<sup>6</sup> As Brice Marden remarked, "We were kept off-balance and confused; we weren't being taught some way to paint."<sup>7</sup>

While history has pinned him to the 50s and Abstract Expressionism, Tworkov broke away from that movement at the height of his own success. Seen by many as radical,<sup>8</sup> the debut of his new monochromatic paintings at the Gertrude Kasle Gallery in Detroit in April 1969 was the arrival of an art less emotive, more stark and more Spartan. "I wanted to get away from the extremely subjective focus of Abstract-Expressionist painting." Tworkov said, "I am tired of the artist's agonies [...] I wanted something outside myself, something less subjective."<sup>9</sup>

This radical change, years in the making, was consistent with Tworkov's thoughtfulness and courage, and found connections with the generation of artists nearly forty years his junior, among them his students at Yale. He recognized their interest in seriality, and shared in their methods to skirt expressiveness and emotion. This generation included Chuck Close, Jennifer Bartlett, Judith Bernstein, Nancy Graves, Brice Marden, Howardena Pindell, Richard Serra and William T. Williams, to name a few.

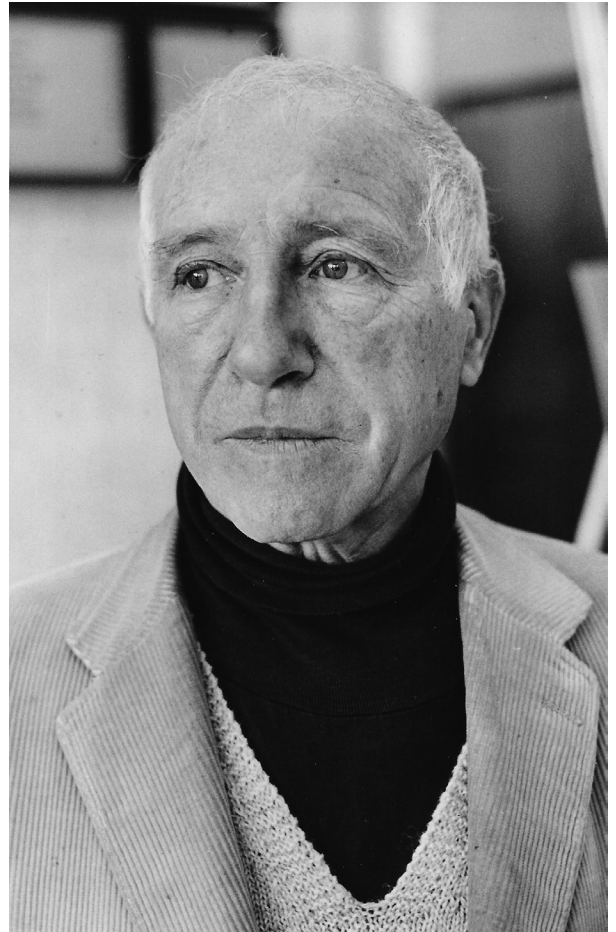
His tenure at Yale coincided with his stylistic shift toward diagrammatic configurations spurred by a renewed interest in geometry and mathematics. Using the rectangle as a measurement tool and foundation of his compositions, Tworkov moved away from any reliance on automatism and turned to a methodical creative process. In his words: "I soon arrived at an elementary system of measurements implicit in the geometry of the rectangle which became the basis for simple images that I had deliberately given a somewhat illusionistic cast."<sup>10</sup> While this system did not exclude spontaneity and fresh invention, it did impose an element of the mechanical and calculated. And it was this decisively imposed predictability that would undo the decades of painting that history most remembers him for.

When these new structured paintings debuted in a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971, curator Marcia Tucker championed the work:

*These pictures—sensuous, personal, endowed with extraordinary clarity and formal intelligence—testify to the energy and timeliness of an artist who has, for over forty years, chosen the path of most resistance in order to challenge his own vision and ours.<sup>11</sup>*

Putting it all on the line, Tworkov's work and conceptual system clashed head-on with not only his own history as an abstractionist, but also with an art world hell-bent on pronouncing painting dead. While others of his AbEx brotherhood, namely Robert Motherwell, Willem de Kooning,

**Portrait of Jack Tworkov,  
Spokane, WA, December 7, 1979.**  
Photo: Jim Shelton, courtesy Tworkov  
Family Archives, New York



and Mark Rothko, cashed in on much less rigorous developments in their art, Tworkov parallels the radical change of Philip Guston, though in a different direction.

As a longtime friend of Tworkov, Guston, too, had outgrown a total expressionist mode. Turning to narrative imagery for his new paintings of 1969–1970, Guston reintroduced his controversial Ku Klux Klan hoods, motivated in part by his outrage at watching the 1968 Democratic Convention. Equally introspective, yet far more subtle, Tworkov chose to double down, restructuring what Donald Judd described in 1963 as Tworkov’s “palisade”<sup>12</sup> of strokes.

Paint, and the handling of it, was paramount for Tworkov. The stroke, or rather Tworkov’s mark, is the single defining element in all his pictures. Look to Cézanne’s *tâches*, Mondrian’s plus-and-minus works, and to the descriptive brushworks of early Jasper Johns, who was pleased to consider himself influenced by Tworkov.<sup>13</sup> While the marks in canvases of the early years evidence speed and direction, marks with variation, volume, and viscosity came to define Tworkov’s canvases of the later years. The underlying challenge for Tworkov was to keep this element distinct, fresh and, moreover, inspired. Having witnessed firsthand Rothko’s tragic struggle and inability to evolve new form, renewal was vital for Tworkov.<sup>14</sup>

To this end, around 1967, Tworkov moved to a new medium: oil pigment mixed with a vehicle of Lucite dissolved in turpentine. This allowed him to keep the quality of the marks distinct, but more importantly, sculpturally independent from each other. No other artist of his generation would demonstrate a more stoic commitment to experimentation and evolution of the medium to meet his own means. The invention offered him the ability to reinvent himself as an artist while monopolizing on his strength as a colorist—paintings from this decade offer seemingly limitless variations within a concise and narrow palette of grays and soft mauves.

There is in Tworkov’s language, as in his paintings, a strict adherence to the matter at hand: the conception of painting

reduced to the stark physical component of painting-as-object, as well as the aim of making visible the material of painting’s conventions: its frame, its stretcher, its supporting surface and the walls on which it hangs. It is this adherence that makes more visible the very mechanical activity of Tworkov laying down his marks as they are manifestly lined up, one after the other, left to right, row after row, until the surface is simply painted—leaving space for breaths between. Yet remembering that for Tworkov, a painting is not merely paint and work, “It is brought into being by desire, by being desired.”<sup>15</sup>

With a new medium mastered, the simple geometry of the rectangle would give Tworkov his repertory—structures he could invent, impose and repeat at will. He initiated each painting with a consciously planned drawing. “These schemata,” wrote Douglas Crimp in 1971, “are not employed by Tworkov as a means of removing himself from the process of painting (as schematic drawing was used by so many artists in the 60s), but rather as the image which holds his painterly surface on the canvas plane. It functions precisely as the image from nature did in late Impressionism, where a decorative surface was kept from reading as decoration but rather as veil for the image.”<sup>16</sup>

In essence, Tworkov’s use of geometry put the brakes on all emotional inauthenticity in the pursuit to paint himself (i.e., his ego) out of his pictures. “I turned to Geometry,” Tworkov wrote, “perhaps to erect a thick glass through which I saw myself, but mercifully could not hear myself though I saw my mouth moving and often in anguish.”<sup>17</sup> With each new work, Tworkov was distancing himself from the mythical male artist brooding before his blank canvas. Geometry is theory, and theory is conceptual. The systematic, single-minded persistent attempt to once and for all empty painting of its idealist trappings gives Tworkov’s work, much like that of Robert Ryman and Agnes Martin, a special place during the 60s and 70s.

Compounding seriality, Tworkov opted to number his compositions as a composer would title his latest opus.



**West 23rd, 1963**

Oil on canvas  
60 1/8 x 80 in (152.6 x 203.3 cm)  
CR 475

Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.  
Purchase (274.63)

**P73 #7, 1973** (Opposite)

Oil on canvas  
90 x 127 in (228.6 x 322.6 cm)  
CR 119

Collection Estate of Jack Tworkov, New York, NY

This procedural ordering typically identified the calendar quarter the painting was finished followed by the year and a number. For instance, *Q3-72 #5* is the fifth painting made during the third quarter of 1972.

The analogy to music<sup>18</sup> was one Tworkov made himself, writing that he “craved a simple structure dependent on drawing as a base on which the brushing, spontaneous and pulsating, gave a beat to the painting somewhat analogous to the beat in music.” Tworkov saw the repetitive mark as a rhythmic element which he related to the music of Steve Reich and Philip Glass.<sup>19</sup> The three paintings from his *Idling Series* (1969–1970) [pages 23, 25, 27] are the clearest examples, and titled appropriately for their deliberate metronomic marks of paint.

Embracing both the spontaneous and the procedural—choice and chance—Tworkov entered one of the most prolific periods of his career. Referencing Tworkov’s online catalogue raisonné, the artist produced 135 paintings between 1969 and 1979. Having access to Tworkov’s complete oeuvre provides a perspective like never before. Formally, one sees there is tremendous variety in Tworkov’s work from the 70s, even though virtually every picture is governed by a fairly strict set of decisions.

*SR-PT-70 #1* [page 29] is one of the first paintings completed in Provincetown in the spring of 1970. Divided equally in half, sharp diagonals create an illusion of forward and receding planes. Tight undulating marks unify the surface while subtle tonal changes enhance edges with the entrails of each, pulled down by the weight of the medium. This compositional structure returns in the fifth painting made in the third quarter of 1972, *Q3-72 #5* [page 39].

Growing more confident in, even reliant on, his new structure, the first picture he painted in 1973, *P73 #1* [page 41], advances both compositionally and gesturally. Embracing a more expanded composition, planes stagger to open the space. Tworkov’s mastery of his medium sees him at play with a variety of gestural marks. Like automatic writing, some undulate quickly and sharply, and some post loosely. Color and mark work together to define and animate space. Flashings of yellow appear in the underpainting, registering as ambiguous references to urban light?

In *P73 #10* [page 47], a rigid scaffolding locks in a static grid, and yet through a flickering of mark and slight modulation of mauves, the painting breathes a resolving sigh. But it is a series of paintings completed between the third and fourth quarters of 1974 that achieve complete nirvana. *Q3-74 #1* [page 51], *Q4-74 #1* [page 53], *Q4-74 #2* are all compositions based on a quadrilateral-faced hexahedron. These paintings represent a cessation of trial and error. A blowing out of the flames of self-delusion. Standing in front of these paintings is like staring face-first into a whiteout—grid and mark fuse in a haze of edge and ambivalence. So subtle and so specifically present, it’s a defining moment—a tipping point for Tworkov in his quest. Overlooked until now, only two of these works has been previously exhibited since they were painted forty-seven years ago. This fact leads one to think hard about why this is the case. Likely they, and the other pictures made during this period and after, signify a clean delineation—Tworkov untethered from the bankrupt tenets of AbEx.





Still, Tworkov pressed on, writing: “Can you accept a painting just for its marks, not reading into it more than the eye can see?”<sup>20</sup>

It is as though, despite his characteristically profound-to-the-point-of-self-doubt reflections, Tworkov, now late in his career, just discovered his artistic identity—his most authentic self. Tworkov took to work with a renewed vitality and energy.

Yet the new Tworkovs aren't the betrayal of his previous work they may at first seem. Rather, they are a refinement of a life's work—a move to balance the spontaneously engendered and the mathematically determined. A trail of journal entries dated decades earlier reveals the duration of Tworkov's pursuit. “The true mathematical imagination,” he wrote in his journal in 1954, “is among the highest faculties of man, and some reflection of it is found in the profoundest art.”<sup>21</sup> It was also around the same time that he made a dramatic call to “Discard! Discard! Discard!”<sup>22</sup> in an effort to rid his pictures of subject and to “paint no Tworkovs.”<sup>23</sup>

Though he embraced mathematics and incorporated such logic as the concept of dynamic symmetry and Fibonacci numbering, these mathematic systems did not tyrannize Tworkov. He never forced himself to follow any rubric that would be detrimental to his work in its exclusivity. And a new generation of artists took note. Jennifer Bartlett, as an example, visited Tworkov in his Provincetown studio in February 1976, where she gave him a drawing for her masterwork in progress *Rhapsody*. Tworkov expounded to her all he had learned about the Fibonacci series. To which Bartlett exclaimed, “Thanks, I'm going to use them.”<sup>24</sup>

Paintings such as *Three Five Eight #1 (Q3-75 #6)* [page 59] and *Q2-76 #1* [page 61] are stellar examples of Tworkov applying the progressive concept of Fibonacci, a concept that will appear even in his final painting completed before his death, *Compression and Expansion of the Square (Q3-82 #3)*.

For Tworkov, painting was a high art, a universal art, a liberal art, an art through which one can achieve transcendence,

even catharsis. Painting is, above all, human. Emphasizing, even paralleling Tworkov's philosophy, the German painter Gerhard Richter in a 1973 interview with Irmeline Lebeer posed:

*One must really be engaged in order to be a painter. Once obsessed by it, one eventually gets to the point where one thinks that humanity could be changed by painting. But when that passion deserts you, there is nothing else left to do. Then it is better to stop altogether. Because basically painting is pure idiocy.*<sup>25</sup>

Idiocy or absurdity, even if knowing nothing of Tworkov's attitudes on art, simply looking at the work will convince one that he was too intelligent, too committed an artist not to have sensed the absurdity that haunts such productive activity. At the same time, Tworkov certainly believed in the transformative power of painting. On a train to Providence to deliver a lecture at RISD in spring 1980, Tworkov turned to his journal to pose yet again more questions about his present work. “It's true,” he wrote, “system does not exclude spontaneity and fresh invention. But it does include an element of the mechanical, the predictable.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, he made one of his more remarkable assertions:

*Looking beyond the present to man's whole history, of wars, persecutions, exploitations, violence and oppressions, a feeling of despair overtakes me. Perhaps the creation of man was a mistake [...] Only in the studio I wake from this despair, only in the studio does my life take form. This is what I mean when I say 'art saves my life.'*<sup>27</sup>

That Tworkov, approaching 80 years old when he recorded these statements, still questioned not only the direction of his work but its critical role in his life, is evidence of his relentless intellectual fervor. For Tworkov the canvas was still and would forever remain an arena in which he could confront perpetual anxieties about himself, his paintings, and society. ■

# End Notes

1. Journal Entry, July 22, 1966, published in Mira Schor, ed., *The Extreme of the Middle: Writings of Jack Tworkov* (Yale University Press, New Haven & London: 2009), 393.
2. I have written extensively on the relationships Tworkov had with the next generation. Essays on his friendships with Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg can be found at [jacktworkov.org](http://jacktworkov.org).
3. Tworkov's friendship with Cage and Cunningham developed during the late 40s and early 50s. In 1967, all three participated in Contemporary Voices in the Arts program in 1967 that consisted of a lecture tour on the interrelationships between art, new media, and technology.
4. My correspondence with Dorothea Rockburne regarding her friendship with Tworkov began in 2010 while working on an exhibition and publication for *Jack Tworkov: The Accident of Choice, the artist at Black Mountain College*. Rockburne studied with Tworkov during his summer at the College in 1952. During a return trip in 1953, Rockburne requested Tworkov as one of her examiners. As Rockburne described it, that visit had a lasting effect on her as an artist. Tworkov encouraged her to move to New York and commit fully to the life of an artist. In an email to me on May 21, 2020, Rockburne wrote: "I have always been grateful to Jack for his thoughtful and brave kindness. He changed my life."
5. Expanding upon journal entries around Kusama inviting Tworkov to her studio, I have collaborated with Kusama scholar Midori Yamamura to flesh out this relationship in an unpublished essay.
6. Sandler, Irving. "The School of Art at Yale: 1950-1970: The Collective Reminiscences of Twenty Distinguished Alumni." *Art Journal*, 42:1 (Spring, 1982), 17.
7. Ibid, 17. It was at Yale that Marden developed the formal strategies that characterized his paintings of the following decades: a preoccupation with rectangular formats and the repeated use of a muted, extremely individualized palette.
8. "Tworkov: Radical Pro," was the title of an *Art News* article written by Louis Finkelstein and published in April 1964.
9. Tworkov, Jack. "On My Outlook as a Painter: A Memoir." *Leonardo, International Journal of the Contemporary Artist* 7:2 (Spring 1974), 116.
10. Ibid, 116.
11. Tucker, Marcia in *Jack Tworkov: Recent Paintings*, February 5–March 14, 1971, Whitney Museum of American Art, exhibition brochure.
12. Judd, Donald. "In the Galleries: Jack Tworkov at Castelli," *Arts Magazine* 37:7 (April 1963), 55.
13. Johns, Jasper. Letter to Gertude Kasle, April 16, 1969. Jack Tworkov papers. *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institute.
14. Tworkov and Rothko knew each other from the early days of the WPA. Their friendship grew more competitive during the 50s. In 1968, Tworkov arranged a studio for Rothko in Provincetown where their friendship intensified. Tworkov was one of the last to see Rothko alive and after Rothko's tragic suicide, Tworkov served on the Board of the Mark Rothko Foundation. For more on Tworkov's friendship see his oral history interview of May 22, 1981, with Gerald Silk archived at *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institute.
15. Journal Entry, July 22, 1966, published in *Extreme*, 257.
16. Crimp, Douglas. "Quartered and Drawn." *Art News* 70 (March 1971), 49.
17. Tworkov in an undated note c. 1970, published in *Extreme*, 393.
18. Tworkov in *Leonardo*, 116.
19. Tworkov, in Marcia Tucker, "Interview with Jack Tworkov," in *Jack Tworkov: Paintings 1950–78* (Third Eye Centre, Glasgow and Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh, 1979), 10.
20. Journal Entry, July 22, 1966, published in *Extreme*, 257.
21. Journal Entry, January 10, 1954, published in *Extreme*, 62.
22. Journal Entry, May 29, 1954, published in *Extreme*, 68.
23. Artist Statement, *Stable Gallery Announcement*, April 1957. And let us not forget that during WWII, he temporarily abandoned his pursuit as a painter to work in the war industry as a tool designer employed by the Eastern Engineering Company.
24. Journal Entry Tuesday, February 3, 1976, published in *Extreme*, 368. Tworkov and Bartlett had a long friendship that developed beyond their years together at Yale. The pair even exhibited in a two person show *Jennifer Bartlett and Jack Tworkov*, Jacobs Ladder Gallery, June 9–July 7, 1973.
25. Gerhard Richter, "Interview mit Irmeline Lebeer" (1973), Gerhard Richter Text, 72–79. Cf. *Gerhard Richter Writings 1961–2007*, ed. Dietmar Elger and Hans Ulrich Öbrist, trans. unidentified (Cologne: Walther König, 2009), 72.
26. Journal Entry, April 22, 1980, published in *Extreme*, 405.
27. Ibid, 407.