

Jack Tworkov: *Against Extremes: Five Decades of Painting*

by John Yau

UBS Gallery August 13 – October 27, 2009

In 1957, Jack Tworkov (1900-1982) wrote in his journal: “My hope is to confront the picture without a ready technique or prepared attitude—a condition which is nevertheless never completely attainable; to have no program and, necessarily then, no preconceived style. To paint no Tworkovs.” He was in his late fifties and hadn’t quite made the defining paintings of his career and more than likely knew it. “Pink Mississippi” (1954), “Blue Cradle” (1956), and “Transverse” (1957-58) are very good, but it is in “Idling” (1970) that he really comes into his own—around the same time as Philip Guston, who was always the more seductive painter. Tworkov seemed to distrust this aspect of paint throughout his career. It was also in 1957 that he had an exhibition at the Stable Gallery, New York, and a group of his paintings was presented by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Jackson Pollock was dead and Jasper Johns hadn’t yet had his first one-person show at Leo Castelli, which opened in January 1958.

A year later, on March 3, 1958, in another journal entry, Tworkov wrote about the shows he had seen that day and singled out two younger artists, Joan Mitchell and Robert Rauschenberg, because he felt their work was the strongest. After writing that Rauschenberg’s work has nothing to do with “dadda” [sic], he concluded: “Our aesthetics admits that anything is possible.” These entries could only have been written by someone who wasn’t afraid, who understood the complex times he happened to be living in, and chose not to succumb to external pressures and seek refuge in a fashionable means of production or aesthetic agendas such as formalism. Being just on the outside, and refusing to cozy up to critics, cost him, but the exchange was worth it in the end, as the last decade of paintings amply prove.

At the core of Tworkov’s project was a belief in freedom. And this belief in freedom not only constitutes an integral part of his legacy, but it also clues us in as to why he and his work have long flown under the radar. In contrast to his far better known Abstract Expressionist peers, Tworkov

never developed a signature style or motif, which is not to say that certain particularities and dispositions don't recur in his work, because they do. Recognizing that he wanted "[t]o paint no Tworkovs" meant that he would repeatedly come up against, as well as discover, his own limits. He was a maker, but he was not omnipotent—that's the humbling lesson that Tworkov never shied away from.

This exhibition, which includes work from five decades of Tworkov's career—I would call it a tantalizing historical survey—makes a strong case that we have yet to come to grips with the fullness and breadth of Tworkov's achievement. In the mid 1930s, he met de Kooning, and considered himself "almost a disciple."

And yet, as the portraits and figure paintings he made in the late 40s attest (because of the war, he chose to work as a tool designer from 1942 to 1945), Tworkov understood that difference and deference are not the same. His use of browns and grays is cool and unsexed next to de Kooning's hot pinks and lemon yellows. The problem of course is that the art world focuses on similarity, and seldom takes the time or has the patience to discern difference, which is why style and mannered gestures are so highly valued; they make commerce easier.

Also, during the late 1940s, long after many of his peers committed themselves to abstraction, Tworkov focused on the still-life because it was, as David Anfam writes in his perspicacious essay in the exhibition's accompanying brochure, "a genre associated with dispassionate pictorial observation." Dispassionate observation has its roots in Modernism's origins, in particular Edouard Manet, who never developed a motif (as did Claude Monet), and was often accused of being "inconsistent" by his harshest critics. It is a disposition that seems foreign to almost everything said about the Abstract Expressionists, who are routinely presented as a bunch of tormented, writhing souls right out of Gustave Dore. Of course clichés don't die; they are resurrected by succeeding generations with predictable regularity. In this regard, Tworkov and his work stand out as exemplary.

For Tworkov, the dream of freedom was rooted in one thing: you banked everything on putting paint on canvas. At the end of his life, knowing that mortality was about to knock on his door for the last time, he used a geometric vocabulary full of solid and transparent diagonal planes to explore the aptly titled "Compression and Expansion of the Square" (1982). The desire to overcome one's limits never subsides. Movement, as the diagonals evoke, could not be stilled, even when the individual ceases to exist. As Tworkov recognized right up until the end, we live in a world marked by what Anfam rightfully calls "chance and purposefulness." That Tworkov, who was in his seventies, made it visible with a calmness that speaks volumes is telling; he did not avert his eyes or look for a way out.



Jack Tworkov, "Transverse" (1957). Collection of Ambassador and Mrs. Donald Blinken.

It would be convenient to believe that Tworokov is simply a historical figure, and that his legacy remains frozen in time now that painting is dead. It is easy to understand why philosophers (if that is what they are) hate painting and keep trying to preside over its passing. Tworokov's dream of freedom critiques all restrictive or institutional agendas: by existing, it quietly and unforcefully reminds us that there is an alternative to the worldview perpetuated by would-be-kings and queens (Ivy League professors and fearful curators) who demand that artists exchange their freedom for academic certification. But Tworokov's motto—"To paint no Tworokovs"—remains alive in the work of Merlin James, Thomas Nozkowski, Catherine Murphy, Chris Martin, Amy Sillman, and Dana Schutz, as anyone with eyes can see.
