



Two work's "Red & Green  
with a Yellow Stripe" (1964).

## Jack Tworkov's different strokes

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Jack Tworkov's timing was off. He came to abstraction a bit later than Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock and remained somewhat

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in the shadows of those heroic painters. Once he hit his stride as a major American abstract expressionist, Pop was in the ascendency. Once he earned a secure niche for his tormented, gestural works, he made a radical switch into a more neutral minimalism, thus confusing his audience.

The superb Tworkov show that curator  
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# BC surveys Tworkov's strokes of independence

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Alston Conley has organized for the Boston College Museum of Art does both artist and his public a great service. It explains the journey of a painter who traveled particularly far and wide in art, from his figurative work of the 1930s to the enigmatic geometric paintings he made right up until his death in 1982. It shows the transitions. Conley — who knew Tworkov through the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, which Tworkov helped to found and where Conley was a fellow from 1978 to 1980 — had tough decisions to make in this show. The BC Museum is small, and Tworkov tended to work big. Conley could include only two dozen paintings and a small selection of works on paper and had to decide whether to focus on the artist's peak periods or to show his development, which meant including transitional works that were not among Tworkov's best.

The curator chose the latter course. It works well, although you're left yearning to see more examples of works painted in series, especially the "Crossfield" paintings, huge monochromatic works with white lines skittering over the surface. The one in the show is a bizarre shade of interior decorator lilac that is so startling in itself that it's hard to get beyond it. A selection of several "Crossfield" paintings might clarify what Tworkov was getting at. There isn't room for them here. But the BC Museum does have a way of getting around its space limitations: BC is the only Boston area museum with a microgallery — a touch-activated computer screen — and in that computer at the moment are 80

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Tworkov paintings that nicely flesh out the actual show. As for documentation of this exhibition that will not travel, which is unfortunate, there is a slim but excellent catalog with a lucid essay by Stephen Westfall. The catalog is particularly valuable — as is the show itself — since Boston's museums have paid virtually no attention to Tworkov and very little to abstract expressionism as a whole.

Jack Tworkov was a Jewish immigrant who moved from his native Poland to New York as an adolescent in 1913. "What saved me then was reading," he wrote six decades later. As a painter, he became highly literate, influenced not only by the history of art, but by sources including mythology. His "House of the Sun" series, Westfall writes, grew out of a preoccupation with Homer's "Odyssey" and Joyce's "Ulysses," and with his own immigrant experience. The examples in the BC show blaze with an energy that explodes into the four corners of the canvas. Their lyrical, swinging brushstrokes suggest music and dance, even a wild bacchanal.

"Seated Woman (Wally)," the earliest work in the exhibition and the only one that dates before World

War II, shows Tworkov struggling to come to grips with Cubism and the School of Paris and push beyond representation. The portrait of his wife is flattened, and line and brushstroke are its subjects as much as Wally is. The lower left corner could stand on its own as an abstract miniature.

After regressing into Social Realism for a time, Tworkov gave up painting when the war began, working as a tool designer. By the mid-'40s he was again searching for a way out of representation. Works from this era form a Cézanne-to-de Kooning progress that culminates, in the BC show, in a painting that is truly Tworkov's own: the 1952 "Guardian," a tall vertical of white and sizzling yellow calligraphic strokes that do suggest a protective presence. While earlier paintings are heavily worked, layered, purged and worked some more, a process that could take a couple of years, "Guardian" looks spontaneous — and complete. Here Tworkov has solved one of the most nagging issues in abstract painting: When is the painting *done*?

In the 1956 "Duo II," the 1957-59 "Victim," the 1961 "Nightfall" and the 1964 "Red and Green with a Yellow Stripe," Tworkov proves himself a master of grand-scale, gut-wrenching abstraction. It's possible to imagine "Victim," with its tumultuous passages of raw, gritty paint, being renamed "Sarajevo." "Nightfall" is more romantic, with sheets of dark color sweeping down on a diagonal, as if a rectilinear painting had been swept by the wind. The darkness reaches into the depths of the painting, crossing ribbon white horizontals as if to block them out.

JACK TWORKOV, 1935-1982:  
AN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST  
INVENTING FORM  
At: the Boston College Museum of Art,  
through May 22.

The value of having "transitional" works in an exhibition is that sometimes wonderful lesser known works come to light. That's true of the all-gray paintings Tworkov made in the late 1960s, all-over works composed of short, thick strokes that create, in some cases, brocadelike textures, with figure and ground completely merged. Flickers of light peeking through the strokes help locate you in these atmospheric, romantic pieces. In "SS 68 No. 2" (this sort of title was part of Tworkov's new neutrality) three lines effectively and economically create a space you can only read as a corner of a room.

The 1970 silvery gray painting "Idling" is as minimalist as Tworkov gets, but even here the brushstrokes curl or lilt, unable to surrender their individuality. Compared to some other minimalists — Agnes Martin, for instance — Tworkov is downright opulent.

Geometry plays a crucial role in the paintings of the last decade of the artist's life. Mathematical systems, grids, diagrams and moves on a chess board all come into play in works that are cooler and more detached than the soul-searching pictures of the earlier years. But one expressive element Tworkov never gave up was the brushstroke that asserts its independence rather than blending smoothly into the surface. That stroke remained Tworkov's declaration of faith in painting.