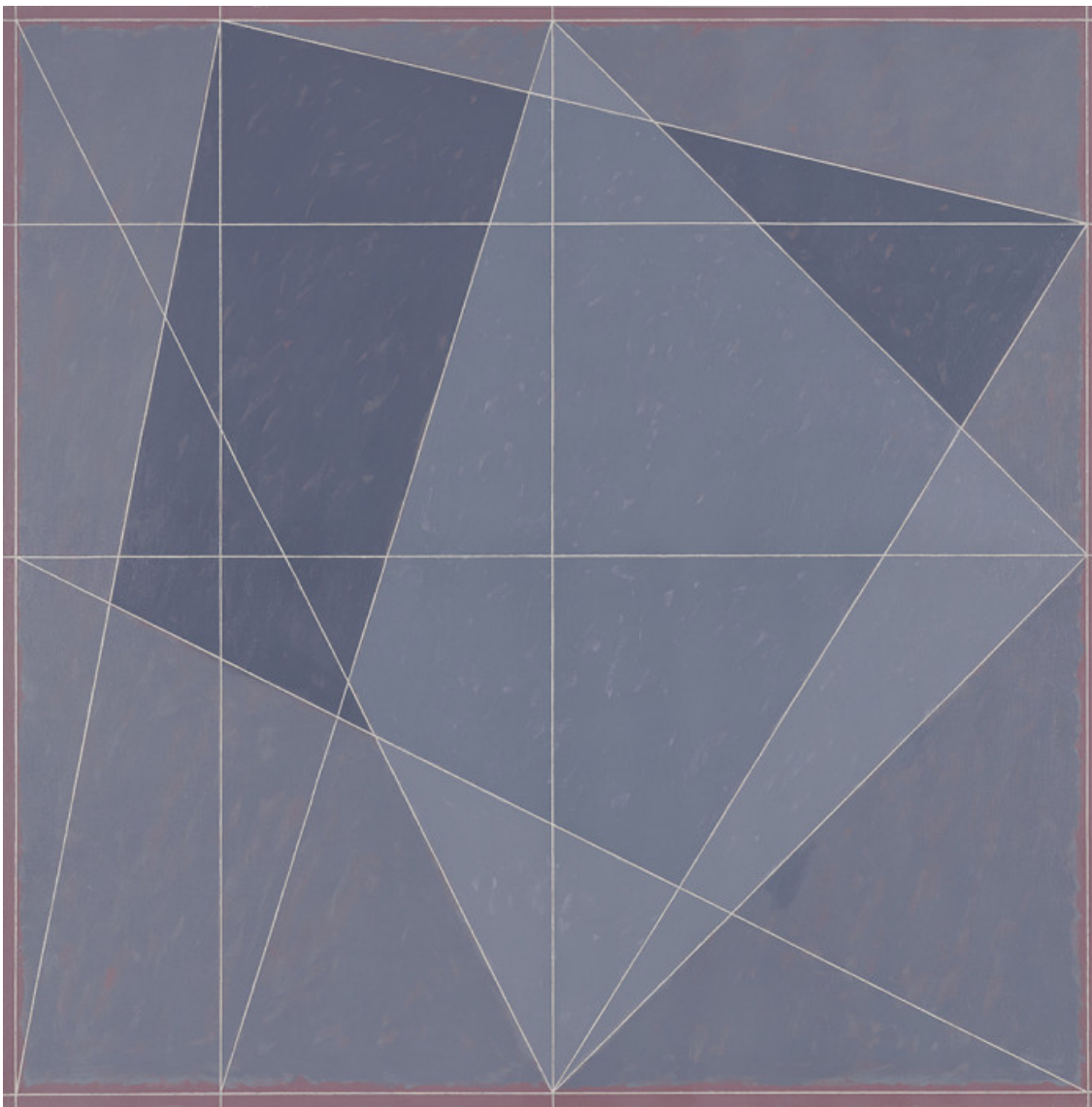


ARTNEWS

DRAWING WITH PAINT: DOUGLAS CRIMP ON JACK TWORKOV, IN 1971

BY *Alex Greenberger* POSTED 09/04/15 11:06 AM



Jack Tworkov, *Alternative IX (OC-Q1-78 #5)*, 1978, oil on canvas.

COURTESY THE ESTATE OF JACK TWORKOV AND ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK

With a show of works by Jack Tworokov having opened yesterday at Alexander Gray Associates, we turn back to our March 1971 issue, in which the art historian Douglas Crimp, who was then a curatorial assistant at the Guggenheim, reviewed two shows by the Polish-born painter. Crimp admired the new work by Tworokov, who had gone from painting in an Abstract Expressionist mode to a proto-Minimalist one. "That he has not sacrificed his passion for either painting or the present is all the more admirable at a time when painting has seemed to race toward its own death," Crimp wrote, six years before he penned his famous "Pictures" essay for the show that launched the careers of Robert Longo, Sherrie Levine, and others. Crimp's review follows in full below.—Alex Greenberger

“Quartered and Drawn”

By Douglas Crimp

Jack Tworokov, established Abstract-Expressionist since the early 1950s, emerges with a more controlled, disciplined style in exhibitions at French & Co. and the Whitney Museum

In the past five years Jack Tworokov has radically reflected his painting in order to extend the possibilities of certain attitudes inherent in his original Abstract-Expressionism. Although he has retained his characteristic painterly brushwork, he has put it in the context of a rigid, systematic format. Such a move is only conceivable in light of 1960s painting. The ironic use of the Action Painter gesture by Johns and Rauschenberg (a loaded image which culminated in Lichtenstein's *Brushstroke* paintings of 1965-66), together with the early field of Newman and Rothko and the development of the stain technique, provided the impetus to a total rejection of overt autobiographical reference as a major concern of painting. It is wholly consistent with Tworokov's thoughtfulness and courage that his recent work should consist of such an expansion of his earlier approach to incorporate subsequent developments in New York painting. What seem to have been the only other viable alternatives—the isolation and consistency of, for example, Still, or the old-master style of de Kooning—are foreign to Tworokov's sensibility, which has allowed him direct and fruitful contact with such men as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Johns and Rauschenberg, and with a generation of art students through his successful chairmanship of the Art Department at Yale.

The results of this process of reconciliation are two related series of paintings: *Crossfields*, painted in a palette limited essentially to pinks and greens, and the black, grey and white *Jags* and their offshoots. In these paintings Tworokov combines the directional brushing and dripping characteristic of his earlier work with a schematic shape or diagram which plots both the design and the image. He has narrowed the variability of his brushwork to create an all-over evenness, as opposed to the strokes-as-areas and brushed passages in his work of the '50s. (During the early '60s Tworokov experimented with the opposite concern in which broad, simple

strokes or patches of color, isolated on a white ground often divided into a grid, related to one another as color areas only.) Although the uniformity of the painting seems to move toward the creation of a holistic image which the schematic drawing subverts, it also affirms the drawing itself by limiting shifts in tonality, or value in the grey paintings, to conformity with the diagram. This sense of tension, precipitated by the contradiction, is a continuation of the conflict between the spontaneity and restraint which has always been integral to Tworkov's art. But whereas before it was obscured by the impression of unconscious activity, to say nothing of the cant, it is now a directly confronted issue.

Discussing his new work, Tworkov has said, "I became interested in a certain kind of drawing... Some of the paintings became for me like an extension of drawing. I saw no great difference between drawing on a piece of paper and drawing on a canvas."¹ The kind of drawing referred to here had occupied Tworkov beginning around 1956 and is related to the kind Clement Greenberg had in mind when he wrote: "It was under the tutelage of Monet's later art that these same young Americans [probably Still, Pollock, et al.] began to reject sculptural drawing—'drawing-drawing' [de Kooning is the unquestioned master of this kind of drawing] ... and turn instead to 'area' drawing, 'anti-drawing' drawing."² Tworkov's "antidrawing" drawings consisted of an all-over pattern of directional strokes of charcoal. The individual lines built up into an only slightly uneven density to create a field-like surface. Certain

paintings of the same period were constructed with the same evenness and density, but the introduction of contrasting color passages mitigated the field quality achieved in the drawings. Paintings like *Red Lake*, 1958, and *Height*, 1958-59, equivocate between Tworkov's Cubist-oriented work and the opposition to Cubism in the painting of Clyfford Still. Still had gone directly back to late Impressionism in order to arrive at his painting of chromatic zones, subverting the Cubist use of value contrasts. Tworkov, however, approached this "anti-Cubism" only in his drawings, where, limiting himself to the value aspect of color which he then evened out, he was able to make a drawing which was all surface. It was later suggested that in these drawings Tworkov "came perilously close to making just an object."³ Jasper Johns, who also took his lead from Impressionism, was doing just that at the time. (It hardly seems paradoxical now, as it once

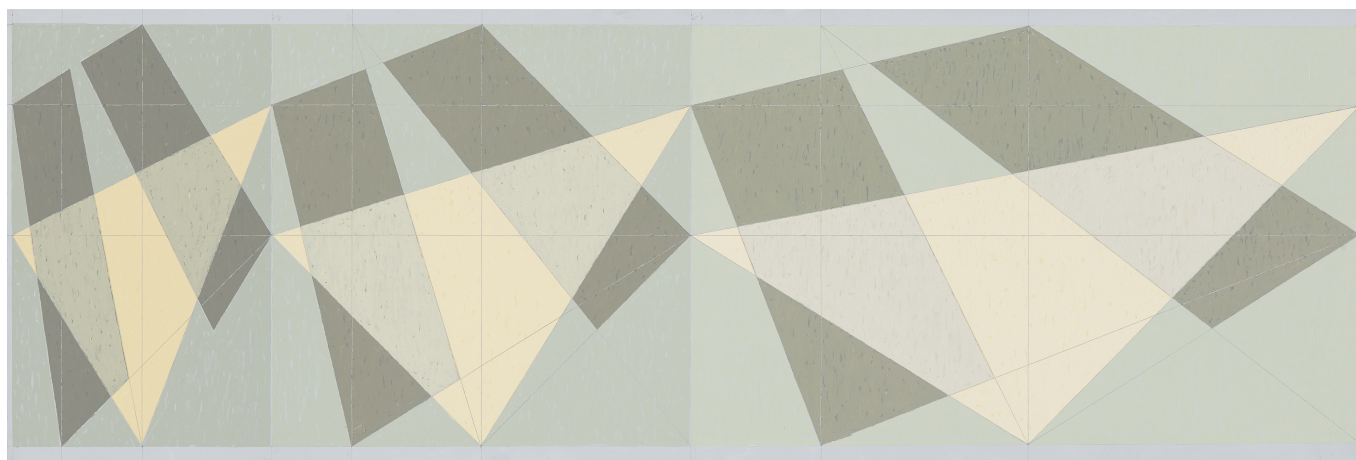


Jack Tworkov, *Idling II*, 1970, oil on canvas.

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did, that Tworkov acquired one of Johns's earliest *Flag* paintings.)

In 1967 Tworkov returned to the all-over drawings in an effort to close in on them with color, rather than *translate* them into color as he had attempted to do earlier. Since the charcoal drawings achieved their object-like character by destroying the value contrast which the medium itself had seemed to dictate, Tworkov began by limiting his color to one value, and moved further toward drawing with paint by eliminating all but the most subtle chromatic distinctions. In the spare, enigmatic painting *SS P No. 8* Tworkov used two colors of similar value, both mixtures of raw sienna. The colors are applied with the same even stroke of the drawings; one, a dark yellowish pink, is applied as a "ground" (like the white of the paper), and the other, a muted green, relates to the charcoal "foreground" surface. This foreground area stops a few inches short of the edge of the canvas except at the bottom of the picture, but strokes of the same color extend into the border. This blending of the two colors in the border, as well as the penetration of the foreground by the ground color, results in an image which fights to move up to the surface plane. To increase the ambivalence implied by this resistance to a single field, Tworkov delineated with a thin white line both the frame within the frame and an approximately geometric shape, whose placement and drawing conform with the direction of the all-over strokes, within the contained area. The destruction of both value and hue distinctions had put Tworkov too close to a single field for his comfort; he needed to invent a device which would allow him to reinstate both without relinquishing his position against Cubist drawing. At the same time he wanted to steer clear of color used exclusively as hue in order to maintain his improvisational surface.



Jack Tworkov, *Compression and Expansion of a Square (Q3-82 #2)*, 1982, oil on canvas.

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The first step was to re-examine the charcoal drawings and approach them from a different angle. By definition, charcoal drawing circumvents all but one aspect of color, that of value, precisely that aspect which '60s color painting wanted to get under control so that color could act exclusively as hue. The most obvious answer sidesteps the issue entirely: Tworkov limited himself

to a literally non-chromatic palette of greys and has continued to do so in one series of paintings since then. At this point Tworokov also moved to a new medium—oil pigment mixed with a vehicle of lucite dissolved in turpentine—which would keep the brushstrokes distinct from one another in much the same way as the charcoal lines retained their identity in the drawings. The quicker drying also resulted in a surface with the same faceted clarity of late Impressionism without limiting the brushstrokes in small jabs of color. In 1967, Tworokov began the series of grey paintings in which bold geometric designs were defined by either shifts in over-all value from one area to another or by thin straight lines or both. At the same time he began the pink and green *Crossfields* in which the ruled lines forming grids were arbitrarily superimposed onto the surface. The grids have since been forced into a more definable relationship to the field of brushing but still read as a superimposed image. With the carry over of ideas from the grey paintings, including a similar type of design and the same drawing-like medium, Tworokov managed to re-introduce chromatic colors without implications of illusory space.

Tworokov arrived at the superimposed diagram as a means of controlling the surface without abandoning the autobiographical nature of his painting. It provides the all-over brushstroke surface with its pictorial conception without moving backward into nature (Impressionism) or forward into literalism (color-field painting). Tworokov saw it as the same conflict he had faced in the earlier work, in which automatism seemed to render a repetitious and uncontrolled handwriting: “The subconscious seems to produce more or less the same material all the time, does not seem to throw up terrifically new revelations...And therefore you really need a kind of unique process of the unconscious, unpremeditated search with the conscious use of the material which comes up. So I have deliberately turned toward planning, toward working from drawings.”⁴ Tworokov here refers to an altogether



Jack Tworokov, *Nightfall*, 1961, oil on canvas.

different kind of drawing than those charcoal sketches which were the starting point for the painting-like drawing of *SS P No. 8*. These drawings are schemata, entirely conceptual in nature, like those which might be used by a painter for whom all choices and adjustments are made in the planning stages before the actual painting is executed. In a recent article on drawing it was suggested that the “two main currents carrying to the present [are] the Constructivist and Surrealist mentalities.”⁵ The importance of facture in Tworokov’s work quite

obviously points to its linkage with the Surrealist mentality (automatism).

However, the mechanical drawing in

Tworokov's recent paintings is not only Constructivist by type but also by its use as image. "1. The subject is the image itself. 2. The image is not associative. 3. The image is premeditated and deliberate and precisely adjusted..." etc.⁶ These schemata are not employed by Tworokov 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 a veil for the image. By following the Impressionist example and employing images derived from Constructivist esthetics, Tworokov has found a means for improvisational painting that does not equivocate between a need to liberate his paintings from the illusionistic space of Cubism and a need to provide his surface with conceptual structure, while remaining wholly committed to abstract painting. That he has not sacrificed his passion for either painting or the present is all the more admirable at a time when painting has seemed to race toward its own death.

1. Phyllis Tuchman, "An Interview with Jack Tworokov," *Artforum*, vol. IX, no. 5, January 1971, p. 66.
2. Clement Greenberg, "The Later Monet," in *Art and Culture*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1965, p. 45. (First published 1956, revised 1959, 1961.)
3. Louis Finkelstein, "Tworokov: Radical Pro," *A.n.*, Apr '64, p. 52.
4. Phyllis Tuchman, *op. cit.*, p. 63.
5. Peter Plagens, "The Possibilities of Drawing," *Artforum*, vol. VIII, no. 2, October 1969, p. 50.
6. George Rickey, *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution*, New York, Braziller, pp.37-39.