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Jack Tworkov: *Mark and Grid, 1931–1982*

September 3 – October 24, 2015

Gallery talk: Jason Andrew, curator and archivist for the Estate of Jack Tworkov, discusses the work of Tworkov on Wednesday, September 30, 2015, 6:00 pm

The first exhibition of work by Jack Tworkov (b.1900, Biala, Poland—d.1982, Provincetown, MA), at Alexander Gray Associates since recently becoming the representative of the artist's Estate. The exhibition examines the artist's stylistic progression from the 1930s through the 1980s featuring work from different decades, and highlights his conceptual approach to painting during the 1960s and 1970s. Tworkov was a prominent presence in the post-war New York City arts scene. He was a founding member of the New York School's seminal Eighth Street Club that included Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Ad Reinhardt, among others. Fairfield Porter called him "one of the more deliberate and intellectual" artists among the abstract expressionists. As Chair of the Art Department of the School of Art and Architecture at Yale University (1963–69), Tworkov taught artists such as Jennifer Bartlett, Chuck Close, Nancy Graves, Brice Marden, Michael Craig-Martin, and Robert Mangold, among others. His tenure at Yale coincided with a radical stylistic shift in his painting towards diagrammatic configurations spurred by a renewed interest in geometry and mathematics. The works on view on the second floor are examples of Tworkov's use of the rectangle as a measurement tool and foundation of his compositions, that allowed him to move away from any reliance on automatism and turned to a methodical creative process.

Tworkov arrived in the United States from Poland at age thirteen. He attended Columbia College as an English major, and spurred by his sister, the artist Janice Biala, he left college in 1923 to begin art classes at the Art Students League and the National Academy of Design in New York. By the late 1940s, Tworkov was balancing his time between painting, his family, and teaching, working and exhibiting in New York City and the artist colony in Provincetown, MA. Throughout his career, Tworkov fundamentally reinvented painting for himself by adhering to limits that defined his grids and marks and became fertile ground for his creative process. Without forgoing the bravura that distinguished his work from the 1950s, Tworkov developed a new visual vocabulary in order to continuously investigate spatial possibilities. As the art historian Lois Fichner-Rathus wrote, "To [Tworkov] the process of personal growth as an artist is paramount in importance. Rather than producing endless variations on the solution to a single artistic problem, [he] has always felt compelled to generate new problems."



View of Bay, Provincetown, 1931
Oil on canvas
20.13h x 30.06w in

The landscape in this painting depicts clearly delineated architectural forms surrounded by patches of color representing the sky, water, and ground. The warmer yellow and browns foreground the composition while the cooler blues recede into the background, providing a sense of depth while maintaining the integrity of the flat pictorial surface. The earliest painting in the exhibition, *View of Bay, Provincetown* demonstrates Tworkov's acquiescence of early European Modern art, especially Paul Cezanne's theories on space and light, an interest that began after viewing his paintings in a 1921 exhibition on French art at the Brooklyn Museum. As a painter who viewed his craft with the utmost seriousness, Tworkov felt a kinship towards Cezanne. For him, Cezanne's art embodied an expressionism that pulsated "...the fever, the anxiety, the emotion (sic)" of his dedication to painting, a result that he strove to attain in his own work throughout his career. The painting's title references Provincetown, MA, the site of the long established artist colony and place where in 1958 Tworkov set-up a studio and continued to spend his summers until his death.

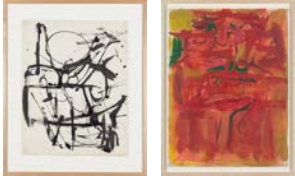


Untitled, 1946
Oil on canvas
24h x 32w in

From 1942–45 Tworkov stopped painting to work as a tool designer and assist in the World War II effort. He returned to art by re-engaging with the history of Modern painting through traditional subject matter, such as still life and portraiture. This approach was, in his words, "...a real therapy...to put aside all probings, all theoretical questions about painting. I wanted to look at objects and paint as directly as I could, and to think as I painted." Although critically well received, Tworkov's still-lives from the mid-1940s broke away with his peers' nonrepresentational painting, a rising artistic trend at the time. The formal concerns of *Untitled* are defined by Tworkov's cubist approach to fragmenting the two-dimensional composition. This work signals a pivotal and necessary formal exploration that led Tworkov towards gestural abstraction. Although he embraced American culture, he often expressed a sense of alienation both in his public life as well as in his private existence as a deeply intellectual painter who defied the whims of the avant-garde in order to forge his own progressive and humanist approach to art.

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Ground Floor Gallery



Left: Untitled, c.1952
Ink on paper
26h x 20w in

Right: Untitled, c.1952
Oil and pencil on paper
25.5h x 16w in

Part of Tworikov's extended series "House of the Sun" (1952–53), these works on paper consist of gestural strokes that resist coalescence into an easily identifiable subject matter. Tworikov often worked through variations on the same theme in paintings and drawings, and consistently relied on his draftsmanship as a crucial step for his painting. The canvases from "House of the Sun" contain clearly defined strokes of various hues among patches of white that create a strong central composition. The drawings on display served as preparatory studies for the paintings and an extension of the overall series. A year after beginning the "House of the Sun," *Artnews* featured a multi-page article by Fairfield Porter with accompanying photographs of the artist's methodical, months-long process that followed his completion of one painting in the series. As Tworikov revealed in the article, the image emerged from the painting process, a delicate balance between impulsive and deliberation, figuration and abstraction, rather than being predetermined by the artist.



Departure, 1951
Oil on canvas
45h x 42w in
Private Collection, New York

During the early 1950s Tworikov often referenced archetypal, heroic themes as he bridged figuration to nonrepresentation, in this case *Departure* derives from Homer's *The Odyssey*. The painting's surface consists of yellow, red and black loosely applied, gestural brushstrokes, structured by the large expanses of white. As a result, a tension emerges between the foreground and background that creates a sense of movement and energy. Each seemingly impulsive stroke and color choice is deliberate and intentional, demonstrating Tworikov's deployment of the unconscious to emphatically organize the composition. *Departure* reveals his reliance on traditional painting techniques that inserted a level of logic into his expressionistic gestures. The artist painted this work one year before he taught—alongside Stefan Wolpe, Charles Olsen, John Cage and Merce Cunningham—at Black Mountain College in Asheville, NC, where students included Robert Rauschenberg, Dorothea Rockburne, and Jonathan Williams. At the time, the college was an unparalleled epicenter of the avant-garde in the United States. In addition to the recognition his work received within the art world, Tworikov was also a highly regarded teacher and mentor to younger generations of painters.



Left: Study for "Barrier Series"
c. 1961
Oilstick on paper
24h x 18w in

Right: Untitled (LP), 1961
Pencil and liquitex on paper
24h x 18w in

Tworikov created these two works on paper at the height of his gesturalism. Energetic and directional marks animate the abstract image's surface while maintaining the flatness of the two-dimensional material. The various colors in these works on paper serve as a structural element, building-up the layers of mark-making. Tworikov amplified this approach in the architectonic use of colors and brushstrokes of *Nightfall* (1961), on view nearby, that heighten the sense of solidity and impenetrability. Drawing had crucial and vital role in Tworikov's approach to painting, complementing it in myriad ways throughout his career. As Tworikov explained, "Drawing was always important to me. I always had the highest opinion of drawing because of what you can do with the simplest possible medium. To reduce everything to a piece of paper and pencil I think is just marvelous; it is one of the highest forms of art."



Nightfall, 1961
Oil on canvas
62h x 76w in

Moving away from his vertical compositions, *Nightfall* continues a technique Tworikov started in the 1950s of applying gestural flame-like strokes along a horizontal framework. Its title serves to ground abstraction in reality by providing a metaphor for dusk that is reinforced by the painting's palette. Crudely rendered rectangles of various hues vibrate within the concreteness of the canvas. Vigorous yet methodical brushstrokes construct areas of color, featuring a deep red that energetically pulls the eye beyond the pictorial surface while a white vertical line abruptly disrupts the composition. *Nightfall's* bold architectonic bands applied in blunt directional swaths assert the painterliness of the surface, modernizing Tworikov's brushwork. This painting emphasized a formal restraint suggestive of Tworikov's exasperation at the time with Abstract Expressionism; in his words,

"I felt that the automatic aspect of abstract expressionist painting of the gestural variety, to which my painting was related, had reached a stage where its forms had become predictable and automatically repetitive. Besides, the exuberance which was a condition at the birth of this painting could not be maintained without pretense forever."

Second Floor Gallery



SSP-67 #8, 1967
Oil on linen
80h x 70w in

In 1965, Tworkov began to study aspects of geometry inherent in a rectangle. At this time, Tworkov began using Lucite, which allowed him to govern the quality and shape of his stroke. The relatively simple monochromatic paintings that resulted provided Tworkov a stable base on which he could control the brushwork of directional strokes and drips of his earlier work. The central green mass of *SSP-67 #8* energetically appears to envelope the entirety of the pictorial field with textured brushwork evocative of Tworkov's loose drawing style. Tworkov never completely eschewed the evidence of his mark-making in his approach to maintaining compositional integrity. Describing his intention, Tworkov explained, "I wanted to read the whole canvas at once, so I went in for more chromatic color, for evenness of touch, for an all-over effect and in some cases eliminated all drawing." Painted during his tenure at Yale University (1963–69), *SSP-67 #8* presents Tworkov's deliberate painterly geometry at its most rudimentary, a characteristic that would soon evolve into a radical stylistic shift that combined gestural but contained brushstrokes and endless variations on the grid.



Note, 1968
Oil on linen
80h x 70w in
Private Collection, New York

Note presents a luminescent surface of vertical stout brushstrokes segmented horizontally by evenly spaced, indistinct lines that appear to radiate from the nearly monochromatic palette. A spontaneity in the calligraphic quality of the painting's surface, reinforced by the work's title, evokes the improvisational rhythm of jazz that Tworkov referenced as an inspiration in his creative process. Tworkov's rigorous structure is evident in the smooth handling of the paint that also reveals a degree of randomness in the directional expressive strokes and drips of his earlier brushwork. The flat abstraction of *Note* belies the layers of paint and methodically applied strokes, gestures, and colors underneath the unified picture plane. The juxtaposition between caution and imprudence creates a tension that speaks to the human experience Tworkov intended to capture in his paintings. In a journal entry from 1952, more than a decade before *Note*, at the height of his expressionistic paintings, Tworkov mentions an interest in incorporating "...the calligraphic element as a structural unit— to make spontaneous movement serve a scheme that evolves out of prolonged day-to-day meditation, to serve the deceitful purpose of making it appear that concept and form are spontaneous functions of each other—to transcend in the finished work the drudgery of daily labor."



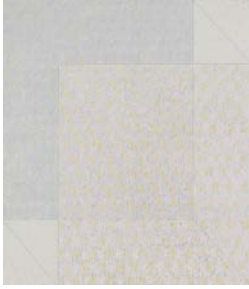
Idling II, 1970
Oil on canvas
80h x 70w in

A forerunner of post-Minimalism, Tworkov entered the 1970s with a conceptual perspective towards painting that evolved into self-imposed rules and limits, yet retained the presence of the artist's hand. *Idling II*, the second in a series of three paintings similar in size and composition, exemplifies the tension between spontaneity and restraint. In contrast to his gestural and vividly colored Abstract Expressionist paintings of the 1950s, and his planar geometric paintings of the mid-1970s and early 1980s, *Idling II* flattens the picture plane with, as art historian Lois Fichner-Rathus describes, "(a) tapestry of thin, woven strokes that were applied predictably and rhythmically." In *Idling II*, Tworkov's interest lays in the creation of a uniform surface through compositional, chromatic, and gestural reduction, which stemmed in part from his admiration of Georges Seurat's dark, dense drawings of the late 1800s. These concerns first appeared in a mid-1950s series of charcoal drawings, in which Tworkov evenly applied lines across the paper, foregoing compositional organization and creating a field of dark marks. He explains, "For a long time I didn't paint these drawings although I wanted to, because I always thought that I had to translate those drawings in terms of color. Until it occurred to me, why do I have to interpret them in color?" Tworkov rejected abstraction's overriding emphasis on primary colors and the belief that color carries psychological connotations. For him, reducing his palette allowed him to focus on form.



P73 #5, 1973
Oil on canvas
96h x 96w in

P73 #5 is the first of ten works in a series painted at the artist's studio in Provincetown in 1973. Its distinct brushstrokes emerge from layers of acrylic paint applied in a seemingly metronomic regularity while the visible dripping of the strokes retain a trace of the artist's gesture. The work offers a spatial play of interlocking, folding, overlapping, or intersecting planes. "I lean towards simple shapes," Tworkov wrote, "but where you could make, say, some shape that gave you some sense of illusion I deliberately follow that. I deliberately took certain shapes by introducing oblique lines as well as vertical lines." Tworkov's clear divisions of the pictorial surface allude to mathematical precision and create a duality between spontaneity and control. The title *P73 #5* references the markers of time: 73 denotes the year of creation, while #5 is a sequence of unspecified paintings. As he turned to geometric principles in his art, Tworkov frequently abandoned referential titles for numeric codes, creating an indexing vocabulary to further distance his work from subject matter based in reality.



Q4-74 #1, 1974
Oil on linen
80h x 70w in

Subtle tonal gradations emerge from the seemingly monochrome surface of *Q4-74 #1*. The dense accumulation of brushstrokes dominates the sensible white lines demarcating the various geometric shapes, and evocative spontaneity contrasts with simple logic that animates the picture field. In this work, Tworkov's desire for both structure and rhythm are clearly at play. Incorporating mathematics in his art, as opposed to an over-reliance on gestural abstraction, allowed Tworkov to return his practice to the process of painting, an inclination that initially drew him to Cezanne. Tworkov never completely abandoned the singular characteristic of his brushwork even as his reliance on mathematical concepts would soon become increasingly overt. As scholar Lois Fichner-Rathus articulated, Tworkov's paintings from this period link with the essence of Abstract Expressionism through "(t)he role of accident in creation, a love of the painting process, and insistence on artistic participation."



Knight Series #8 (Q3-77 #2)
1977
Oil on canvas
90h x 72w in

Knight Series #8 (Q3-77 #2) is part of Tworkov's "Knight series" (1974–77), a pivotal body of work from this period through which he explored issues of limits, systems and intuition. The series consists of eight paintings and approximately thirty works on paper. For each work, Tworkov determined the compositional arrangement by tracing the various possibilities of the Knight's move across a chessboard; the baseline grid system, divided by visible construction lines, references the geometric pattern of the board game. *Knight Series #8 (Q3-77 #2)* plots Tworkov's imagined course starting with the dot in the upper left, moving only in straight lines as far as the grid will allow and never in the same square twice. Changes in color across the pictorial surface reinforce Tworkov's diagrammatic approach to painting through various hues methodically applied with small vertical strokes in rows that fill-up each section. The painting's loose, but regulated brushstrokes reveal Tworkov's experimentation with planar illusion and geometric form, representing the artist's belief that "planning does not exclude intuitive and sometimes random play." Tworkov created the first painting in the series in 1975, the same year Saigon fell and the Vietnam War came to an end. He had taken an ardent position against the War, an attitude that was reflected in his paintings through metaphors of sequence that favored compositional logic and order over chaos and ambiguity.



Alternative IX (OC-Q1-78 #5)
1978
Oil on canvas
72h x 72w in

Ten paintings make up Tworkov's "Alternative Series" (1977–78). The series is one of the artist's most important late works featuring variations on a gridded Fibonacci sequence derived from a 3:5:8 ratio. The aim of the series was to create "identical structures but make each one a totally different painting experience [through] the color and the brushing." *Alternative IX (OC-Q1-78 #5)* furthers the painter's use of mathematic concepts, including the "golden mean" and dynamic symmetry. In this painting, the composition radiates from the perimeter generating modulated volumes connected by white lines. The planes create an illusion of overlapping shapes generating a three-dimensional visual depth. This painting is emblematic of how mathematical precision proved a vital and fertile ground for Tworkov's creative process.



Compression and Expansion of the Square (Q3-82 #2), 1982
Oil on canvas
36h x 108w in

Compression and Expansion of the Square (Q3-82- #2) is the last painting Tworkov did before his death. The large horizontal canvas depicts layered brushstrokes and a gridded background, from which precise square forms emerge as if unfolding through space. For this work, Tworkov pared down the numerous diagonal lines of past compositions to select a few strong compositional axes to create quadrilaterals and triangles of various sizes. The overlapping geometric shapes create a sense of opposing movement pulling on contrasting diagonals. Although gravely ill, Tworkov's determination and commitment to his art energized his time at the studio until this last painting. "I passed last night fairly free of pain," he wrote in one of his final journal entries, "I dreamed weird dreams. But one dream that seemed to last most of the night consisted in going over exactly the moves in the studio that I had to go through today working on *Expansion and Contraction of the Square*. Only the same moved repeated themselves again and again to the point of exhaustion."