

March 16, 2007

ART IN REVIEW; Jack Tworkov

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER

Rhythm, 1955-1970

Mitchell-Innes & Nash

1018 Madison Avenue, at 79th Street

Through March 30

For a pioneer of abstraction like Kandinsky, canvases needed to have titles like "Improvisation" and "Composition" so that viewers understood that his paintings were, like music, nonrepresentational. By the time you get to Jack Tworkov and the 1950s, such tactics were superfluous; the association between music and abstraction was well established.

Tworkov (1900-82), like many of his peers, was a jazz fanatic. He favored Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane and frequented the Five Spot, a club in the East Village. The paintings here capture with bold, slashing movement both the music and mood of its performers and audience.

One called "5-Spot" (1960), a vibrant blue and red painting, contains a burst of black brushstrokes erupting from its core like a sax or horn solo. The heavy vertical brushstrokes in "Blue Note" (1959) suggest the mood of a smoke-veiled club or the sensation of music washing over its listener. "Note" (1969), a nearly monochrome gray painting bisected by fuzzy white lines, conjures a blank musical score or the chalkboard-style canvases of Cy Twombly.

Despite being a founding member of the Club, that contentious midcentury art world establishment, Tworkov has often been overshadowed by other New York School painters. His work from the late 1940s and early '50s eerily echoes the isolated figures and "Excavation"-era compositions of de Kooning (or vice versa, you might argue, particularly regarding the mid-1940s Cubist-inspired figures).

The gathering of works here, including two paintings on loan from the Whitney Museum housed in fortresslike plexiglass boxes, tries to remedy this by picking up with Tworkov at the moment he pulled away from de Kooning. Lodging his work within a musical context also posits the paintings as cultural documents, reminders of what Tworkov did in the off hours and where, outside of art, he found his inspiration. MARTHA SCHWENDENER
