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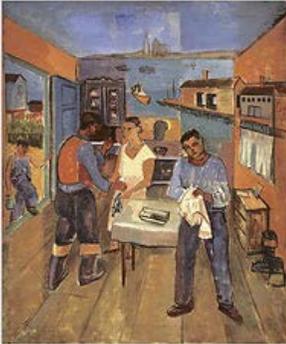
ART REVIEW | JACK TWORKOV

A Modern Artist Who Wielded Both Pen and Brush

By KAREN ROSENBERG
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The painter Jack Tworkov (1900-82) made his name at the height of Abstract Expressionism, but he was never really comfortable with the angst-filled, tortured aspects of that movement. A noted intellectual and a sharp-eyed critic, he held his art to high, self-imposed standards of clarity and coherence. And, as a small Tworkov survey at the UBS Art Gallery confirms, he did more soul-searching on paper than on canvas.

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Estate of Jack Tworkov and Mitchell-Innes & Nash

Tworkov's "Fisherman's Family," oil on canvas, from 1931.

Tworkov was born in Biala, Poland, and grew up in a Lower East Side tenement. He went to [Stuyvesant High School](#) and then [Columbia University](#), planning to devote himself to writing. Gradually, he drifted into art and found himself shuttling between an artists' colony in Provincetown, Mass., and the Art Students League in New York.

He never really put down his pen, filling journal after journal with notes and musings. He published criticism, including a 1950 article on Chaim Soutine that was later hailed as one of the earliest efforts to wrestle with the new style of painting.

"Jack Tworkov: Against Extremes — Five Decades of Painting," organized by Jason Andrew, the curator and archivist of the Tworkov estate, is the artist's first New York retrospective. Among the 26 paintings on view (supplemented by journals, jottings and works on paper) are loans from the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo and the Provincetown Art Association and Museum.

The show is accompanied by a related exhibition of letters, photographs and other Tworkov ephemera at the New York Research Center of the Archives of American Art, also in the UBS building. Both shows coincide with the



Rockefeller University

Some of the 26 works by the painter Jack Tworkov on view in his first New York retrospective: above, "Pink Mississippi" (1954), oil on canvas; far left, "Watergame" (1955), oil on canvas; left, "Thursday" (1960), oil on linen.

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Pacewildenstein Gallery

"Watergame" (1955), oil on canvas.

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Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

"Thursday" (1960), oil on linen.

publication of "The Extreme of the Middle: Writings of Jack Tworkov," edited by Mira Schor and published by Yale (where Tworkov was chairman of the art department from 1963 to 1969).

In all of this Tworkov comes across as a restless but hamstrung figure. His career didn't start, or end, with Abstract Expressionism and the New York School. In the beginning he was a Social Realist; much later he embraced a geometric form of Minimalism. He switched movements effortlessly but rarely broke new ground.

Among his immigrant peers, Tworkov may have been the most connected to the Old World. He referred to himself as "a ghetto-Jew" and didn't deracinate, like [Mark Rothko](#) (born Marcus Rothkowitz), or make up stories about his background, like [Arshile Gorky](#). As the art historian David Anfam notes in his brochure essay, Tworkov's article on Soutine had an element of self-

diagnosis. (Soutine was a fellow "wanderer," an artist "living in a foreign land.")

Tworkov also gravitated to [Cézanne](#) and [Matisse](#), as his early works reveal, managing to infuse even Social Realist canvases like "Fisherman's Family" (1931) with Francophile modernity and grace. Later, after the war, he shared a studio and a sensibility with [Willem de Kooning](#) (both artists had worked together on the [Works Progress Administration](#) Federal Art Project in the late 1930s).

"Untitled (Seated Figure)" (1950) could be a male version of one of de Kooning's women, in an earthier palette.

Literature was still on Tworkov's mind. In the early 1950s he made a series of increasingly abstract paintings based on Homer's "Odyssey" (via Joyce's "Ulysses"). He loved classical myths but disdained self-mythologizing. "The artists I like are ones who have stopped playing the aesthete — people who do not live other artists' biographies," he wrote to Franz Kline in 1950.

He peaked in the second half of that decade, turning out commanding paintings with centralized clusters of vertical and horizontal strokes. The best of those on view, "Pink Mississippi" and "Watergame," pit roseate pinks against steely blues.

Tworkov wrote of these works: "The central image of these paintings is an action brought near by a telescope but out of earshot, silent and meaningless. In a thicket the actors might be lovers, or a murderer and his victim — the anxiety is that of silence of an action without sound, without meaning." This noirish description has corollaries in the work of [Philip Guston](#) and [Francis Bacon](#).

By the early 1960s his cuneiformlike brushstrokes had been replaced with larger, streamlined motifs he called Veils, Screens, Grids and Barriers. He achieved some commercial success, including shows at Castelli and a touring Whitney solo in 1964.

The paintings of this period, including "Thursday" (1960), are muscular and self-important, heralding the corporate co-option of Abstract Expressionism. And the linen-upholstered, dark-wood-paneled galleries along the UBS lobby don't do the paintings any favors. (It's easy to imagine them in the office of the "Mad Men" ad agency owner Bert Cooper, hanging next to the Rothko.)

To his credit, Tworkov didn't care much about meeting anyone else's expectations. In a 1962 letter to his sister, he described a new series of red, white and blue works as "an ironic comment on my growing patriotism," and observed, referring to [Leo Castelli](#), "They are quite different from the group of paintings called Barrier series, so different that I have Leo quite worried."

The example on view, "RWB #3" (1961), is a clumsy, unfinished-looking painting. But its cockeyed boosterism reflects the tentative optimism of the year in which it was made, and is reminiscent of [Jasper Johns](#)'s maps and flags.

Around 1963, a change sets in. Tworkov's late paintings — and there are many in this show — are as subdued as his midcentury works are swaggering. These geometric compositions, mapped out in preparatory drawings and delivered in measured doses of blue, gray and brown, are an antidote to two decades of gesture and expression.

There are exceptions. In "Crossfield 1" (1968) and "Partitions" (1971), Tworkov reintroduces pink to salubrious effect. Elsewhere, however, he pursues a cool neutrality, along the lines of Johns or [Agnes Martin](#). His journals of the time are filled with self-abnegating dictums in the manner of [John Cage](#): "The best way to work is to empty out your head, to aim at nothing, to become the medium of a process that is almost outside of oneself."

Tworkov persisted with the geometric style until his death even as Neo-Expressionism took hold in the early 1980s. In a 1981 letter to the artist Andrew Forge, Tworkov described his approach as "less hypocritical at the moment than the apparent ecstatic self-expression that a more romantic art calls for." Characteristically, he reined himself in when everyone else was letting go.

"Jack Tworkov: Against Extremes — Five Decades of Painting" continues through Oct. 27 at the UBS Art Gallery, 1285 Avenue of the Americas, at 51st Street, Manhattan; (212) 713-2885.

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