Drawing for "House of the Sun", 1952. Oil on paper, 19″ × 17″. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Donald Blinken

JACK TWORKOV

APRIL KINGSLEY

Someone once said about jazz that it did not actually have to be improvised, but that it had to convey the sense of improvisation. The same thing might be said of much that was Abstract-expressionist painting, and of the work of Jack Tworkov. As he says, "I let reason examine disorder."[1] Throughout his long career Tworkov has managed to maintain a delicate balance of opposites in his work, opposites which comprise two of the major poles of modern art—constructivism and expressionism. It is in his work, even more obviously than in the work of most of his fellow Abstract-expressionists, that one may readily discern the (Cubist) scaffolding around which they wove their webs of automatist-derived painterliness. It is probably due to his handling of this basic duality that Tworkov was uniquely able to make a wholly successful changeover from the heat of fifties angst to cool sixties control without falsifying his personal idiom.

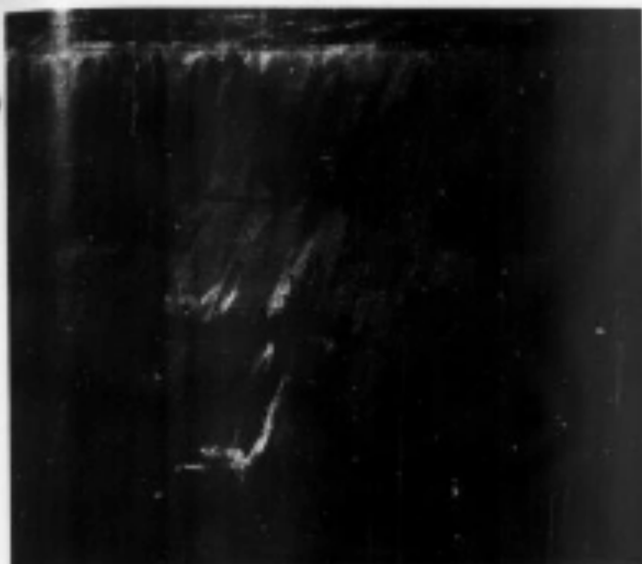
An immigrant to this country at the age of 13 from Poland where he was born in 1900, Tworkov studied mechanical drawing in high school and soon began to paint. By the early twenties he was living on his own in Greenwich Village and seeing the works of modern French artists as they were being introduced into this country. He studied with conservative painters like Ivan G. Olinsky, Charles Hawthorne, and Guy Pène du Bois, as well as with Ross Moffett and Karl Knaths who were considered more radically modern. During the depression he worked for the WPA as did so many of his fellow New York artists, including Willem de Kooning with whom he established a long and close friendship.

The depression and war years were years of crisis and dilemma for many American artists. Tworkov, who'd been painting traditional landscapes, still-lifes, and portraits in an effort to keep in touch with the everyday world, felt that he had "tried to salve my social conscience at the expense of my esthetic instincts."[2] Between 1942 and 1945 he worked for the war effort as a tool designer and gave up painting. When he returned to it in 1945, he did so with renewed vigor, and a fresh sense of confidence and independence. He worked simultaneously in two directions—painting conventional post-Cubist still-lifes that concentrated on solving formal problems, while he made automatic abstract drawings and paintings. Only the former were ever exhibited and they are of interest primarily because of the formal clues they provide to his later work. In them, line doesn't really shape or contain forms so much as it flits around them, binding them into the background, indicating direction and passing through the picture space. This non-sculptural drawing style is a constant in his work.

Between 1948 and 1953 Tworkov's studio adjoined that of de Kooning, and despite the fact that Tworkov produced some of his finest paintings during the period, it is impossible not to see similarities between his work and that of his formidable friend. He concentrated on figurative painting during these years with the exception of the summers of 1948 and 1949 when he painted dense "all-over" landscapes inspired by the Virginia woods. *House of the Sun*, 1952–53, probably the finest painting of this period, and the drawing for it, offer a crucial iconographical key to his subsequent work. A cluster of curvilinear forms is centered within a wide horizontal stress, which is, in turn, anchored by a centralized vertical swath located in the top half only. Although the configuration is based on "the ancient wheel-like symbol of the sun as a tumbler, with four legs extending from the center in the form of a swastika",[3] it is also suggestive of a human figure seated

Figure P.H., 1954. Oil, 55″ × 27″. Collection Dr. and Mrs. Nathan Alpen

The stroke most natural to Tworkov—a slash from upper right to lower left (half of an X)—began to predominate in his abstractions in 1955 when his mature style coalesced. In paintings like *Watergame*, *Cradle*, *Duo* and *Games III* dense thickets of these strokes veil massive horizontal and vertical thrusts. The stroke is angry, brutal, the color acerbic. Strangely, many of these paintings seem to have something in common with the irrational violence of Francis Bacon's distorted figures. Later, from 1958 on, in the *Barrier* series of paintings—*Transverse*, *Crest*, *Height*, etc.—the mood is slightly more relaxed. Mixed colors promote an atmospheric vision of muted tonalities and the long brushstrokes seem a bit gentler. Bar forms float to the surface and pencil thin grid-lines barely manage to restrain the accumulations of reed-like strokes that move in from one side or the other of these paintings. The



Games III, 1956. Oil, 38¼" × 44". Collection Mr. and Mrs. David A. Prager

before horizontal architectural members, as comparison with the drawing of a *Seated Female Figure* of 1958 shows. This seated figure in an architectural context reappears again and again throughout his work of the fifties and early sixties. Many of the *Games* and *Barrier* series paintings are organized around it and in numerous charcoal drawings this configuration shows dimly through blackened meshes of crossing strokes. Occasionally this "figure" may be reduced to near non-existence, but the architectural framework surrounding it is almost always present. No matter how schematically or faintly it is rendered, it functions as a stabilizing grid for the explosive linear networks he superimposes on it. It is this underlying grid structure, barely visible in some of his more violent paintings of the fifties, that comes to the fore as the organizing principle of his work after the mid-sixties.

Tworkov utilized an alternative format in some of the paintings from the fifties and early sixties which was based on a standing figure located in a narrow vertical space. *Figure P.H.* of 1954 is one of his last paintings to employ the figure explicitly. Afterwards it is abstracted into long, sweeping diagonal strokes which are interwoven and overlapped like crossed limbs. *Changes on Wednesday I and II*, the *Duo* series, and, to some extent, his *Homage to Stefan Wolpe* of 1960 are based on this configuration.

Figure P.H. and two others of the same year, *Pink Mississippi* and *Father*, are interesting examples of Tworkov's facture at its most painterly. At no other time does he use such a pigment-laden brush. Unlike Philip Guston or de Kooning, Tworkov doesn't normally dwell on his brushstrokes as units or call attention to the fattiness or substance of his medium. His stroke is characteristically fast, efficient, and draftsmanlike. It neither defines the edges of shapes, nor does it function as a shape in itself, the way a stroke by Franz Kline does, for instance. As pure drawing his mark has its closest parallel in Jackson Pollock's drip. Even when, as in the 1958 drawing of a *Seated Female Figure* mentioned earlier, he assembles lines around a figure, they don't actually form it. Instead they seem to hover in its vicinity, the shape itself being negatively (almost negligently) left as the area where the lines aren't. His lines are always more concerned with their direction or hypothetical destinations than with settling into actually being or shaping forms.

When Tworkov says that "Certain types of brushing meet the mood, maybe the need, of the body the way certain kinds of motion meet the mood and need of a dancer"[4] he is affirming his belief in gesture as the direct transmitter of the artist's emotion. Despite the fact that he thinks that "The subconscious seems to produce more or less the same material all the time . . ."[5] he believes that . . ." if you eliminate subject, if you eliminate references to nature . . . one of the significant things left is the trace of the hand. It is the way a man reveals so much of himself, just precisely by the way he handles paint, the way he treats the material, by the way he permits its flow, or contains its flow. There is a whole range of thought and feeling in that process."[6] For Tworkov, then, the calligraph is the seismograph of the artist's soul and an essential component of his style, no matter what alterations it goes through.

Seated Female Figure, 1958. Pencil, 11¼" × 8¼". Solinger Collection, New York

Brake II, 1960. Oil, 65" × 77". Collection Mr. and Mrs. John L. Eastman

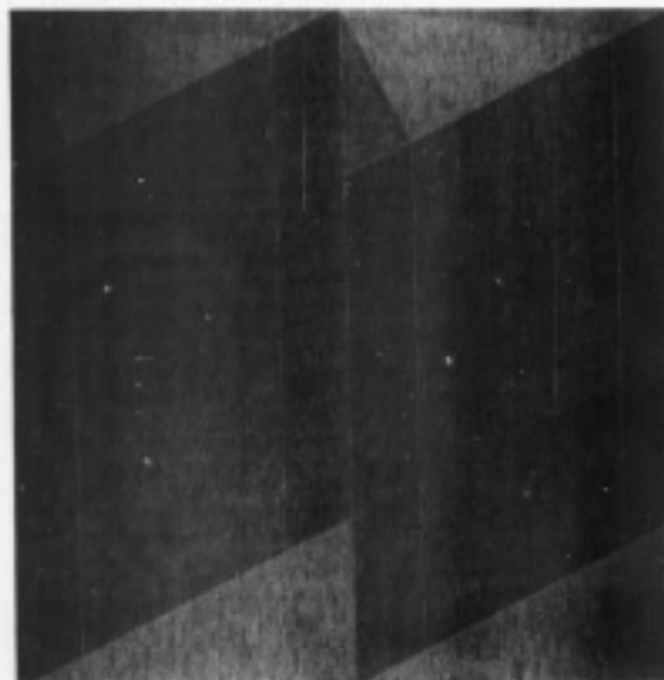
Brake series (out of which came the *Red, White and Blue* paintings of the sixties) are harsher. No tonal modulations soften the transitions between stripes of pure color that are broad, horizontally active and often interwoven.

In 1963, Tworkov painted *West 23rd Street*, the high point of the work of these years. It combines the acidulous unmodulated striping of the *Brake* series with the stroking densities of the *Barrier* series and the strident red-green primary coloration of the vertical format *Duo* series. By the following year Tworkov's work was beginning to undergo dramatic changes as his career went through a major turning point. A large retrospective exhibition of his work was mounted at the Whitney Museum while the death knell of Abstract-expressionism was sounding throughout New York. Pop art was achieving mass popularity and serious abstraction was cooling, solidifying and minimizing itself. He had felt by the end of the fifties 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" and he had begun "... to look around for more disciplined and contemplative forms".[7] Never one to act impulsively, it took Tworkov until the mid-sixties to find these forms. Two factors were primarily responsible for Tworkov's remarkable ability to evolve logically out of Abstract-expressionism with a viable, honest new style. The first was the continual presence in his work of the structural underpinning or grid which served as a foundation and foil for his vigorous brushwork. This may have been, all along, an unconscious residue from his early training in mechanical drawing, but in the mid-sixties he also began to study geometry and the number system. "I became fascinated", he says, "with the little I learned, and found in some aspects of the geometry of a rectangle a new starting point for composing a painting... What I wanted was a simple structure dependent on drawing as a base on which the brushing, spontaneous and pulsating, gave a beat to the painting somewhat analogous to the beat in music."[8]

His lifelong dependence on the stroked line to convey the emotional content of his painting was the second factor. During the late fifties he had begun a series of charcoal drawings in which evenly stroked lines were massed uncompositionally all over the field like solid curtains of blackness. Though he was delighted with the tonal densities of these drawings, he wasn't able to see a way to translate them into paintings until the mid-sixties when he allowed the geometric framework to play a much more significant compositional role. Gesture as statement had to be de-rhetoricized and subsumed beneath rationality.

One might say that his work moved from sharing something with the agitation of Futurism to the serenity of Seurat during this transition period. As his stroke became more homogenized and controlled, his color became progressively more dilute or

Untitled (Q3-72-5), 1972. Oil on canvas, 72" × 72"



Facing page, above: *West 23rd*, 1963. Oil, 60½" × 80". Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Below, *Trace*, 1966. Oil on canvas, 50" × 60"

(All illustrations by courtesy of the Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York. See also color illustrations, page 38)

changed into non-color. Pinks, pale greens, mauves and grays took over from the acrimonious reds and greens and the grating blues of the earlier painting. Not that Tworkov could ever be accused of painting with "decorator colors" or of having a sweet palette. Even his palest hues create a slightly unnerving sensation. They are never tasteful or easy to like, but rather challenging. (It's an interesting footnote that Tworkov's paintings are extremely difficult to hang next to other artists' works; they always seem to set up jarring coloristic vibrations.)

Starting out with simple bordered fields of linearity like the *SSP* series of 1967, Tworkov's post-transition work became more and more subtly complex, both coloristically and compositionally. In many of the *Crossfield* paintings he utilized horizontal grid structures which organized screens of pink and green lines into bands. He explored aspects of geometric illusionism related to the shape of the rectangle in the grey *Jag* series. More recently, his color strokes pointillistically define spatial illusion in terms of hue and density, as overlapping screen-like rectangles fold and unfold across the canvas. He manages to maintain, in the best of his new work, a tenuous balance between surface and illusionism, calligraphy and geometry; between sensations of spontaneity and freedom and coolly contemplative detachment.

Tworkov has said that, "In a sense, the abstract painting which most typically represents the iconography of the postreligious age, consciously or unconsciously expresses an element of despair which runs like a thread through our century and which is an ingredient in all serious abstract painting."[9] This sense of despair and frustration is definitely present in his work of the fifties and early sixties. The "barriers" seemed to block off our view of figures and interior or exterior incident with closed windows and doors; the "brakes" functioned like fences preventing our entrance into the pictorial space. These paintings often conveyed a sense of negation or denial, of spiteful anger and refusal. A line was like a scratch mark, crossing out or eradicating something from visibility. Tworkov treated the painting field as a screen through which he allowed only fleeting glimpses. Since the mid-sixties these screens have become increasingly more transparent and ephemeral. They seem like quiet reminders that the painting field is a place of meditation to be approached with the utmost respect. In some of them a gap appears near the center resembling a door standing ajar, as if inviting our entry. This may be an unconscious reference to a childhood pleasure he recalls of "playing with my younger sister on the grounds of an old Castle ruin reached through a breach in a wall bordering our yard",[10] but it functions as a symbol of optimism and open-ended possibility in a time when such things are rare, indeed.

(Jack Tworkov's next exhibition, following one in autumn 1973 at the Gertrude Kasle Gallery, Detroit, will be presented at Nancy Hoffman's in New York in the spring.)

NOTES

1. Jack Tworkov, "Notes on My Painting", *Art in America*, vol. 61, no. 5, September-October 1973, p. 66.
2. Edward Bryant, *Jack Tworkov*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1964, p. 9.
3. Ibid., p. 15.
4. Jack Tworkov, op. cit., p. 68.
5. Phyllis Tuchman, "An Interview with Jack Tworkov", *Artforum*, vol. IX, no. 5, January 1971, p. 63.
6. Ibid., p. 67.
7. Jack Tworkov, op. cit., p. 69.
8. Ibid., p. 69.
9. Ibid., p. 68—69.
10. Ibid., p. 68.

Brake series (out of which came the *Red, White and Blue* paintings of the sixties) are harsher. No tonal modulations soften the transitions between stripes of pure color that are broad, horizontally active and often interwoven.

In 1963, Tworkov painted *West 23rd Street*, the high point of the work of these years. It combines the acidulous unmodulated striping of the *Brake* series with the stroking densities of the *Barrier* series and the strident red-green primary coloration of the vertical format *Duo* series. By the following year Tworkov's work was beginning to undergo dramatic changes as his career went through a major turning point. A large retrospective exhibition of his work was mounted at the Whitney Museum while the death knell of Abstract-expressionism was sounding throughout New York. Pop art was achieving mass popularity and serious abstraction was cooling, solidifying and minimizing itself. He had felt by the end of the fifties 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" and he had begun "... to look around for more disciplined and contemplative forms".[7] Never one to act impulsively, it took Tworkov until the mid-sixties to find these forms. Two factors were primarily responsible for Tworkov's remarkable ability to evolve logically out of Abstract-expressionism with a viable, honest new style. The first was the continual presence in his work of the structural underpinning or grid which served as a foundation and foil for his vigorous brushwork. This may have been, all along, an unconscious residue from his early training in mechanical drawing, but in the mid-sixties he also began to study geometry and the number system. "I became fascinated", he says, "with the little I learned, and found in some aspects of the geometry of a rectangle a new starting point for composing a painting... What I wanted was a simple structure dependent on drawing as a base on which the brushing, spontaneous and pulsating, gave a beat to the painting somewhat analogous to the beat in music."[8]

His lifelong dependence on the stroked line to convey the emotional content of his painting was the second factor. During the late fifties he had begun a series of charcoal drawings in which evenly stroked lines were massed uncompositionally all over the field like solid curtains of blackness. Though he was delighted with the tonal densities of these drawings, he wasn't able to see a way to translate them into paintings until the mid-sixties when he allowed the geometric framework to play a much more significant compositional role. Gesture as statement had to be de-rhetoricized and subsumed beneath rationality.

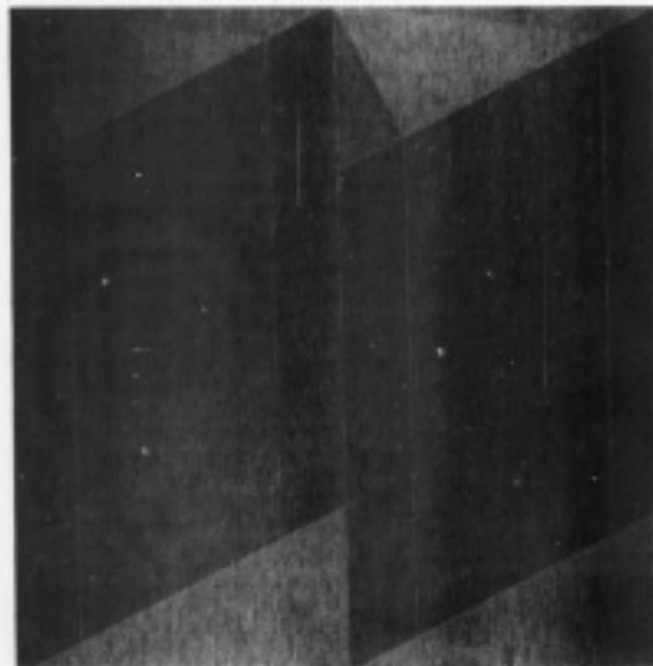
One might say that his work moved from sharing something with the agitation of Futurism to the serenity of Seurat during this transition period. As his stroke became more homogenized and controlled, his color became progressively more dilute or changed into non-color. Pinks, pale greens, mauves and grays took over from the acrimonious reds and greens and the grating blues of the earlier painting. Not that Tworkov could ever be accused of painting with "decorator colors" or of having a sweet palette. Even his palest hues create a slightly unnerving sensation. They are never tasteful or easy to like, but rather challenging. (It's an interesting footnote that Tworkov's paintings are extremely difficult to hang next to other artists' works; they always seem to set up jarring coloristic vibrations.)

Starting out with simple bordered fields of linearity like the *SSP* series of 1967, Tworkov's post-transition work became more and more subtly complex, both coloristically and compositionally. In many of the *Crossfield* paintings he utilized horizontal grid structures which organized screens of pink and green lines into bands. He explored aspects of geometric illusionism related to the shape of the rectangle in the grey *Jag* series. More recently, his color strokes pointillistically define spatial illusion in terms of hue and density, as overlapping screen-like rectangles fold and unfold across the canvas. He manages to maintain, in the best of his new work, a tenuous balance between surface and illusionism, calligraphy and geometry; between sensations of spontaneity and freedom and coolly contemplative detachment.

Tworkov has said that, "In a sense, the abstract painting which most typically represents the iconography of the postreligious age, consciously or unconsciously expresses an element of despair which runs like a thread through our century and which is an ingredient in all serious abstract painting."[9] This sense of despair and frustration is definitely present in his work of the fifties and early sixties. The "barriers" seemed to block off our view of figures and interior or exterior incident with closed windows and doors; the "brakes" functioned like fences preventing our entrance into the pictorial space. These paintings often conveyed a sense of negation or denial, of spiteful anger and refusal. A line was like a scratch mark, crossing out or eradicating something from visibility. Tworkov treated the painting field as a screen through which he allowed only fleeting glimpses. Since the mid-sixties these screens have become increasingly more transparent and ephemeral. They seem like quiet reminders that the painting field is a place of meditation to be approached with the utmost respect. In some of them a gap appears near the center resembling a door standing ajar, as if inviting our entry. This may be an unconscious reference to a childhood pleasure he recalls of "playing with my younger sister on the grounds of an old Castle ruin reached through a breach in a wall bordering our yard",[10] but it functions as a symbol of optimism and open-ended possibility in a time when such things are rare, indeed.

(Jack Tworkov's next exhibition, following one in autumn 1973 at the Gertrude Kasle Gallery, Detroit, will be presented at Nancy Hoffman's in New York in the spring.)

Untitled (Q3-72-5), 1972. Oil on canvas, 72" × 72"



Facing page, above: *West 23rd*, 1963. Oil, 60½" × 80". Collection. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Below, *Tree*, 1966. Oil on canvas, 50" × 60"

(All illustrations by courtesy of the Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York. See also color illustrations, page 38)

NOTES

1. Jack Tworkov, "Notes on My Painting", *Art in America*, vol. 61, no. 5, September-October 1973, p. 66.
2. Edward Bryant, *Jack Tworkov*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1964, p. 9.
3. Ibid., p. 13.
4. Jack Tworkov, op. cit., p. 68.
5. Phyllis Tuchman. "An Interview with Jack Tworkov", *Artforum*, vol. IX, no. 5, January 1971, p. 63.
6. Ibid., p. 67.
7. Jack Tworkov, op. cit., p. 69.
8. Ibid., p. 69.
9. Ibid., p. 68—69.
10. Ibid., p. 68.