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**Jack Tworkov: *Towards Nirvana / Works from the 70s***

By David Rhodes



Jack Tworkov, *P73 #10*, 1973. Oil on canvas, 34 x 48 inches. Courtesy the Jack Tworkov Estate and Van Doren Waxter. © 2021 Estate of Jack Tworkov / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

The eight paintings and seven drawings that comprise *Towards Nirvana/ Works from the 70s* all date from an important decade for Jack Tworkov (1900–1982). The 1970s saw a solo show at the Whitney Museum curated by Marcia Tucker (1971), the Skowhegan Medal for Painting (1974) (presented to the artist by artist and dealer Betty Parsons), and a career survey at the Third Eye Centre, Glasgow (1979) which toured the UK. Significantly, Tworkov had undertaken changes to his painting, moving away from the more obviously gestural spontaneity that marked his development in Abstract Expressionism in New York. Trial and error evolved into a meditative, analytical approach for which Tworkov also developed a new medium of oil pigment mixed with Lucite (a synthetic organic compound) thinned with turpentine. This method emphasized the quality, particularity, and viscosity of his brush mark—a mark he would eventually set over a mathematically calculated pencil grid. The mark as a discreet, repeated element remained a constant focus throughout Tworkov's long career.



Jack Tworikov, *OP-Q2-77-3.5.8 Series*, 1977. Oil on paper, 18 x 18 inches. Courtesy the Jack Tworikov Estate and Van Doren Waxter. © 2021 Estate of Jack Tworikov / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

In his essay, “On My Outlook as a Painter: A Memoir” (1974), originally published in *Leonardo: International Journal of the Contemporary Artist*, Tworikov spoke of a “ruling middle-class... [that] now preens itself as the patron and advocate of every outrageous-innovation. It has coopted bohemia and captured its style and established it as typically bourgeois.” He continued, bemoaning “the vulgarization of life and politics for which the same class is to be held responsible.” The turn away from a devalued, expressionist abstraction towards an austere, conceptual, and rigorous painting, though no less sensual, reflected Tworikov’s observations on and experiences of the wider world—not simply his formal innovation.

*Idling II* (1970) is a vertical painting, with a black margin abutting the sides of a descending sequence of varying grey brush marks. The paint runs as the narrow brush marks are applied with an even rhythm. The paint weaves and interlaces unpredictably between control and accident—open within measure, a freedom within chosen restraints. There is an aliveness to the marks made by the thinned paint after it leaves the brush and encounters gravity, moving sideways, creating angled curves, or more or less flowing directly downward. The field of modulated color is meditative, and full of incident, held between the dark vertical boundaries that enable the field to be concentrated, rather than expanded as an otherwise all-over monochrome might. The specificity of the painting qua painting is as unforced as it is intense.



Jack Tworikov, *Q3-74 #1* (Provincetown), 1974. Oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches. Courtesy the Jack Tworikov Estate and Van Doren Waxter. © 2021 Estate of Jack Tworikov / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

*Q3-74 #2* (1974) is a 72-inch square painting. The composition appears to unfold forward, in pictorial space, to the picture plane

itself. Rows of short brown brush marks fill each plane, overlapping each other as the angled planes end with a broad and frontal horizontal plane. All the planes are the same width, outside of which is the unmarked pale, even ground that was the painting's first move. The planes are delineated, mapped with a ruled pencil line. Because of the overlapping there are changes in opacity and rhythm: it is not an image of something, it is a form created by engaging geometry. The compositional strategy—a pencil drawn rectangle of clearly considered proportions—is explored over the course of the decade. In *Colored Pencil #4* and *Colored Pencil #5*, both 1974, both drawings on paper, the colored pencil line corresponds calligraphically to the painted mark in the paintings and similarly follows a geometric, graphite drawing that precedes them in the making. In the viewing, however, the relationship is one of a complex and mutable architecture.

Tworokov ends "On My Outlook as a Painter: A Memoir": "Above all else, I distinguish between painting and pictures (between Cézanne and Picasso). Where I have to choose between them, I choose painting. If I have to choose between painting and ideas, I choose painting; between painting and every form of theatre—I choose painting." In both the drawings and the paintings, that process of becoming through *painting*, using temporality as structure—not descriptive images—evinces Tworokov's remarkable achievement and his path toward Nirvana.

A concurrent exhibition of the artist's geometric and rule-based drawings, also from the 1970s, will be on view at MINUS SPACE, 16 Main Street in Brooklyn from February 6–May 1, 2021.

### **Contributor**

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