

# ART: TWO EXHIBITIONS OF LATE TWORKOV WORK

By John Russell

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AT first glance the forms in Jack Tworkov's late paintings look like tinted wraiths held in place by lengths of high-tension cable. Structured but not regimented, they present themselves for the most part either as triangles or as irregular quadrilaterals. We sense that a preordained order dictates their size and shape, but we do not see that order as tyranny. These paintings can in fact be read as a metaphor for a society in which everyone gives up something and gets in return a great deal more in the way of mutual tenderness.

Thus read, they are the paintings of a moralist. In that capacity, Jack Tworkov has been among us as a benign and ruminative presence for a very long time. Born in 1900 in Biala, Poland, he came to this country in 1913. After graduating from Columbia in 1923, he almost immediately became a part of the American art world, summering in Provincetown, Mass. (as he does to this day), and spending the rest of the year in New York. He showed under very good auspices (Dudensing Brothers, the Societe Anonyme, the Charles Egan Gallery) from 1931 onward.

Like many another artist, he worked for the Work Projects Administration during the Depression. An archetypally concerned citizen and a man of conscience in all things, he gave up painting to work as a tool designer during World War II. Only in 1945 could he once again give all his time to painting. What to paint, and how to paint, were problems he had not quite resolved. Yet here he was, in his mid-40's, at a time when the whole future of American art was up in the air.

He had been making abstract paintings for some time, under Freudian impulses. But in 1945, when Charles Egan first gave him a show, Tworkov asked to begin with some paintings of still life that he had made several years earlier. In this way - as it now seems to him - he got out of step with himself, as far as the public was concerned. And although his was recognized as a touching and individual voice in the concert of Abstract Expressionism, it is in the last 15 years or so that he has perfected the idiom that best suits him.

So we may infer, at any rate, from "Jack Tworkov: 15 Years of Painting" (which can be seen at the Guggenheim Museum through June 10), and from "Jack Tworkov: Works on Paper 1933-82," at the Nancy Hoffman Gallery, 429 West Broadway (through April 28). The primary instrument in both exhibitions is the unmistakable Tworkov touch.

"Flamelike" is the universal adjective for his brush strokes in the Abstract Expressionist period, and they did indeed have both the momentum and the immateriality of flame - and something of its waywardness also. But in time it seemed to him (as Andrew Forge points out in the Guggenheim catalogue) that the canvas became "a mirror in which only one likeness was returned."

How he got out of that impasse is the subject of these two exhibitions. (The earlier period is merely adumbrated at the Nancy Hoffman Gallery, though in ways that everyone who enjoys Tworokov's work will be glad to see.) Put briefly, what he did was to start in every case from a given geometrical grid. That grid functioned as line, division and limit, but it also functioned half as trapeze and half as safety net.

By accepting a given structure and putting it up front, in other words, Jack Tworokov set feeling free. The exceptional subtlety of his shifting hues is maneuvered by a touch that is everywhere light but firm. The grid is not sensed as dryness, or as formula, but rather as a device that gives order and definition to color relationships. It is a tribute to the artist that as we walk from bay to bay at the Guggenheim, we should so often be surprised by the manifold radiance of late Tworokov. "The hope that art reveals the whole man is frustrated," he once wrote, but those tethered and weightless forms make us wonder if he was not mistaken.