

BOOK REVIEWS



The Extreme of the Middle: Writings of Jack Tworok, ed. by Mira Schor, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2009; 478 pages, \$45,



Jack Tworok: *Still Life with Peaches and Magazine*, 1929, oil on canvas, 20 by 24 inches. Estate of Jack Tworok.

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THINKING THINGS THROUGH BY RICHARD KALINA

The Abstract Expressionists were so passionately engaged in talking about art, so caught up in the joys of philosophizing and feuds, that it is not surprising many of them also wrote. Robert Motherwell's texts are probably the best known: he was the acknowledged (and at times resented) high theorist of the group. Ad Reinhardt's polemics are still in circulation, and recent years have brought us collections of reminiscence and musings by Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Philip Pavia. We can now add Jack Tworok (1900-1982) to the list.

Tworok, articulate and well-educated, was thoroughly committed to putting his thoughts and feelings down on paper. (He received a BA in English from Columbia in 1923—a not inconsiderable accomplishment for a young man who had emigrated to New York from Poland when he was 13. He originally wished to be an author, and did

not begin his art studies until his graduation from college.) Tworok wrote continuously and felicitously—diaries and journals, letters, lecture notes and a variety of theoretical pieces from the 1930s until just before his death. *The Extreme of the Middle*—a compendium edited by Mira Schor, an artist, writer and lifelong friend of the Tworok family—was published by Yale University Press this summer. In addition, a small but well-focused retro-

spective of his art, organized by Jason Andrew, the Tworok Estate archivist and curator, was held Aug. 13-Oct. 27 at the UBS Art Gallery in New York.

While a number of Tworok's essays appeared in print, *The Extreme of the Middle* consists, for the most part, of unpublished writings. Schor has organized the texts in chronologically ordered thematic sections. (She has done an excellent job handling such a large amount of material, but I still

would have appreciated—in a book so centered on biography—a chronology of the artist's life.) The bulk of Tworok's published writing appeared in the 1950s. His most widely read article, "The Wandering Soutine," was printed in the November 1950 issue of *Art News*. It established Soutine's vital connection to the avant-garde American art of the day. Soutine, who had died in 1943 while on the run from the Germans during the occupation of France, was held up as both a stylistic and existential exemplar, an expressionistic innovator and deracinated exile living tenuously on his nerve ends and genius.

Tworok wrote several more pieces for *Art News* (the advanced art world's journal of record in the '50s), including a particularly perceptive and historically erudite essay in May 1954. Titled "Flowers and Realism," the article used a large Wildenstein Gallery loan exhibition of flower paintings to analyze the relative merits of 17th-century Dutch and late 19th-century French flower painting and to explore how each dealt with the possibilities as well as the inherent limits of direct delineation. Tworok also contributed a number of thematic pieces between 1958 and 1960—on color, for example—to Pavia's artist-run and handsomely produced journal, *It Is*. In addition, he participated in *Art Digest's* 1953 symposium "Is the French Avant-Garde Overrated?" (where he didn't directly answer the question) and *Art in America's* 1978 "The Late Cézanne" (where he combined a sharply focused technical analysis of Cézanne's painting with a rather diffuse broadside against the in-your-face conceptual and performance art of the day). Although Tworok was not known to be more than an occasional writer, he had a reputation for being an especially thoughtful artist and teacher, so that when he did publish, his peers took the articles seriously.

Tworok's style in the published work was in line with the somewhat overheated mode of the day—phrases like "to insure against the vulgar manipulations of a style, you must insure against life itself," which appeared in the Autumn 1958 edition of *It Is*, were standard-issue Abstract Expressionist

rhetoric—but his diaries, journals and letters (primarily to his family) were cleanly written, sharply observed and to the point. Within each of his chosen formats Tworokv maintained a consistent style over the years—not surprising, when we consider the man's essential stability.

One of the original Abstract Expressionists—a WPA artist, a close friend and neighbor of Willem de Kooning, and a founding member of the Eighth Street Club—Tworokv was respected as a painter, well liked as a person and revered as a teacher. Chair of Yale's art department for much of the '60s, he also taught at Black Mountain, Columbia and many other schools. He garnered awards and grants, was given museum and gallery shows, and

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sold his work for respectable prices. For all of that, he felt that he had never managed to rise, in terms of critical or financial success, to the top level of artists of his generation.

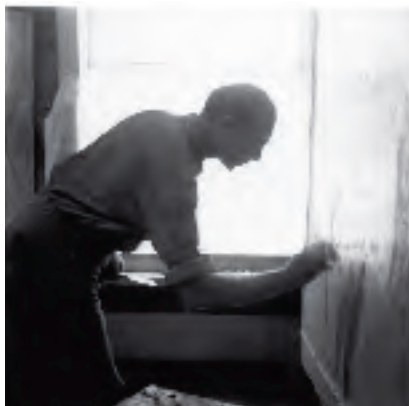
This rankled, but Tworokv was so involved in the world of art and ideas, and kept so occupied not just by his work but by a circle of accomplished and interesting colleagues and a supportive family, that the grumbings about being "second rated," as he referred to it in his journals, seem a bit pro forma. He might have been moody and withdrawn at times, as numerous diary entries attest, but he was never a serious depressive, an alcoholic or a womanizer, as were many of his peers.

Tworokv was, in fact, a prime example of constancy: he worked hard and

steadily, was highly responsible in all matters, and made a point of doing things right, whether it be preparing a canvas, repairing a table, or setting his thoughts in order for a lecture. He remained happily married to his wife, Wally, for nearly 50 years; was a kind and understanding father to his two daughters, Helen and Hermine (the



Above, *Pink Mississippi*, 1954, oil on canvas, 60 by 54 inches. Collection of the Rockefeller University.



Left, Jack Tworokv at Black Mountain College, summer 1952. Photo Robert Rauschenberg. © Robert Rauschenberg/VAGA, New York.

painter Hermine Ford); and enjoyed a loving friendship with his artist sister, Janice (known as Biala), and her husband, Daniel Brustlein, who was also a painter. Tworokv had many friends, both old and young—a benefit of teaching—who pursued a wide variety of artistic concerns. It might be expected that he would be close with his contemporaries like de Kooning and Franz Kline, but he was also good friends with Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns,

John Cage and Merce Cunningham, as well as former students Jennifer Bartlett and Chuck Close.

Tworokv's equanimity was an essential part of his personality, his art and his philosophy. The book's ironic title is apt; while Tworokv never held back on his art—he tried, in emulation of his hero, Cézanne, to inject it with the most feeling and visual intelligence it could hold—he nevertheless profoundly distrusted excess. As he wrote in notes for a talk at the Cleveland Museum in 1962, "Esthetics of the extreme is invariably more appealing to the artist of little native ability." For Tworokv extreme work, particularly when it existed on the border of nonart, was at heart ideational—it sprang from thought, not from making—and therefore innately problematic. He wrote in his journal in 1968:

A conceptual work—one which followed completely a predetermined course or design—as happens in the fields of design, belongs essentially to theory and criticism and not to art as such. . . .

I might be criticized for drawing too sharp a distinction between the words "art" and "design"—but that is precisely my intention.

I am against extremes. Undoubtedly this is primarily a matter of temperament simply. But I believe this stand can be defended theoretically. For I call extreme that which is not the necessary result of a work process but has its inception in a purely willed process to invent.

Tworokv's feelings in this regard, although clearly stated and heartfelt, must be seen in a larger context. They are symptomatic of the working artist's perpetual quandary: how does one adapt to changing conditions in the art world? It is easy, particularly when you are operating at

the margins, to be reflexively against the new, but for someone as ensconced as Tworokv, things became much more conflicted and nuanced. It should be noted that he wrote this entry while he was running the art department at Yale and was committed to dealing empathetically with young artists of all stripes. For Tworokv, the deeper question here was: how do you treat art with a strong conceptual basis (something you temperamentally oppose) when you admire

and respect artists who work in that arena—for example, John Cage? How can you be doctrinaire when it is in your nature to be open-minded?

Tworokov's natural sense of moderation did not mean that he stuck to a narrow stylistic path in his own art. For the first 30 years of his career he followed a reasonably standard arc for an American avant-garde artist of his time—producing esthetically savvy Social Realism in the '30s; abstracted, Matisse-like still lifes in the late '40s; and vigorous gestural abstraction with occasional figurative references in the '50s and early '60s. By the late

TWORKOV WROTE DIARIES, JOURNALS, LETTERS, LECTURE NOTES AND THEORETICAL PIECES FROM THE 1930s UNTIL JUST BEFORE HIS DEATH IN 1982.



Compression and Expansion of the Square, 1982, oil on canvas, 36 by 108 inches. Estate of Jack Tworokov.

'60s, however, Tworokov took what was for him a surprising turn. He never wavered from his commitment to painting, but he moved away from the open, improvisatory format he and so many others of his generation had accepted as a given. He incorporated geometry into his work, setting up a logically divided structure, often a grid, within which he could allow intuitive brushwork to operate.

This was something he had strenuously avoided until then. He wrote in his journal in 1953, "The last resort of the imagination that has failed is geometry." Although he modified that statement a month later (saying,

in another entry, that he took issue with geometricizing the surface or the image, not with the mathematical imagination), Tworokov's feelings reflected the strong desire in Abstract-Expressionist quarters to avoid the taint of Cubism, with its air of played-out European esthetics. Typically, Clement Greenberg—a critic whom Tworokov and his friends viewed with a shifting mix of admiration, disdain and wariness—used the accusation of Cubist leanings as one of his sharpest barbs. (Greenberg paid Tworokov little critical heed. In this he was atypical. Most of the important critics of Abstract Expressionism—including Dore Ashton, Thomas Hess, Harold Rosenberg and Fairfield Porter—were supportive, although Tworokov, to his dismay, did not have an early, powerful critic who championed him.)

But by the mid-'60s the art world had changed. Mainstream Abstract Expressionism had clearly lost its primacy, and its adherents had to decide to stand firm or in some way

quieter and more chromatically subtle work seemed to suit his meditative temperament. The paintings' geometric underpinnings gave the long, reiterated gestural strokes a formal coherence they had previously lacked. The structure that once derived from the pictorial example and theoretical rhetoric of his fellow Abstract Expressionists was replaced by a structure integral to the painting itself. This new approach gave Tworokov many more successful and productive years. Indeed, he may well end up being remembered more for his later work than for his earlier efforts.

Reading Tworokov is rewarding in multiple ways. His take on older painters, especially Cézanne and Soutine, is full of insight and passion; his musings on art's mission are idealistic and perhaps more pertinent than ever; his sense of ethics is strong; and his pedagogical thoughts and technical prescriptions are of real value. But what holds the reader's attention most is the man himself, his fundamental decency and kindness.

Particularly affecting in the context of this book is the depth of Tworokov's feeling for Mira Schor's artist father, Ilya, and for his friend's wife and children. Ilya died in 1961 and Tworokov's grief, expressed in journals and letters, for a man he considered a brother is exceptionally touching.

adapt. In a letter to his sister in 1965, Tworokov encapsulated the dilemma in the midst of an extended complaint about the decline of both his career and, not surprisingly, art in general: "Without the support a 'movement' and group gives to the individual artist, can I muster the strength needed to make painting authentic?"

Tworokov ultimately responded by changing rather than retrenching. Perhaps influenced by the interest surrounding the geometric work of his students and younger colleagues (in the fall of 1965, for example, Frank Stella gave a lecture seminar at Yale and critiqued advanced painting students), Tworokov moved toward an art of greater premeditation and less overt spontaneity. As it turned out, this

Also vividly compelling is Tworokov's connection with the events, people and ideas of his time. His letters and journals put us in the middle of the marches and labor struggles of the WPA; they open the door to the debates at the Club, fill us in on the expanding gallery scene of the '50s and '60s and, toward the end, give voice to the country's ambivalence about patriotism and the Vietnam War. To read Tworokov is to be given a front-row seat to the drama of Abstract Expressionism's rise, flourishing and inevitable end—complete with its camaraderie and intellectual excitement as well as its bickering, less exalted moments. Jack Tworokov was there and he was paying strict attention. ○