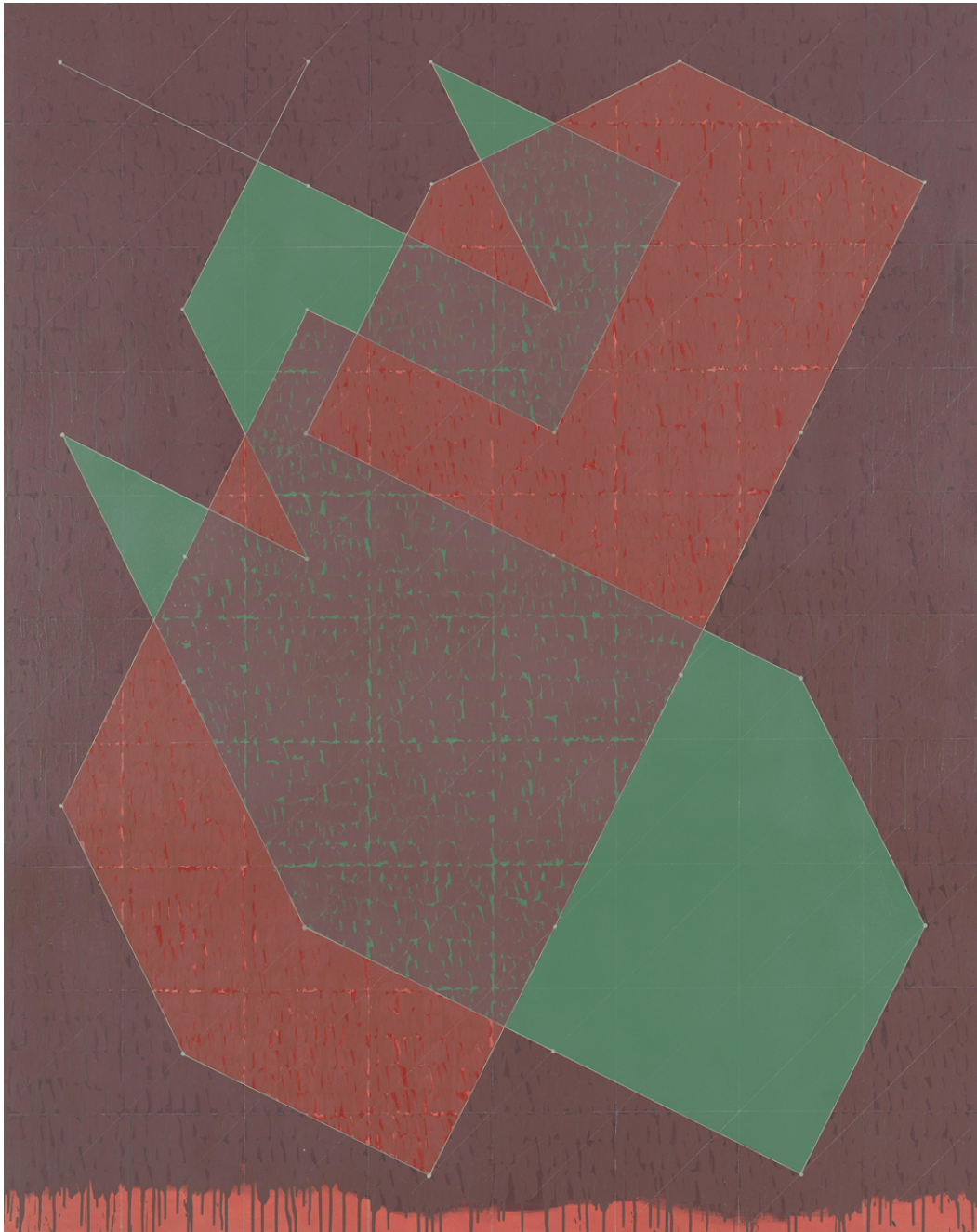


The Anti-Expressionist: Jack Tworkov's Paradigm Shift

by [Thomas Micchelli](#) on September 5, 2015



Jack Tworkov, "Knight Series #8 (Q3-77 #2)" (1977), oil on canvas, 90 x 72 inches (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2015 Jack Tworkov/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY)

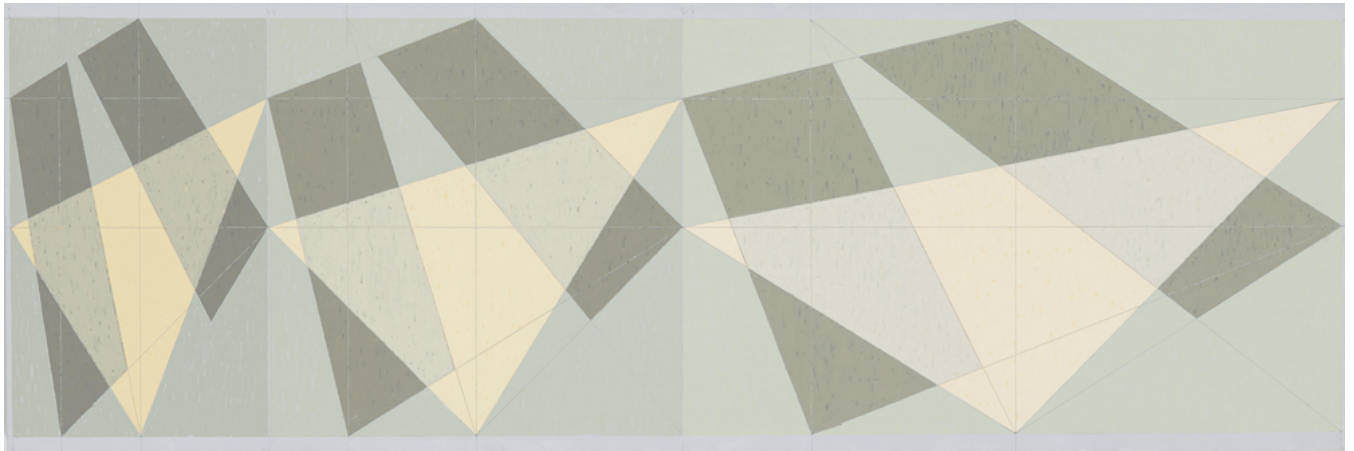
One of the many striking works in the exhibition [Jack Tworkov: Mark and Grid](#) is a large abstraction from 1977 called "Knight Series #8 (Q3-77 #2)." Resembling a Synthetic Cubist floor plan, it is in fact an experiment in gaming that looks back to the anti-art of Marcel Duchamp and forward to the rules-

based systems of 21st-century conceptual painting.

That's the essence of the puzzle that is Jack Tworokov, a painter's painter who never seemed quite in step with his time, skipping past prevailing styles while remaining devoted to the bedrock values of stroke, line, shape and color.

Tworokov (1900–1982) was not just another member of the First Generation Abstract Expressionists; during a significant period of his painting life he was Willem de Kooning's studio mate, working in adjoining rooms on Fourth Avenue near East 10th Street.

For a brief time, the two artists came at their work from the same corner: the overloaded brush; the organic forms; the no-holds-barred improvisation. But by the mid-fifties, something changes for Tworokov. The brushstrokes become unidirectional and highly agitated. The figure appears and just as promptly vanishes, only to reemerge and disappear again. The forms spread across the entire field.



Jack Tworokov, "Compression and Expansion of the Square (Q3-82 #2)" (1982), oil on canvas, 36 x 108 inches (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2015 Jack Tworokov/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY)

Ten years on, in the late 1960s, Tworokov's work is completely transformed, dominated by controlled drips and geometric planes, with an increasing focus on the latter in the transition to the '70s. His last painting, "Compression and Expansion of the Square (Q3-82 #2)" (1982), which is included in this show, is as much about the Fibonacci sequence as it is about Cubism and Constructivism. By contrast, during this same period de Kooning continued to pursue ever more elaborate refinements of his trademark fluid brushwork. Arguably, of all the Abstract Expressionists, Tworokov traveled the farthest, an apostate from the temple of the emotive stroke who found salvation in the mathematical implications of the diagrammatic line.



Jack Tworokov, “Idling II” (1970), oil on canvas, 80 x 70 inches (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2015 Jack Tworokov/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY)

These changes are distilled in the exhibition’s title, *From Mark to Grid*, and the installation in the bi-level space of Alexander Gray Associates in Chelsea makes the most of Tworokov’s stylistic discontinuities by mounting his representational and AbEx works on the ground floor, and his experiments in sensual celebration on the upper level. The ideation that went into the later group led to an ever-tighter application of geometry and precision, but in a self-consciously painterly mode that can be viewed, as described in the exhibition [catalogue’s](#) unsigned text, as a “forerunner of post-Minimalism,” a term that bears examining.

The early works (and it should be noted that for Tworokov, who made these paintings over a thirty-year stretch between the ages of 31 and 61, “early” would today be considered mid-career-to-over-the-hill) bear the hallmarks of early Modernism — the influence of Cézanne, Klee and Weber — and the gestural orthodoxies of postwar non-objective painting, augmented by mythic themes based on *The Odyssey* (“Departure,” 1952–53), which played into the era’s heroic take on painting, despite the works’ relatively modest scale.



Jack Tworkov, "Departure" (1952–53), oil on canvas, 45 x 42 inches (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2015 Jack Tworkov/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY)

During a press preview of the exhibition, Jason Andrew, the Manager/Curator/Archivist of the Estate of Jack Tworkov and editor of the [catalogue raisonné](#), made it clear that the artist considered a painting a painting, and that it made little difference to him whether it was figurative or abstract. In other words, there is no decisive break from one to the other (or back again, as with de Kooning's *Women*), though after 1960 the only vestiges of representation are found in paintings suggestive of aerial views of rivers and fields.

"Nightfall" (1961), on the first floor, presages the slashing diagonal brushstrokes and floating planes of color that occupy Tworkov's later work, but it still doesn't prepare you for what you'll find on the upper level, which might as well been made by a different artist.

The earliest painting on this floor is “SSP-67 #8” (1967), made when the artist was 67 years old. Composed almost entirely of slanting strokes in a single color, this is Tworkov taking leave of his Expressionist moorings and entering a wholly different domain. The simplicity of this canvas, and of “Note” (1968), which is composed of rows of dark, silken-gray downward strokes, is not that of Minimalism: there is still a painterliness that subverts the exclusive focus on materiality intrinsic to that movement.



Jack Tworkov, “SSP-67 #8” (1967), oil on linen, 80 x 70 inches (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2015 Jack Tworkov/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY)

But the painting does exhibit a critique of formal properties of the kind that undergirds Minimalist and Conceptual thinking. It's as if he is saying, this is paint, and this is what you can do with it — don't bother looking at what has been done before because it is not going to help you find your path. Only an adherence to the painterly act can do that. As a case in point, "Idling II" (1970), done just two years after "Note," takes paint in an opposite direction: while the composition is still based on rows of marks, the strokes have given way to manipulated drips and streams in shimmering tones of gray, like an orderly rainstorm.



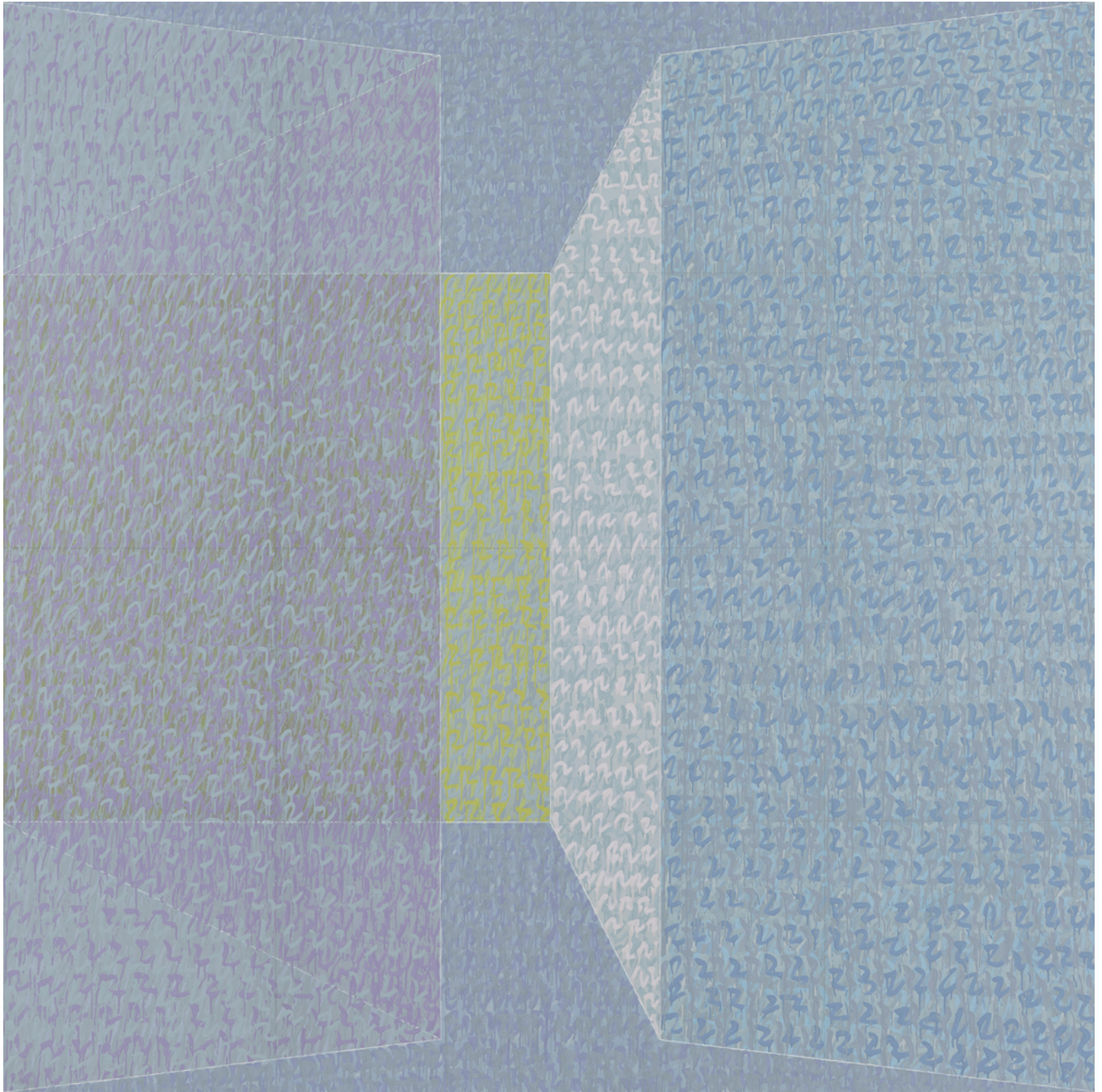
Jack Tworkov, "Note" (1968), oil on linen, 80 x 70 inches
(courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2015
Jack Tworkov/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY)

Is this "post-Minimalism"? The curious thing about the question is that Tworkov, in his position as Chair of the Art Department of the School of Art and Architecture at Yale University (1963–1969), taught such leading Minimalists as Richard Serra, Robert Mangold and Brice Marden. It's as if he led his students to their own radical critiques, and then went on to the next step with such paintings as "P73 #5" (1973), a geometric abstraction featuring skewed planes and a beguiling sense of perspective. The multitude of small, squiggling strokes in green, purple, blue, and white running across the entire surface of this work could be viewed as anticipating the Pattern and Decoration movement.

It does not seem, at least from a 21st-century point of view, that Tworkov was problematizing painting. Rather, it is as if he is burrowing down into an ideal world of math, space, line and color. "Knight Series #8 (Q3-77 #2)," cited in the opening paragraph, is based on the zigzag moves of the knight in chess. The imaginary path taken by the piece across the painting's grid substructure prescribes the shapes and colors of the image.

It's hard to think about chess and art without bringing up Marcel Duchamp, whose career as a chess player after disavowing (falsely, it would turn out) the practice of art can be seen as occupying the

same ideal world as Tworokov's. The latter, however, rather than containing that world within his own head, used paint and canvas to document what he found there.



Jack Tworokov, "P73 #5" (1973), oil on canvas, 96 x 96 inches (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2015 Jack Tworokov/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY)

And so the earthy red, green and violet shapes of "Knight Series #8" are not about themselves, but about the motivations that guided their making. As in contemporary conceptual painting, the medium is a vehicle for ideas, but Tworokov was too much of a painter to restrict it to that capacity. In his works, paint is also a creator of illusions; a container of light and air; an infinitely mutable field where color, texture and touch respond to one another with unforeseen volatility.

The organization and exactitude of these late works, which were done when Tworokov was in his seventies and eighties, are as exhilarating as their buoyant color and mind-bending space. What's even more remarkable is that his last painting, "Compression and Expansion of the Square (Q3-82

#2),” feels not at all like a valedictory, but a way station. There were so many roads left for him to travel.

Jack Tworok: Mark and Grid *continues at Alexander Gray Associates (510 West 26 Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 24.*

Alexander Gray AssociatesFeaturedJack Tworok