

VISUAL ART

Jack Tworok

by Ron Shuebrook

the train's machinations, recreates the journey from New York to Washington D.C. carrying assassinated Senator Robert Kennedy's coffin. The film is loosely based on the RFK series by Magnum photographer Paul Fusco, who was on the train that day, capturing images of the countless bystanders who had come to pay respects. In essence, the film is a series of tracking shots from the perspective of the train—motionless bystanders caught in some infinite stance of remorse, their stillness accentuated by the wind-bent grass or the movement of tree limbs. Compared to the Fusco archive, groups of rail-side mourners in Parreno's film are generally paired down. Indeed, the most poignant of the images are the solitary mourners—a boy at an intersection on a bicycle, a young woman, alone, unexpectedly bikini-clad along the tracks. At times, in Fusco's photographs, the gazes of the witnesses meet his lens and at others, trail off to the length of the train, seeking something they know to be invisible. However, the bystanders' gaze in Parreno's film seem to meet our own, as though we are standing on the other side of nothing, and through this meeting the exchange between art and audience occurs.

As much as it is an elegy to death, "Chronicles" also acts as a memorial, preserving remembrance and guarding against that greatest loss, which is forgetting. ■

"Chronicles of a Disappearance" was exhibited at DHC/ART, Montreal, from January 19 to May 13, 2012.

Tracy Valcourt lives and writes in Montreal.

Renewed attention to the seminal achievements of the Abstract Expressionists was generated in 2010–11 with the Museum of Modern Art's comprehensive exhibition of its unrivaled collection. Given this revival of interest, the recent exhibition by the late Jack Tworok at Barbara Edwards Contemporary was particularly timely. It provided a welcome opportunity to engage with a compelling selection of mid-career efforts by this prominent member of the first generation of the New York School. Well respected by his peers as an articulate and important artist, Tworok began his career in the late 1920s and continued exhibiting at major galleries and museums until his death in 1982. Although two of Tworok's paintings, *The Wheel*, 1953, and *West 23rd*, 1963, were included in the MoMA exhibition and were reproduced in its accompanying book, neither of these paintings was shown in the greatly reduced version of the show that travelled to the Art Gallery of Ontario. These omissions were disappointing to many who had seen the inclusive New York exhibition and had anticipated a more balanced, if less exhaustive, account in Toronto.

Tworok's show at Barbara Edwards's intimate, elegant gallery consisted of 10 works on paper in a variety of media, and one small oil painting on canvas. They focus on key aspects of his intelligent and conscientious search, from the mid '40s through the early '60s, for an art of personal integrity. Two of the earliest drawings (circa 1945–50) are gestural representations of seated women, and demonstrate Tworok's solid education in the discipline of observational drawing. These skillful, though relatively conventional, efforts—one in gouache

and the other in ink—serve as useful reminders of the artist's intensely conscious struggle with historical precedent. The planar drawings, as well as a more linear graphite drawing of another seated female from 1955, underscore the crucial roles that careful scrutiny and assured gesture have played in his overall evolution. In all three studies Tworok deftly implies, by different means, the fact and substance of the figure while integrating such references into the picture's internal order. They attest to Tworok's thorough understanding of Cézanne's exacting pursuit of his "little sensations," as well as his admiration for the Master of Aix's propensity for demonstrating aesthetic necessity and achieving formal coherence.

Besides his apparent grasp of Cézanne's pictorial inventiveness, Tworok also seems to have intentionally explored Surrealism's interest in the unconscious as a source of referential imagery and convincing spatial considerations, as evident in his *Untitled (Study for Christmas Morning)* from 1951. In this poignant oil painting on paper, Tworok employs a seductive immediacy of touch and an open and direct pictorial construction that contains calligraphic gestures within an imagined landscape. Although indecipherable, the overlapping, letter-like brushmarks in red-orange, blue-black and maroon (produced by the mixing of the two colours) advance and recede on a pale blue ground, and create a dynamic space that is simultaneously flat and recessional. Embodying a process of improvised action and imagery, this astute composition equivocally hovers between representation and formal discovery. In the *Untitled (Abstract Drawing)*, 1952, Tworok again uses oil paint, but with a different expressive purpose and result:

1. Jack Tworkov, *Untitled (Abstract Drawing)*, circa 1952, oil on paper, 24.06 x 19". Images © The Estate of Jack Tworkov, New York. Courtesy Barbara Edwards Contemporary, Toronto.



1

2. *Untitled (Study for Christmas Morning)*, circa 1951, oil on paper, 20.125 x 26.125".



2

the short, energetic black strokes distributed across the paper create an ambiguous, overall field in which there is no obvious representational subject. These graphic repetitions evolve into an increasingly dense, oval web that invokes a shallow, fluctuating space interrupted only by a stabilizing, vertical accumulation of the same black marks located a few inches from the right side of the page. This improvised, upright band emerges from the extended field, nearly touches the upper and lower edges, and intensifies the piece's inherent optical tension, in which a kind of linear energy becomes mass.

Similar strategies are evident in the haunting charcoal abstractions, *Untitled (ACD)*, 1957, and *Untitled (ACD)*, 1958, which possess a darkening atmosphere constructed by the distribution of gestures in various tonal densities and textures. In certain places within these mysterious fields, the marks enclose passages of white ground, define subtle geometric forms, and draw the viewer's attention across the paper's surface. In a related way, a small, untitled watercolour from 1963 investigates the pictorial

dynamism that can be created through the purposeful juxtaposition of diagonal gestures and a calculated set of horizontally spaced intervals. Finally, the lone oil painting on canvas, *OC#54*, 1958, consists of broadly brushed, slanting planes of layered dark blues, dull greens and a lighter ultramarine that flank a central zone of highly saturated reds. The advancing and receding hues of this plastically organized composition reinforce the viewer's recognition of one of Modernism's fundamental lessons—that a painting can be perceived simultaneously as both physically flat and spatially shifting.

The potent drawings in this show appear to be forerunners of later, larger-scaled oil paintings on canvas, beginning with *Trace*, 1966, and *Situation L.*, 1967–68, and continuing through to his final paintings such as the *Compression and Expansion of the Square*, 1982. In each of these canvases, Tworkov employs deliberate linear gestures that accumulate into pulsating fields in which a flickering geometry often emerges, sometimes suggesting opposing movements. Throughout his artistic life, he

remained committed to a complex creative process that embraced premeditation and disciplined decisions as well as intuitive responses and improvisation. His nuanced and often restrained approach was the result of working patiently through received traditions and conventions, while thoroughly exploring familiar materials and allowing the possibilities inherent in drawing and painting to unfold. He never sought to create art as the product of a so-called big breakthrough, but rather pursued an authentic art inextricably connected with place, material, time. As Tworkov once wrote in a letter to the late painter and critic Andrew Forge, "art is the absence of falseness; it teaches us not only about art but how to judge anything in life..." ■

"Jack Tworkov" was exhibited at Barbara Edwards Contemporary, Toronto, from February 8 to April 7, 2012.

Ron Shuebrook is an internationally exhibiting painter, writer, art educator and consultant who now lives in Guelph, Ontario.