

art

Josef Albers: To Improvise in a Disciplined Fashion

Jonathan Goodman

Josef Albers, the great German painter, came to America by ship in November 1933, a few months after the Bauhaus had closed for good—a consequence of increased Nazi hostility to the legendary school. His best-known and arguably most accomplished sequence, *Homage to the Square*, was relatively far in the future—the first works of the series were not begun until 1950. But Albers, who had accepted a position at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, was already an accomplished abstract painter, and would become known in America for his rational, even scientific approach to form and especially color. A precisionist with the curiosity of a true pioneer, Albers was famous for his objectivity, that is, his ability to stay true to his task: the investigation of color as it took place within a reductive consideration of formal elements. But *Painting on Paper: Josef Albers in America*, the remarkable recent show at the Morgan Library in New York, is not at all about the stringent methodology of Albers' best-known works of art. Instead, it looks to a series of motifs that prove him to be a much more expressive artist than one would imagine.

Indeed, the expressiveness experienced in *Painting on Paper* shows that Albers had an exploratory bent that sought a looser appreciation of related hues, brilliantly considered in several groups of work, including geometric abstraction and a body of work influenced by his experience of the adobe houses in Mexico, where he and wife, the textile artist Anni Albers, visited in a series of trips begun in 1935. The flat fronts of the adobe homes, with their regularly aligned square windows, set up visuals that came quite close to the geometric symmetries of Albers' art. This allowed him to explore, with a seemingly infinite variety, the effects of color in a group of small works on paper. In these works, we find a nearly unending display of closely related color treatments, the likes of which seemed—and still seem—brilliantly conceived and also intellectually considered in art on paper. It is likely that working on paper enabled Albers to take greater risks than he would have if he had been working on canvas; in examples of the former, for instance, paint slips over the right-angled edges of his basic forms. As a result, we come across a painter of far greater range than we assumed from the experience of the tight, highly finished studies of the square.

As the show proves, Albers was more open as a painter and artist than his seemingly endless series of squares suggests. Primarily interested in the interactions of color, he took upon himself the task of identifying the sorts of exchanges in tone that would occur once the colors were contrasted with each other. In this regard, we have only a small sense of Albers as a man behind the paintings. But in the examples of paper works in the show, Albers allows himself the freedom to explore—radically contrasting colors co-exist in a single work of art; color spills over what we expect to be definitive edges. This is not so much sloppiness or paying not enough attention to detail so much as it is an art taken on for its openness to change and its following of a smaller number of constraints.

Albers has always seemed a man of rules in the eyes of his viewers, so it comes as a surprise to see the extent of improvisation in his works on paper. The two elements of his creativity—various color schemes and a reductive sense of form—need to be placed together, so that we have a larger sense of what he set out to do. While it may not be easy to reconcile the differing constituents of his oeuvre, *Painting on Paper* serves to expand our sense of someone we thought was deterministic, to the point of a fairly rigid simplicity, in his career.

Geometric abstraction has had a long, eventful, and august history beginning with Suprematist efforts in Russia in the early 1900s. It is still followed today, but not with the transcendental force and political drive it had when the movement first began. As the Bauhaus artists later made clear, abstraction might be the coherent style bringing architecture, design, and art together in new ways that affected the common culture. Albers' inquiring spirit, tied to rational examination of color and form, owed everything to the Bauhaus movement, but in America, where the works on paper were conceived of and produced, they were seen somewhat differently—even as a step preceding the extreme reductiveness of the minimalist sculptors and painters. In general, Albers adhered to Bauhaus theory, even if that theory was understood differently in the United States. Clearly, Albers did not belong to the abstract expressionists. But despite the lack of a connection, his art joins the general movement in abstraction in the middle and the second half of the American twentieth century. Unlike the Americans, however, who were concerned with expressive feeling and a certain wildness, Albers reiterated the right angles of his earlier teaching in Germany.

So it is with considerable surprise that we discover the works on paper, fraught as they are with a tentativeness that is quite the opposite of his more famous series. The improvisation on Albers' part was highly disciplined; he never lost sight of the basic set of squares and rectangles he adhered to. Still, it is remarkable to behold the basic creativity of his position, influenced perhaps by the general openness of the American scene. Most of the works in the show are not dated, but are given the general title *Color Study for Homage to the Square*. More than a few examples are marvelously alive in reds and greens; other examples show Albers working out tonal details of a particular hue. Who would have thought that the artist could have found so much possibility within so restricted a spectrum of expression? In a way, the works aspire to the condition of music, being slight variations on a general theme. Their minor unruliness underlines the austere splendor of the *Homage to a Square* series. Still, it is interesting to note just how accomplished the sketches are; they tell the story of Albers' process even when they appear as finished works of art.

The variants on a theme remained central to Albers' life work. And his interest in the interplay of parallelograms here comes early—it can be seen in two works from the early to mid-1940s: *Study for Vice Versa C* (ca. 1943) and *Study for Tautonym* (1944) (both works appear several years before the *Homage to the Square* series). The first study takes place in shades of gray; they are lighter and darker, with a gray and a black rhomboid in the middle of the composition, from whose sides darker gray parallelograms extend. In contrast, in *Study for Tautonym*, the geometric forms are variously colored dark green,

gray, blue, orange, and cantelope. The painting's structure can be read several ways, with the central forms shifting their angles according to the way in which they are regarded. These pieces have a finished quality, as is found in *Study for Lozenge Horizontal* (ca. 1946), a red design in which the central form is a lozenge. The work looks like it has been influenced by the Albers' trips to Mexico, where they must have confronted indigenous culture; the various densities of red show us how small changes in tone can add complexity and force to a work focusing on a single color.

Red is also taken up in the adobe paintings, for example two *Variant/Adobe* works completed in 1947. In one piece the inmost forms are surrounded by a brown frame, outside of which is a red frame bordered by two straight, darker red lines. Finally, a brown frame surrounds the entire composition. In the second work from 1947, a yellow rectangle surrounds the red windows of the adobe, around which are translucent red rectangles boxed in by a deep red frame. The two works on paper are beautiful examples of Albers' hand and prove him to possess a larger creativity than a viewer might have first imagined. The adobe houses do in fact look like variations on a theme in regard to Albers' output. Who would have thought that so much change would occur within the small alterations Albers made in his colors and forms? Albers has rung the changes of his esthetic using limited means; his impeccable color sense shows us that the range of expressiveness, even when it is expressed inside his narrow spectrum of forms, can be seen as expressive to a nearly infinite degree.

Sometimes the squares painted on top of each other are nothing like the finished series Albers showed publicly; there are some examples in the show that are very rough indeed. There is a beautiful example, titled *Study for Homage to the Square and Color Study* but undated. Consisting of a central yellow square framed by a larger pale green square, which is itself surrounded by a gray, squared frame of color, the painting's lyric structure is reemphasized in the study of the same three colors above it. In this case, as in most of Albers' art, simplicity results in a splendid composition. In each case, the square or frame is weighted toward the bottom, giving the form its weight and solid sense of placement. The lyricism is achieved by the muted tonalities of color, which support each other. One expects from Albers a certain investigational mood, but this study moves beyond scrutiny or appraisal, into an ambience of joyousness. The viewer looks hard for the mutual appearance of examination and pleasure in Albers' other efforts but finds it primarily in the works on paper in this show, which gives us the feeling of an actively probing mind. In search, in the German manner, of an absolute, Albers reduced his vernacular without becoming overly reductive in his art.

Given the choice between the unfinished and the completed, the experimental and the overtly solved, modern taste tends to prefer the former in both cases. This is because we mistrust our penchant for completion as an instance of finished creativity, and favor process, which Albers does not hesitate to illustrate in the exhibition. There are marvelous analyses of color in small works here, which tend to become more expressive as they move outward, away from the central square. But at the same time one finds highly worked and sophisticated color relations in pieces whose originality derive from their extensive finish and rational consideration of color. What are we to make of the

artist Albers, who is responsible for both sets of works? Compelling in detail, inspired and improvisational, these studies argue for a far greater complexity than that seen usually in Albers' art. As happens with most major artists, the works contain particular that contradict each other, so that it is fair to call him both conservative and revolutionary, restrained and impulsive. The paradoxes lead us to a deeper consideration not only of Albers but of art itself—in particular, the achievements of modernism, whose formalist finish belies the inquisitive nature of its organization.

Albers adopted principles of order but, as we have seen, is not bound to them. Within the design, both free and logical, that he pursued, he found his way by means of musical variation on themes large enough to sustain extended meditational progress. As a result, he can be called traditional within his radicalized conception of color. A show like this, put together by two Germans, Heinz Liesbrock of the Josef Albers Museum Quadrat Rottrop and Michael Semff of the Staatliche Graphische Sammlung Muenchen, takes a major protagonist from Germany's Bauhaus and discovers new aspects of his achievement by setting it within a new context. Doing so expands our understanding of both the man and his art, which now, more than ever, seems destined for permanent recognition. Albers' production is not so narrow as we may have thought before this show, which provides its audience with a series of radical tenets. The mood is not contemplative so much as it is probing and provisional—without losing the artist's remarkable gift for color. Indeed, we find ourselves nearly amazed by the lively energy of many of the works in the show. In consequence, Albers art becomes less theoretical and more painterly, which is what one would expect of a major artist.

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