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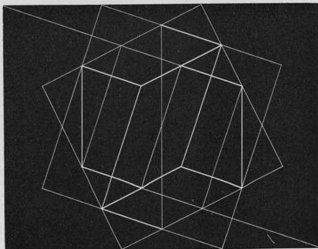


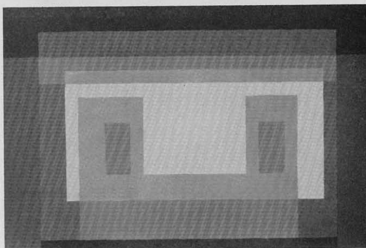
Josef Albers: *Structural Construction*, 1951, incised plastic.
All illustrations courtesy of Sidney Janis Gallery, N.Y.

NATURE AND THE ART OF JOSEF ALBERS

Jean Charlot

Two years ago, while Josef Albers was in Hawaii, he would sit on a canvas chair, facing unmatched vistas of palm trees and blue sea. On his knees would be a notebook, of squared paper of the type that architects favor. From time to time, emerging from his obvious enjoyment of the scene, Albers would carefully put together some 'abstract' diagrams, using pencil and ruler. These sketches distilled up for me, paradoxically, a visual essence more like nature than any one of the many postcards of the famed view. In the same way, I cannot pass an adobe house set against the desert horizon without remembering Albers' New Mexico series, or look at the cubic compactness of a pre-Hispanic ruin without assessing against it Albers' Mexican "Mitla."

To analyze Albers' art, or to purposely use a term with obsolete connotations, to describe its subject matter, there is no need to postulate a right to

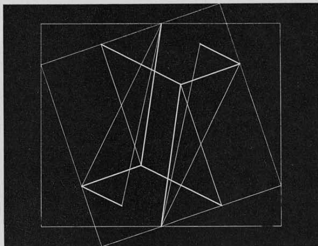


Josef Albers: *Casablanca B*, Adobe Theme, oil, 1947-1954.

abstract art, or take an upwards plunge into a fourth dimension. As it is usually understood, the term 'realism' is a singularly limited and limiting term. Out of the immensity and variety of physical nature, it singles out as proper fare for art only the most meager fringe. Looking at Albers' work, one such adherent of routine realism softly complained, "There are no faces." For this spectator as for many another, the hub of reality remains this consoling cluster: human features that sum up our daily contacts with a neighborhood we know 'by heart' and its familiar neighbors.

Between this comforting world of our own daily experience and an equally real Universe, there lies a chasm that would make the good spectator queasy, another kind of realism that would rudely jolt him out of his horizontal everyday-ness, unless he succeeded in building around himself an opaque accretion, a cell, within which he may live and breathe in relative comfort; wherein he is at least spared the sight of the immensities that a

The eminent mural painter, Jean Charlot, formerly a member of CAA's Board of Directors, now on the faculty of the University of Hawaii, is in New York on leave this year and will be artist in residence at St. Mary's College, South Bend, next summer where he will supervise installation in their new art building of eight frescoes which he painted there last summer. This article about his friend, Josef Albers, appears on the occasion of an important exhibition of his work being held at the Yale University Art Gallery from April 12 to May 20. The exhibition is a retrospective one, including work from all phases of his career. Josef Albers is Professor of Art and Chairman of the Department of Design at Yale.



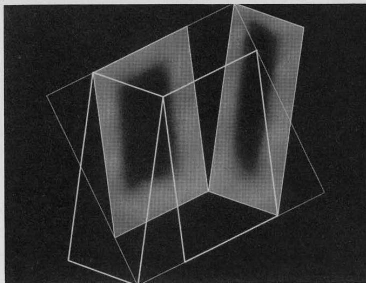
Josef Albers: *Structural Construction,* 1951, vinylite.

Pascal saw and dreaded. It is not the artist's task to cater to the good spectator's practical plea for faces, especially for such well tried ones that it would be ingratiating to limit to this tender knowledge our image of the Universe. Great art is made neither to please nor to displease. If truly great, it should at least make uneasy those whose lives are lived in self-chosen prisons similar to the large soap-bubbles and giant clam shells in which Hieronymus Bosch locates his pin-headed and gymnastic lovers.

To let go of routine appearances, a change of scale suffices. One feels the vertigo of leaving the known world behind in the pearly touch of Vermeer, who, patterning his art after what he had seen through the home-made microscope of his closest friend, Anthony van Leevwenhoek, had lost faith in the oneness of form: he had seen it dissolve under his eye, in a sample drop of water or of sperm, into legions of clashing forms. The spherical units with which Vermeer builds the loaf of bread in *The Milkmaid* mean much more than a textural device. They are an anguished try at integrating with optics the novel science of microscopy, before whose advance the world that previous masters had believed in collapsed.

A telescope will offer visual truths not unlike those seen in a microscope. It shows an equally featureless world, globe after globe patterned after a canon of balance more readily expressed in mathematical terms than in aesthetic ones. It is beauty also, but poles away from the anatomical, a scaffolding of numbers instead of bones.

The man who looks through a microscope, or through a telescope, or with good will at the pictures of Albers, comes to feel how small is the distance between, let us say, the *Venus of Milo* and any one of the dancing

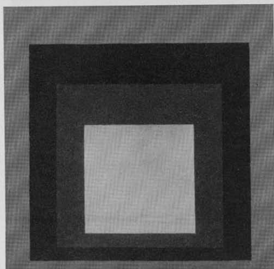


Josef Albers: *Transformation of a Scheme No. 29,* 1952, vinylite.

peasants of Breughel. The Greek sculptor and the Flemish painter both paraphrased daily experience. Both remain comforting in their everyday-ness, and ask little more for their art than to be checked against the daily exercise of our senses, tact and sight. Perhaps the *Venus* is at one end of this approach to the visible world, close to infra-red as it were; while Breughel's peasants hover on the borderline of the ultra-violet. Yet the span that both works stake is limited, and needs no Columbus to survey it.

Albers firmly believes that art and nature are at peace, that his own art springs from nature. Of course the two can be linked metaphysically, for example by quoting Aristotle, "Art follows Nature in its operation." But artists, dealing with concrete forms, colors and lines, are scarcely nourished by philosophy. Albers' art stirs the spectator much more radically than a merely generalized assertion; yet it escapes the range of the more usual definitions.

One theory has it that the challenge of art is, for the spectator, to partake of the born and trained awareness of the hyper-sensuous artist, with tactile and visual richness underlined. A Venus, a ham by Jan Steen, a Renoir buttock, a plate of oysters by Hals, all ring the bell that starts the dog salivating, procure a visceral well-being that needs hardly refer to the head to function. True, but art is of many kinds, and man's roads to enjoyment are diverse and placed on divergent levels. Albers' art proposes an opposite effect, a discipline that does not lack, however, its own kind of pleasure: to retire into oneself, to stop fluttering and retract the wing under the wing plate as does



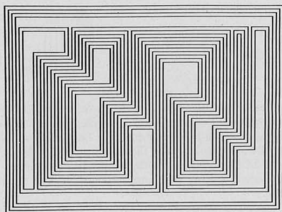
Josef Albers: *Between the Skies*, 1954, oil on board.

a beetle at landing; to stop the excited palping of antennae, retreat into willful hibernation and conform again to the austere form of the pre-natal grub. Close to contemplation, the French word *délectation,* that Poussin wisely chose to express the purpose of art, has very little to do with sensuous surfeits. Poussin's art, Albers' art, instead of flattering and expanding the spectator's self, choose to prune and to cauterize it. This sort of artist is so intent on grasping the very core of things that he lets go of all the surface phenomena around it. To better express this inner order, he will give up facetted appearances and cloying nuances.

In art history, there are eras where sensuousness recedes, when the artist, turning his back on the obvious, both hides and exposes his meditative secret. Then prettiness, beauty even, are deemed expendable. Paolo Uccello's diamond shaped *mazzocchios,* his faceless armored robots, are less immediately ingratiating than, say, a Virgin and her Bambino by Raphael; and yet a passion of sorts went into the making of these perspective diagrams, a passion at least as demanding as that of Raphael for his Fornarina.

Everyday sights remain the expected content of this art that those who like it term realistic, and those who disdain it dub photographic. As scale changes, and without leaving the realm of the visible, we come closer to what moves planets and atoms, invisible laws. Laws dominate our life as did the Three Fates of old, minus the human features that Greek mythology, somewhat optimistically, attributed to the Three Sisters. Two main laws, horizontal and vertical—are strung implacably straight: the plumbline of gravity

Josef Albers:
Prefatio, 1942,
lithograph (from series
"Graphic Tectonic")

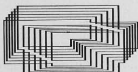


that each of us carries inside himself as if it were a physical conscience, so to speak, ready to reproach man his least attempt at obliquity; and another law, made visible in water levels, that checks from a whole ocean to the content of a cocktail glass. Between the prongs of this compass, set at right angles to each other, man lives cautiously, as if they were the jaws of the dragon that was an essential prop of mediaeval mysteries. A third law, equally face-less, is one of rhythm, meaning for us mostly the clocked beat of the heart and meticulous intake of breath, computable in intervals and numbers, and as crucial as they are untranslatable in terms of story-telling.

Ruled verticals and horizontals, numbers set to an organic beat, these are living truths that realistic art may, at its best, do no more than suggest. For the painter, to pitch into diagrams of straight lines and measured numbers is not an escape, but a licit approach to the deeper truths. Such geometric art is not without tradition despite Albers' sharp distrust of a past with which misguided 'professors' attempt to smother our present. From the makers of the pyramids to Mondrian, some masters have felt the vertigo of shedding appearances for substance.

Unlike Mondrian, whose verticals and horizontals function as spears meant to pierce through and through the borderline between the picture world and the outer world, Albers designs *sous cloche,* with no loose ends, no stray matter to escape the limits of the frame, unless it be through the expanding vitality of pure color. Active lines are deflected even before they reach the edge of the picture as is a billiard ball by the elastic band.

While Mondrian states the law—plumb and water level—Albers, without denying to law its absolute worth, in milder and personal fashion proposes situations that become geometrical and legal labyrinths. Man, imperfect and limited, contacts outer dictates of perfection in genuine puzzlement.



Josef Albers

Accidents clog the cogs somewhat in whose perfect motion Mondrian took straightforward delight. Albers' favorite term is a legalistic one: and/or. It reappears in the titles he chooses for his pictures in endless variations. It is literally a *double-entendre,* though here not a double solution. Albers favors these deceptive figures that the mind apprehends in one way, only to discover at a second reading new terms incompatible with the first ones, and equally valid.

And/or: square overlaps square in playing-card fashion, until the picture proposes avenues that recede, portals opening on vistas. And/or: shapes will pile up in the semblance of houses, cubic with flat *azoteas,* but form melts into form, or bilocates with amoeba-like motion. And/or: pyramidal shapes will be at first convex, as monuments surveyed from a plane in flight, only to reverse themselves, become concave shells, their sides receding to the caved-in tip, as if it were a mummy's outlook from the burial chamber to the pyramid's outward slopes.

The coolness of Albers' craftmanship, his obvious love of the law, make one feel that in the midst of such geometric fantasmagories and pulsating images, the artist longs for rest, for a superior state in which incidentals, without being annulled, may be allowed to register correctly within the frame of a stable absolute. Though Albers' art longs for this state of repose as does a saint for unitive vision, the artist's exacting conscience refuses to hurry the process. It is only in a very few cases that diagonals are laid to rest on a water level, or are raised true to plumb. Close to such a peace achieved the hard way is the harmonious gray picture called "Franciscan," but even there, planes hinged in screen fashion breathe a potentiality of motion, and refuse the nirvana.

Thus, in Albers' art, geometry acquires dramatic undertones, man pleading his right to imperfections even as he handles the cold perfection of numbers and geometric relations. One could say that, in measuring mind against law, Albers humanizes geometry. He says, "But for me a circle, a triangle, has a face," and means it. For it is geometry only as it percolates inside man's nature and not geometry in a void that Albers treats of. There is humor of a sort, there is earnest, in his figures; not so perfect that a mathematician or a geometrician could call them bona-fide science, and yet planted at heights out of the grasp of many a one who sighs for Venuses and for Jan Steen's succulent hams.